Complexity thinking and adaptive peacebuilding

What can it contribute to our understanding of inclusive political settlements?

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We often refer to peace processes being complex. Beyond this common-sense use of complexity, however, there is a serious project under way to study and theorise complexity, and to operate adaptively in such environments. Studying complexity can, for instance, help peacebuilders understand where they can have the most impact when trying to influence social systems.

Donella Meadows found that we devote most of our energy on aspects that, counterintuitively, only have weak leverage. In the peacebuilding context this will be things such as skills, equipment and procedures. These are weak leverage points because on their own they don't change the system within which they function. Meadows points out that the higher-order leverage points in complex systems where relatively small shifts can have the most impact are rules, structure, goals and paradigms.

Studying complex systems has also taught us that change does not always occur gradually. Pressure for change accumulates, but often without much evidence during the build-up phase. And then suddenly, when a tipping point is reached, a system can change significantly in a short period of time. Thus, working towards more inclusive political and social processes will not necessarily show signs of steady progress. Adam Day (UNU-CPR) and Ian Wadley (Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue) propose that in order to consider if peacebuilders are doing the right thing, even if progress appears slow or stalled, one

can evaluate against best practice, peer review and by considering counter-factual scenarios.

This is partly due to the importance of path dependency in systems dynamics. The choices that individuals make, even powerful leaders and political elites, are constrained by initial conditions and the choices that have been made earlier. This helps explain why most important system changes occur during periods of turbulence when path dependency is disrupted. From a peacebuilding perspective, such transitions create opportunities to exert influence on higher-order leverage points.

Self-organisation

Another concept that unlocks new insights for understanding change in complex systems is resilience, which refers to the capacities of social institutions, such as formal and informal justice systems, to sustain acceptable levels of function, structure and identity under stress. Resilience to withstand shocks and challenges, and the ability to adapt, grows as social institutions develop

increasingly complex forms of self-organisation. Christine Bell and her colleagues at the Political Settlements Research Programme have shown that from Aceh and Mindanao to Colombia and Mali, national and local peace agreements reached through *self-renewing and inclusive peace processes* have proven to be more resilient when roles and responsibilities, including for implementation, are distributed among a broad group of participants.

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Self-organisation, in this context, refers to the ability of organisations and individuals within a complex system, like a large community, to organise, maintain and adapt themselves without the direction of a controlling agent. It is thus not surprising that one aspect of self-organisation that is strongly associated with sustaining peace is the inclusion of *outsider groups*, ie interest and identity groups otherwise excluded from peace talks. Societies that have found political and social models that can accommodate multiple identities of ethnicity, religion, language, race, gender and sexual orientation are less likely to experience violent conflict. For example, Tania Paffenholz and colleagues at the Inclusive Peace and Transition Initiative have found that when a broad range of actors beyond the principle conflict parties are included, and these actors were able to assert influence over the process, their inclusion was vital for preventing violence and for sustaining peace. This is partly because self-organisation facilitates and modulates the flow and processing of feedback information, for instance through developing a shared understanding, participatory decision-making or monitoring mechanisms. It distributes and dilutes vulnerability across social networks. If one node is weak, others can carry the load, thus preventing the system from breaking down. Based on these insights, support for peacebuilding should prioritise facilitating and enabling resilient, self-organising and adaptive national and local social institutions.

Adaptive peacebuilding

Adaptive peacebuilding is one such complexity-informed approach where peacebuilders, including communities and people affected by the conflict, actively engage in a structured process to sustain peace by employing an iterative process of experimentation, learning and adaptation. It builds on the work of Andrews, Pritchett and Woolcock, who have pioneered the problem-driven iterative adaptation (PDIA) approach to escape the linear tyranny of the log-frame in development planning and evaluation. Adaptive peacebuilding applies this approach to sustaining peace and links it with other complexity-informed approaches to peacebuilding. Examples include the work

The Moro Islamic Liberation Front and the Government of the Philippines sign the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro at the Presidential Palace in Manila on 27 March 2014. © Conciliation Resources

of Dialectiq, Humanity United's work in Mali and Zimbabwe, the work of Burns, Gray and Roos on community-based peace processes in Myanmar and the International Rescue Committee and Mercy Corps' ADAPT project, also in Myanmar.

UN peacekeeping operations in the Central African Republic and South Sudan, together with local communities, employ a range of strategies to pursue local peace agreements, improve local security, disrupt local conflict dynamics and encourage local economic activity. The people involved are continuously learning from their experiences and are adapting their approaches based on their assessment of which initiatives are more or less effective. Adaptive peacebuilding in these contexts does not necessarily imply following a specific methodological approach like PDIA. It is more a pattern of practices that experiment with an inductive, iterative and adaptive approach. These adaptive approaches differ fundamentally from the determined-design approach that was in vogue over the past two decades, where the logic of the programmatic intervention has been predetermined, and the role of the peacebuilders and communities was to implement the programmes as designed.

While peacebuilders can influence complex social systems by enabling and stimulating the processes that enable resilience and inclusiveness to emerge, the prominent role of self-organisation in complex system dynamics suggests that it is important the affected societies and communities have the space and agency to drive their own process. External fixes will not stick if they have not been internalised, so local adaptation processes are ultimately the critical element for inclusive political settlements to become self-sustainable. In *How China Escaped the Poverty Trap,* Yuen Yuen Ang describes this paradoxical mixture of top-down influence and bottom-up improvisation as 'directed improvisation'.

Local leadership

This is why the notion of peacebuilding is unfortunate. It subconsciously suggests that experts can design and build peace, as if it was an engineering challenge. In *On the Frontlines of Peace*, Severine Autesserre shows how many successful examples of peacebuilding have involved innovative grassroots initiatives, led by local people, often using methods that international peacemakers tend to undervalue. In *Global Governance and Local Peace*, Susanna Campbell goes one step further and argues that the capacity of UN agencies to successfully pursue their peacebuilding aims relies to a large degree on the ability of their people in the field to make the organisation responsive to parties in the local context. Thus, not only is sustaining peace dependent on resilient local communities, but also the international efforts to support such efforts are more successful when they are accountable to local populations and informed by feedback from local communities.

As these examples show, adaptive peacebuilding approaches can contribute in original and innovative ways to more inclusive peace processes and more self-sustainable political settlements. This does not mean, however, that adaptation is a solution in and of itself. There are common fallacies associated with complexity that should be avoided, such as that complexity thinking implies embracing messiness, abandons goals and gives up on transformative change. What incorporating complexity thinking will do is to help mediators and other peace practitioners to become more confident in coping with uncertainties and more comfortable experimenting with adaptive approaches.

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