Resilience is “always more” than our practices: Limits, critiques, and skepticism about international intervention

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ABSTRACT
This article examines the response to the crisis of liberal statebuilding in conflict-affected societies since the end of the 2000s. It shows how both resilience policy approaches and academic critical understandings are dissatisfied with the implementation of policies and programs, which seem to fail time and again. That is, there is a widespread perception that resilience is “always more” than what current approaches are providing. In consequence, it is assumed that international interventions require even more locally-sensitive initiatives that are in tune with local needs; new and better technologies, for instance, digital maps to assist practitioners in obtaining sheer volumes of information and accurate representations of space; and programs that are open-ended and flexible. The article cautions that by assuming that satisfactory outcomes are yet to come (i.e., that resilience, or a desired outcome such as peace and security, is still lacking), policy and critical approaches are reproducing and legitimizing failure, furthering neoliberal governance and cementing a profound skepticism.

KEYWORDS Resilience; ownership; digital maps; peacebuilding; critique

In 2008, the actor, filmmaker, and producer, and then United Nations (UN) Messenger of Peace, George Clooney, narrated an advertisement commemorating the sixtieth anniversary of the first UN peacekeeping mission. Over images of UN peacekeepers performing diverse roles in the field, Clooney says that “peace is not just a colored ribbon,” “not just a donation,” “it’s not just a folk song, or a white dove.” Instead, he claims that “peace is certainly more than a celebrity endorsement,” “peace is a fulltime job. It’s protecting civilians, overseeing elections, and disarming ex-combatants.” In the end, his conclusion is bold: “peace, like war, must be waged” (Clooney, 2008).

During the 1990s and 2000s, international intervention was conceived as “statebuilding,” a process to guarantee a stable peace by the means of
strengthening governmental institutions and consolidating a liberal democratic state; yet, towards the end of the decade of 2000s, most operations were not delivering (Paris, 2010). While just an anecdote, the UN advertisement speaks to the crisis of the theory and practice of liberal statebuilding: It was felt that international interventions were full of limitations and any attempt to achieve peace was deemed insufficient; so peace had to be continually attended, waged. Critical scholars helped highlighting the negative impact of statebuilding approaches, which resulted in costly and burdensome projects. These were engineered and executed top-down by external actors and had little resonance with local interests, experiences, and perceptions (for example, see S. Campbell, Chandler, & Sabaratnam, 2011). Accordingly, international interventions had to be reimagined against over-simplified, linear, technocratic, and Eurocentric understandings of development and peace (Autesserre, 2014; Mac Ginty, 2011; McLeod, 2015; Richmond, 2011). These critics argued for an emancipatory “hybrid” or “post-liberal peace,” rooted in everyday settings and inclusive of diverse perspectives.

Over the last decade, the idea of resilience has become central in diverse areas such as development, food, cyber and energy security, conflict prevention and peacebuilding, disaster risk reduction, conflict and poverty reduction. Although it has never been a coherent policy framework and takes on multiple forms (Cavelty, Kaufmann, & Søby Kristensen, 2015; Joseph, 2018), resilience is generally understood as the capacity of systems to withstand and adapt to complex crises and shocks (European Commission, 2017; European External Action Service, 2016; Interpeace, 2015; Stockholm Resilience Centre, 2015). It has become a guiding principle of governance under the assumption that complex economic, social, political, and environmental problems cannot be addressed by the means of top-down, centralized, and “modernist” technocratic interventions (Chandler, 2014; Joseph, 2013; Walker & Cooper, 2011). Policy approaches based on the concept of resilience are purposely less intrusive and domineering than previous statebuilding approaches. Instead, they are based on the assumption that adaptation and resilience to conflict emerge from within each society and, therefore, external actors need to gradually draw on local resources, yield more responsibilities to local stakeholders and promote plural partnerships (De Coning, 2018; Korosteleva, 2018; Tocci, 2020; Wagner & Anholt, 2016). Resilience interventions operate in diffused and complex “areas of limited statehood”, where orders are permanently “contested”, rather than in fragile or collapsing states that need to be rebuilt according to liberal standards (Börzel & Risse, 2018).

This article examines the shift from liberal statebuilding toward resilience. In particular, it highlights that current policy understandings are enthused by a sense of an existing “deficit” which needs to be made good. This argument fits with the analysis made by some critics of neoliberal governance, who identify a similar “deficit”—or, as Duffield puts it, “the endless willingness
to happily fail-forward into the future” sustaining “the economic logic of late-capitalism” (Duffield, 2019, p. 17; see also, Chandler & Reid, 2016; Mckeown & Glenn, 2018; Joseph, 2018). In disaster- and conflict-affected contexts, practitioners consider that resilience is “always more” than what current policies and practices are providing. Similarly, as it will be argued, for some critical scholars “an emancipatory peace” is yet to come, thus reproducing the sense of deficit. In both cases, policies and actions are faulty, fall short of enabling societies’ creative potential, and thus greater or more sensitive efforts are required to achieve desired outcomes.

The article is structured in three parts. Each explores a key assumption in the literature that illustrates how resilience approaches suffer from a chronic deficiency that should be corrected. The first is the need for interventions that are locally-driven and context specific. Although practitioners proclaim attachment to local ownership, critics suggest that in practice ownership has not been transferred to local stakeholders. Most difficulties in peace or resilience support activities are rationalized on the grounds that local ownership has not yet been meaningful (Mac Ginty, 2018).

The second assumption has to do with the introduction of new technologies like crisis mapping initiatives to reach the local level and attempt inclusive responses. Maps collect large amounts of diverse information at unprecedented speeds with the promise that the information that is updated and verified by local actors could help practitioners understand, be attentive to and respond to the everyday needs and concerns of the people affected by conflict. However, the conclusion seems to be that information given by crisis mapping projects tends to be incomplete, distorted, tinged with power biases and false representations of space. Thus, the conclusion is always that more (and better) data should be gathered to meet expectations.

The third assumption is that the need for sustaining interventions requires long-term processes of constant adaptation to uncertainty and crisis. Avoiding failure or reaching agreements is not as important as accompanying societies through time in open-ended processes. As policy frameworks expand their time-horizon, there is never an end-state called resilience, where peace and harmony could settle: no mission, initiative, gesture or symbol seems to get them close enough to finally achieve resilience. Thus the struggle for resilience “has to be waged,” continually supported, as uttered in the advert of the Messenger of Peace. Regardless of how long-term resilience strategies become, in the literature it is assumed that implementation programs are still dominated by short-term concerns and are not open enough to unpredictability and change.

These three assumptions—the need for local ownership, inclusivity and open-ended processes—are ubiquitous in resilience policy approaches. They gained increasing significance throughout the 2000s. Today, above all, the challenge remains how to bring “more” ownership, “more” inclusivity, and a longer-term perspective. Importantly, as it will become clear, critical
scholars seem to be reinforcing these assumptions when highlighting that programs are failing: Local ownership is not fulfilled, maps are biased, and resilience operations, too liberal. Therefore, exploring these assumptions, and the debates in which they originate, is relevant to think about the trajectory of international intervention after the crisis of statebuilding: From top-down, linear and abrasive operations and towards more bottom-up processes that seek to be more flexible, plural, and sustained (Korosteleva & Flockhart, 2020). In the conclusion, a potential negative consequence to this shift is highlighted: The certainty that resilience, or any other satisfactory endpoint, is always “lacking” implies that policy approaches are always in the wrong. Although the idea might be enabling, helping practitioners to be more attentive to the need for an evolving policy practice, it is also important to pay attention to the down-side of resilience: The danger that it will reinforce scepticism among policy-practitioners and recipients and lead to the acceptance of repeated policy failure.

**The limits of the local turn: Just can’t get enough**

By the end of the decade of the 2000s, the discourse and practice of international statebuilding appeared “exhausted.” Neither liberal democracy and the rule of law nor an enduring peace had consolidated in diverse regions such as the Middle East, the Western Balkans, or Central and West Africa. Complex global threats from Ebola to the Islamic State made operations much more onerous and risky, provoking “an intervention fatigue,” as alerted by the then United States Ambassador to the UN, Samantha Power (O’toole, 2014). The liberal interventionist model entered into a crisis of results and lost its normative allure, terminating the post-Cold War euphoria around creating a peaceful global liberal order (Rampton & Nadarajah, 2017).

If there has been an overriding lesson drawn from the difficulties in building peace in war affected societies, this has been that peace must invariably emerge “from below”: Owned and led by local people, because operating “from the top,” so to speak, actions become too rigid, sharp, and reckless. Jean Paul Lederach was perhaps one of the first theorists to widen and deepen the prevalent understanding of peacebuilding of the 1990s (Boutros-Ghali, 1992). He wrote that “peacebuilding is more than a postaccord reconstruction. … [It] encompasses, generates, and sustains the full array of processes, approaches, and stages needed to transform conflict toward more sustainable, peaceful relationships” (Lederach, 1997, p. 20). Rather than a negotiated settlement achieved between top-level leaders in the war, Lederach (1997, pp. 37–97) stressed the need to work with the middle-range and grassroots levels on both sides of the conflict and use the socio-cultural resources for peace that are already present in the communities involved. Local people must be considered “resources, not recipients,” he
stated (1997, p. 94), and innovatively pointed to the middle-range actors—because they are connected to both the elite and the grassroots—as key for sustainable peacebuilding.

By thinking “peacebuilding” as a process of societal transformation that involves multiple actors from multiple levels, Lederach has been prominent in redefining the role of practitioners (Paffenholz, 2014). Institutes such as the Innsbruck School of Peace and Conflict Studies founded by Wolfgang Dieterich at the University of Innsbruck in Austria build on Lederach’s ouvre to do research and offer training to peacebuilders. As explained by Dietrich (2013), peacebuilding “draws on the common knowledge, values, and communication techniques that exist in the individuals, groups or communities concerned” (p. 13). It also reconstructs “communication on a deep cultural level” (p. 13), thereby demanding a new attitude from mediators who must be more sensitive and expand their gaze and skills, their imagination and creativity. They should become “explorers, forerunners, reassurers, conveners, initiators, advocates, decouplers, unifiers, aggregators, consolidators, enskillers …” (p. 5), and much more. In some of his most recent work, Lederach (2016) urges to try to grasp conflict and peace through “the elements that go below and beyond the linear modalities of making sense of things,” like listening to the pervasive “soundscape of human experience” (p. 198): “We need metaphors based on vibration, sound, and music in order to understand the essence of peacebuilding” (p. 198).

Lederach’s lessons have not only made it into peace education but have permeated policy programs from international organizations involved in peacebuilding. From the European Union (EU) to the UN, and their diverse partners and programs, these organizations have gradually reoriented policy strategies, limiting external guidance and pursuing plural partnerships that rely on local knowledge, capacities, and resilience for making advances on peace (for some examples, see Council of the European Union, 2018; Interpeace, 2015; UNESCO, 2017; United Nations, 2018b; United Nations Development Programme, 2016; United Nations Secretary General, 2014). In 2015, the UN replaced the idea of peacebuilding with a more non-linear and bottom-up approach:

“Sustaining peace” … must be people-centred and inclusive in approach, and provide a vision of a common future to domestic stakeholders, public and private. External actors, including the UN, can accompany and facilitate, but they cannot impose peace. (United Nations, 2015, p. 47)

In the EU Global Strategy published in 2016, the EU put forward an “integrated approach to conflict and crisis,”, which is “multi-dimensional … from security to gender, from governance to economy”; “multi-phased … acting at all stages of the conflict cycle”; “multi-level … acting at the local, national, regional and global levels”; and “multi-lateral” … cooperating with
“all those players present in a conflict and necessary for its resolution” (European External Action Service, 2016, pp. 28–29). Like the UN’s (2015) sustaining peace approach, the EU proposes working simultaneously on many fronts with multiple instruments and policies and puts a premium on “local knowledge,” “local agency,” and on “inclusive governance at all levels” (European External Action Service, 2016, p. 31).

The limited success of earlier programs is frequently rationalized on the grounds that there had been very little engagement with the local level. For example, reports evaluating the little tangible progress made in rule of law reforms and peace consolidation in Afghanistan over the years have repetitively blamed the technocratic approach from above that downplayed questions of local legitimacy, interests and perspectives (Department For International Development, 2009; see, further, Ucko, 2013). Similarly, when reviewing the operations in Democratic Republic of the Congo, Mali, and Ukraine, the EU has admitted critically that “the EU has not always paid enough attention to the needs of the local population and service delivery,” as “interventions were often not tailored to the context,” and based on “incomplete analysis” of local politics (EC, 2016, pp. 11–12). These reports clearly resonate with Lederach’s critical scrutiny of the UN mission in Somalia, which he considered it to be too narrow in focus and operating from the top, failing to encourage participation of the Somali society (Lederach, 1997, pp. 102–106).

What is striking is that even if the lesson has been learned and international agencies consider local ownership a fundamental cornerstone of any policy program, a common observation is that it has not yet been properly implemented (European Commission, 2016). Today, the key concern is how to bridge the gap between discourse and practice of local ownership; how to fulfill the commitment to transferring competences satisfactorily, in every context and policy area, so that local actors are more than implementers and truly own and lead the peacebuilding process (EU-CIVCAP, 2017). The true operationalization of the policy requires always more consultations, stronger cooperation and participation of local society; or to paraphrase the Depeche Mode well-known song: ownership just can’t get enough.

Nowhere is this observation clearer than within critical approaches to peacebuilding. A previous special issue of Contemporary Security Policy examines whether the EU has advanced in granting power and responsibility to local agents, while embracing their perceptions and values. The authors resolutely conclude that the rhetoric-practice gap is still yawning (Ejdus & Juncos, 2018; Mac Ginty, 2018). For example, examining the EU intervention in the Horn of Africa, Ejdus (2018) notes that ownership translates into techniques to make the local population responsible for objectives that are externally set, thereby triggering various forms of protest and resistance (see, also, De Heredia, 2012). Other authors also recount high levels of contestation,
tension, and even acts of violence in Bosnia and Kosovo against EU infrastructures (Gippert, 2018; Juncos, 2018; Mahr, 2018). Despite the EU’s pledge to place local actors in the driver seat of post-conflict transition, the people in the Balkans complain that their sovereignty and politics are undermined, as they are seen as passive recipients of technocratic reforms that can even contradict their interests. In practice, security sector reform programs are likely to be influenced by the ideas and expectations of international donors, often without local participation and acceptance, as Ansorg (2017) notices when evaluating the implementation of these programs in Africa.

“Who (or where) is the local?” is the question that is frequently raised. The question is meant to challenge policy approaches that only give support to local perspectives that buttress elite interests or abide to international liberal standards, while disavowing the participation of other dissonant, non-liberal voices (Bojicic-Dzelilovic & Martin, 2018; Kappler, 2014; Mac Ginty & Richmond, 2016; von Billerbeck, 2016). As Mac Ginty and & Richmond (2016) write: “[O]ur intention is to escape from a narrow instrumentalization of hybridity in service of a rebranded liberal peace” (p. 230). Both scholars disapprove the policies that instrumentalize local ownership and hybridity and, instead, insist on a more honest transfer of responsibilities to local agents and a deeper interaction with their social and customary spheres.

However, like the policy frameworks they dismiss, these critical approaches are sometimes accused of having thin conceptions of who is the local to be partnered with. They are criticized for building up a simplified understanding of indigenous perceptions and experiences, one that reproduces the binary logic of enlightened donors and passive recipients and the exclusionary dynamics of liberal peace, which discard certain forms of local agency (Bargués-Pedreny & Mathieu, 2018; Björkdahl & Höglund, 2013; Lemay-Hébert & Kappler, 2016; Nadarajah & Rampton, 2015; Randazzo, 2016). Mathieu (2019) explains that “hybrid peace” tends to produce further “exclusion and stigmatisation” of difference, as it tends to “separate” and “reify” the local as a space that is opposed to the international—dynamic, complex, full of culture and symbols, potentially resourceful and emancipatory (pp. 37, 41–43). Relatedly, feminist critiques have noted how even critical understandings of intervention possess a consideration of the socio-economic conditions of local societies that is partial, blind to the co-constitutive character of formal and informal economies and to the gendered and racialized logics of peacebuilding (Martin de Almagro & Ryan, 2019; McLeod & O’Reilly, 2019).

In sum, the tendency is to search for genuine bottom-up peacebuilding processes, and yet the quest appears always incomplete. Policy reports call for self-reflection, contextuality, and admit that greater ownership would be necessary, while critical commentators remark that attempts to access the local become superficial, prejudiced, and reinforce power differentials. Practitioners are required to show greater openness to diversity, as peacebuilding
demands listening to manifold interpretations, perceptions and grievances. Even hybrid peace proposals, which are meant to be willing to embrace local costumes and values, appear inconsiderate, insufficient. The next section explores how the apparent sense of deficit has also permeated debates on the use of new technologies for humanitarian purposes.

The limits of all-seeing digital maps: The partial representation of life

Over the last decade, diverse data have been gathered at an unprecedented speed and from multiple sources to generate knowledge and enhance the capabilities and practices of governance in humanitarian contexts. While the use of Big Data and new technologies for security and military purposes appears haunted with ethical dilemmas, the use of data in the field of humanitarianism has been received with great enthusiasm. This enthusiasm is tied to the idea of “innovation,” the possibility that entrepreneurs and corporations develop new gadgets and techniques for seeing, knowing, and governing the world better (Scott-Smith, 2016). The bond between technology and innovation for humanitarian purposes started to emerge in 2009 with the “Innovations in International Humanitarian Action” report (Ramalingam, Scriven, & Foley, 2009), and reached its climax in May 2016, in the first-ever World Humanitarian Summit, when the Global Alliance for Humanitarian Innovation was created to bring the aid industry, governments, private sector partners, and hubs together to scale innovation. The technologies that were launched were diverse, like the mobile phone-based feedback mechanism in Somalia that enabled the Danish Refugee Council to add the content of the messages in an online map; or a platform that gave humanitarian workers near real-time information about communities affected by the Typhoon Haiyan in South-East Asia (Obrecht & Warner, 2016; see, further, UN, 2014). Most technologies were concerned with accessing the local level and including civil participation in a meaningful way.

It is not a coincidence that the rise of data-driven knowledge and new technologies to improve governance has coincided with the crisis of liberal state-building. The fact that information is obtained from a multitude of people in their everyday contexts, who might want to share their most immediate needs and emergencies, enables rapid and precise responses by aid agencies. Furthermore, technologies produce more representative visualitations and facilitate more diverse and flexible responses than the ones provided by the technocratic and reductionist programs of yesteryear. Chandler (2015) explains it this way:

The failure of centralised and bureaucratized forms of international intervention and external attempts to address international questions of peace,
conflict, rights and development, has led to the imagination of Big Data as both 
an effective and an ethical substitute for traditional forms of international inter-
vention, which are seen as too slow, too unwieldy and too reductionist to ade-
quately engage with the concrete contextual realities of the world. (p. 839)

Although some analysts have recently perceived financial woes and some 
degree of disenchantment (Parker, 2019), new technologies are at the core 
of innovation ventures and bring the promise of “finding needles in hay-
stacks,” penetrating up to the most isolated shantytowns and leaving no 
one behind. The argument made in this section is that while the promise is 
a novel form of humanitarianism that might be inclusive, the tendency is to 
detect the limitations of these technologies and point to the many exclusions 
and biases they produce. This argument is elaborated by focusing particularly 
on digital mapping practices in conflict and disaster-affected contexts, where 
both practitioners and particularly critical commentators visibly attest that the 
fullness of life is yet out of reach.

Digital mapping—as the practice to visualize and locate entities in time and 
space that is enhanced by computing systems and customized and mobilized 
spontaneously by both local people and humanitarian agencies—is ubiquitous 
in current international interventions. In disaster-affected contexts, “digital 
humanitarians” organized for the first time to launch a crisis map in response 
to the earthquake that struck Port-au-Prince, Haiti, in January 2010. Shocked 
by the humanitarian drama, thousands of improvised volunteers from all over 
the world started mapping the news reports and tweets describing devastation 
or needs coming out from Haiti, so that these maps containing the latest infor-
mation could be used by aid agencies and people on the ground (Meier, 2012, 
2015). After Haiti, digital volunteer networks have spread and international 
organizations have made use of mapping initiatives to enhance their response 
to situations of disaster and conflict recovery. For example, during the Ebola 
outbreak in West Africa, volunteers of the Red Cross worked with local com-
munities to introduce data sources in OpenStreetMap, so that this infor-
mation could be used by humanitarian organizations if another epidemic 
occurs in the future. In 2018, UNOSAT’s Rapid Mapping Service—the UN 
agency that draws on Geographic Information Systems and satellite 
imagery to deliver solutions and geographic information to UN agencies 
and other international organizations working for peace and socio-economic 
development—assessed and gave response to 28 humanitarian crises.

Digital maps are considered to operate differently than traditional paper 
maps. Throughout the modern period, maps were conceived as static, 
neutral, and highly accurate, almost scientific, representations of the Earth’s 
surface. Yet as critical geographers began to denounce at least since the 
1980s, maps were historical products designed and coded by governmental 
powers: Rather than mirroring space, they preceded the territory they 
meant to represent and created new knowledge, shaped understandings,
produced identities and nations, and were generally utilized to dominate and govern peoples and lands (Edney, 2015; Kitchin & Dodge, 2007). Building on these critical perspectives and examining cartographic representations, International Relations scholars have shown how these representations have reduced the complexity of social life to homogenous spaces, supporting some political imaginaries, while rendering others unimaginable (Campbell, 1998; Lobo-Guerrero, 2019).

Quite differently, today digital maps are meant to reflect heterogeneity, dynamic relations, plurality, and evolving contexts, and the emphasis is often on the several functions they perform—identifying, revealing, envisaging, relating, orienting, tracking, correlating, and others (Mattern, 2018; November, Camacho-Hübner, & Latour, 2010). Rather than distant cartographers drawing a map and imposing their worldviews through plotting codes and lines, digital maps bring knowledge closer to the field and complex information is processually generated, updated, shared in real time and verified regularly by local people, from volunteers to victims (Salovaara, 2016). Mapping benefits from crowdsourcing volunteering activities that go beyond simple information sharing and descend to the community level to visualize ever more relations. As a World Bank study states: “[C]rowdsourcing is used to create and increase collective knowledge, community building, collective creativity and innovation, crowdfunding, cloud labor, and civic engagement” (Bott, Gigler, & Young, 2014, p. 2).

Furthermore, mapping technologies draw on self-learning algorithms and intelligent systems to adjust and reconfigure, so that information emerges immanently “from the world itself, independently of any qualification, evaluation or deliberation”, and thus apparently freed from the alterations of subjectivity (Rouvroy & Berns, 2013, p. 164). Although digital maps may report information that is misleading (false positives), not missing any potential important information is better than making small errors or creating a few false alarms (Meier, 2015, p. 43). For it is the participatory process, the collective effort to map infinite relations without the reductionist intervention of an external mind, that is valued. The more data is introduced, the more information may be verified, more connections may be seen, more views and concerns may be expressed, with the hope that omissions may be close to nil. Allegorically, digital maps would appear to be like Argos, the all-seeing one-hundred-eyed giant guard in Greek mythology, who could look everywhere and every time, and who could even fall asleep while still keeping some of his eyes awake.

Yet one hundred eyes are not enough. While data enthusiasts believe that mapping technologies enhance civic engagement and accurately capture processes in their emergence, facilitating new and creative ways of responding to humanitarian crises, a common critique is that maps are still exclusionary. Read, Taithe, and Mac Ginty (2016, pp. 1322–1323) argue that maps struggle
to surpass the “digital divide” and tend to neglect those people who do not have access to phones and computers. Moreover, maps also provide distorted views, like the maps produced by the World Health Organization tracking the Ebola outbreak in West Africa during the summer of 2014, which gave the impression that the virus ravaged all the region, while life in cities and villages still went on and death from other illnesses did not make the news (Read et al., 2016).

The bottom-line message of the critics is that power still corrupts digital maps, as much as it did in traditional cartographic representations. Rather than empowering communities and altering power relations, these maps are seen as tools that rely on platforms and filters designed non-locally, often by great corporations like Google and filled by humanitarian agencies and their networks of funders, who establish what may appear and what may be written out. Burns (2014, pp. 54–57) illustrates how the platforms, symbols, metrics and schemes used by digital humanitarians tend to rely on certain types of knowledge production and misrepresent other forms of knowledge production, like “collective memory,” “affective geographies,” or indigenous representations of nature that do not conform to “Cartesian space.” Though digital maps show multi-layered, reliable, and up-to-date information with unprecedented concreteness and dynamism, critics note that information is still remote from indigenous practices and cosmologies (Specht & Feigenbaum, 2019).

The “power-based” critique of digital maps is part of a broader critique of new technologies and the belief that they could help the UN peacekeeping system in obtaining accurate and representative data to enhance more efficient and inclusive responses (Mac Ginty, 2017). Critical scholars argue that, despite being touted as neutral, technologies are designed within specific political contexts and filter the type of information that should be collected and employed, thereby disregarding subtle, structural or indirect forms of violence, traditional knowledges and non-events that could also be noteworthy (Duursma & Read, 2017; Fast, 2017). For example, Suda Perera (2017) investigates how peacekeepers in the Democratic Republic of the Congo collect data via remote technologies to access the populations that appeared impossible to reach, like those living under armed group control in forested areas. However, she concludes that technologies may need to be accompanied with other forms of knowledge gained from long-term and embedded experience with these populations, otherwise their everyday needs and concerns would continue to be invisible to peacekeepers (Perera, 2017, pp. 819–820).

In sum, according to the critical scholars, new technologies are bound to “Western” and “colonial” logics of knowledge production, which invariably lean towards knowledge that is “abstract, generic and applicable beyond a specific context” (Rosenow, 2019). It is this moment of closure and sense-
making in the abstract that appears at odds with or insufficient to comprehend non-European grounded norms and histories that are crucial for strengthening resilience. Although the disaster-management and peacebuilding fields are dominated by a techno-optimist tone, and these “power-based” critiques should not be overstated, they are important to see how there is a demand for more representative maps and more inclusive responses. As in debates assessing the implementation of local ownership, it is the richness and fullness of life that again seem to be elusive to the digital cartographic gaze. Hence, this deficit needs to be corrected with more representative maps. The next section explores how long-term and sustained processes that are flexible and adaptive similarly fail to facilitate resilience.

**The limits of sustained interventions: Always all too powerful**

The previous two sections have shown how resilience policy approaches have prompted the need for greater local ownership, assigning the role of facilitators or catalysts to foreign practitioners, and inclusivity, benefitting from the support of new technologies. What is underscored in this section is that interventions to enhance resilience have developed into sustained processes where there is no defined end-state of resilience and goals are adjusted and modified continually. Learning from the shortcomings of rapid and targeted interventions that set specific goals to be met, resilience policy frameworks build on process-oriented, long-term and flexible processes and partnerships to address the non-linear and unpredictable nature of post-conflict and disaster recovery (De Carvalho, De Coning, & Connolly, 2014; De Coning, 2018). Critiques of resilience, however, would be unsatisfied with implementation programs and denounce the ties between resilience and external agendas. Again, it is highlighted in this section, the idea of deficit is ubiquitous: resilience approaches are considered to be coercive, all too powerful, constantly reproducing liberal technocratic approaches of regulation.

Governmental agencies—like the Office of the Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization in the United States, the Stabilization and Reconstruction Task Force in Canada and the Stabilisation Unit in the United Kingdom—were formed in the mid-2000s to assist states beset by conflict in pursuing socio-economic and institutional stability. Shaped by the complications of the interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan, which sought grand transformations but resulted in unstable social contracts between state and society and a volatile peace, the agenda of “stabilization” provided a more modest and realistic approach to post-war reconstruction (United Kingdom, 2011; United States DoS, 2010). Different than the statebuilding agenda, the idea of stabilization gradually moved away from grand promises of rapid structural change and the setting of specific objectives—like building liberal democracies with efficient and representative governmental institutions—to be met. Rotmann
(2016) observes this shift between Clinton’s and Kerry’s Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Reviews, which were published in 2010 and 2015 respectively:

In 2010, the Clinton State Department painted a soaring picture of “build[ing] sustainable peace by resolving underlying grievances fairly and helping to build government institutions that can provide basic but effective security and justice systems. Over the longer term, our mission is to build a government’s ability to address challenges, promote development, protect human rights, and provide for its people on its own” (U.S. DoS, 2010: 13). Five years later, the State Department’s mission is framed exclusively in terms of the threats to be prevented, mitigated or responded to; there is a palpable unwillingness to spell out a positive end-state (U.S. DoS 2015: 10, 21–27). (Rotmann, 2016, p. 5)

The “unwillingness to spell out a positive end-state” discloses a more modest strategy, which is ready to accommodate unexpected turns and learn by doing, by an iterative process of trial and error. In 2011, the UK government published its “Building stability overseas strategy” and defined stabilization as a path out of instability and fragility that is process-oriented and context-specific: “This type of “structural stability”, which is built on the consent of the population, is resilient and flexible in the face of shocks, and can evolve over time as the context changes” (United Kingdom, 2011, p. 5). Over the years, stabilization programs have tended to emphasize broader conflict-prevention, peacebuilding and facilitating resilience tasks to achieve durable peace, rather than military activities to contain conflict and securitized interventions focused on rebuilding the formal institutions of the state (United Kingdom, 2019).

The idea of resilience seems to have been introduced to modify stabilization, to undo its implicit tensions. For stabilization still denotes a conservative impulse to maintain composure while controlling conflict, crises and shocks—as if a state of equilibrium could be achieved over time, as if a dynamic world could be mastered and its movements and flows could be stopped in our favor (Zebrowski, 2013, pp. 163–167). A key lesson is thus “to recognise the significant trade-offs and tensions between stabilisation actions to secure short-term stability and activities designed to generate longer-term stability and resilience” (United Kingdom, 2019, p. 29). The transition from statebuilding to stabilization seems to be furthered with resilience (Börzel & Risse, 2018, p. 20). As the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2009) explains: “We presume the opposite of fragility not to be stability, though this has often been the goal of external actors, but rather resilience—or the ability to cope with changes in capacity, effectiveness, or legitimacy” (p. 70). Resilience approaches, even more than stabilization, operate without setting concrete and fix goals and timelines, and adjust programs continually (De Carvalho et al., 2014; De Coning, 2016; De Weijer, 2013). This is because resilience strategies presuppose that resilience is
“always more,” eluding external capture, while practitioners assume to know less and are less capable of commanding: “We must be honest, learn and adapt”; “We must be humble, sensitive and communicate well”; “We must be coherent, realistic and integrated” (United Kingdom, 2019, p. 27).

As in approaches to local ownership and mapping crisis initiatives revised in the first and second sections, the perception of deficit informs the need for sustained engagements in areas of limited statehood. Since any outcome is considered insufficient, international policy approaches are reconfigured so that the process—a constant and constructive endeavor and the promotion of partnerships—is valued more than specific outcomes. Symptomatic of this is the UN’s “sustaining peace” agenda, through which tasks of peacemaking, peacekeeping and peacebuilding morph, and political, economic and technical support is provided over an indefinite period of time (United Nations, 2015, 2018a). Rather than assuming a linear process towards an end-state of prosperity in which tensions would be absent and external forces would no longer be needed, resilience approaches are aware of conflicting objectives and feedback loops, as “not all good things go together” (Grimm & Leininger, 2012).

Furthermore, the increasing emphasis on prevention, which involves capacitating social and political networks and institutions to be prepared and resilient to shocks in the future, presumes that all actions are necessary but none is sufficient (United Nations, 2018b; World Bank, 2018; see, further, Ganson & Wennmann, 2012). This is different to the UN’s more traditional “preventive diplomacy,” which was reduced to rounds of negotiations between parties to try to avoid flaring tensions and violence (Boutros-Ghali, 1992). Today’s prevention is characterized by an expansion of the time horizon of intervention where it is never too early to assist and always more work remains to be done. The UN Development Programme rationalizes that “generational changes” are required to enhance resilience in local governance systems (UNDP, 2016, p. 26); for the UK government, there is no clear beginning or end: “There is no set period for stabilisation—it can range from months to years—but it is always a transitory activity” (United Kingdom, 2019, p. 23).

Along these lines, the EU’s “integrated approach to conflicts and crises” endorses uninterrupted engagements that expand for long periods of time: “The EU will act at all stages of the conflict cycle, acting promptly on prevention, responding responsibly and decisively to crises, investing in stabilisation, and avoiding premature disengagement when a new crisis erupts” (EEAS, 2016, pp. 9–10). The prolongation of external support with an emphasis on the process, rather than the outcome, is also visible in the “Joint Communication on a Strategic Approach to Resilience” in the EU’s External Action. Written as policy guidance for EU practitioners, it understands “resilience as a means not an end” and recognizes that “development, and progress
towards democracy, peace and security, is not a linear process, and that sectoral approaches, on their own, are not always enough to ensure sustainable results” (EC, 2017, p. 23). Rather than setting a clear agenda and being held accountable to meet specific objectives, practitioners are encouraged to be sensitive to unintended consequences and deviations, be aware of the risk of failure, and improvise and redefine goals as they go in partnership with diverse local agents (De Coning, 2018; Stockholm Resilience Centre, 2015; Tocci, 2020).

Even if some academic studies claim that resilience programs enable processes of collective transformation, where actors learn from experience and evolve through crises and shocks (Bourbeau & Ryan, 2018; Cretney & Bond, 2014; Wagner & Anholt, 2016), others are more skeptical. Like the critiques of local ownership and of the mapping initiatives revised earlier, critical perspectives attest that prolonged interventions in areas of limited statehood fail to be flexible, and are still determined by ready-made blueprints, short-term concerns, financial and economic pressures and allegiance to liberal norms (Autesserre, 2016; Cochrane & Cafer, 2018; Mavelli, 2019; Mckeown & Glenn, 2018). However open to diversity and contingency sustained operations may appear, critical scholars tend to condemn the “hubris” and “high modernism” of external interveners (Chandler, 2020).

What is important to notice is that critiques rarely propose to end international intervention (Bargués-Pedreny & Randazzo, 2018); instead, they press for even longer engagements that could truly open up to life and emergence. In other words, the perception is that current operations are still operating with too much haste, and this deficit needs to be made good. For example, according to Autesserre (2014), current sustained operations do not translate into inclusive and emancipatory forms of peace. This is because, she explains, practitioners tend to rely on foreign sources and seek security on what they already know as soon as they are found in situations of insecurity and risk. Instead, she insists on introducing “strategies that are long-term or impossible to quantify but nevertheless crucial to building peace” (Autesserre, 2014, p. 251).

Comparably, other studies underline how conflict prevention, which expands the time-frame of intervention before the eruption of conflict, has become an intrusive form of monitoring, reporting and imposing knowledge from the outside, rather than an approach to cultivate peaceful relations (Jacobsen & Engell, 2018). Other authors suggest that interventions are still based on short-term time frames and instead insist on the benefits of ethnographic field-research (Macaspac, 2018; Millar, 2018). Although current international missions and operations are committed to long-term conflict-prevention and peace consolidation strategies, “more” is always better: for prolonged engagements offer the opportunity to build contacts and strengthen alliances; make more observations and conduct more accurate,
context-specific and in-depth analyses; also, they increase the likelihood of witnessing the evolution of events and allowing serendipitous discoveries (Millar, 2018). These authors assert that resilience programs are too instrumental to be able to engender emancipatory forms of peace, but seem to reinforce (or even expand) resilience’s temporality: “It is never too late to start, it is always too early to end.”

**Conclusion: Is resilience always in the wrong?**

This article has argued that the feeling of an existing “deficit”—the idea that resilience is always more than what current practices are providing—has driven international interventions since the crisis of statebuilding. This deficit has been examined in debates discussing the value of local ownership, the need for inclusive responses facilitated by mapping technologies, and the importance of long-term and flexible processes. Today, resilience compels a reimagination of international intervention as a process of becoming, that must be owned by local actors, inclusive, experimental, open-ended, and adaptive to the contingencies of each situation. One pending challenge is to discuss the potential consequences of thinking resilience as continually “lacking.” Would a peace process that is truly led by local agents not undermine the responsibility and virtue of any peacebuilder? Would mapping technologies that produce ever more representative, objective, images not infringe upon privacy and freedom? Would sustained engagements not legitimize a permanent denial of national sovereignty? These are necessary questions that need to be researched further with empirical analysis as much as theoretical scrutiny. Here, to conclude, I wish to imply a potential down-side.

The idea that resilience eludes capture presupposes that today’s policy approaches are always in the wrong. Critical scholars—as much as policy frameworks reflecting on past operations—are continually able to identify a “lack” in the processes of engendering resilience (something was absent, someone was omitted, something else could be done). While this may be liberating, giving another chance of genuine improvement, it is important to relate this perception of deficit to contemporary forms of neoliberal governance that continually expand (Evans & Reid, 2014; Mavelli, 2019; McKeown & Glenn, 2018; Tansel, 2017). By “governing through failure and denial” and interpreting crises and past failures as new opportunities, measures for further monitoring and control are legitimized, while critiques and challenges to broader structures are deemed impossible (Joseph, 2016, pp. 387–390; see also, Chandler & Reid, 2016; Duffield, 2019).

Relatedly, the feeling that resilience is “always more” leads to a dangerous nihilism in processes of international intervention: the acceptance of a permanent failure. As Schmidt (2015) puts it, resilience approaches today accept the
problem of “never getting it right” and, in consequence, translate it into a virtue: “always having to adapt” (pp. 416, 420). As practitioners are in awe with resilience, skepticism about programs and policies spreads. Results seem impossible to achieve and the end appears remote. Practitioners appear overwhelmed, but continue nevertheless. Pospisil (2019) captures this well, when he writes: “policymaking has found its ways of living with affirmation. It has developed concepts of peace governance ambiguous enough to conceptually work even when failing in practice: inclusion, resilience, and political settlements” (p. 2). While the over-confidence of liberal practitioners needed to be softened, today’s strategies that enhance resilience might point toward idleness and despair.

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