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Measuring Peace Consolidation: For Whom and for What Purpose?

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In *Measuring Peace,* Richard Caplan sets out to answer an important question for those engaged in some or other way in contributing to bringing about peace, namely 'how can we know if the peace that has been established following a civil war is a stable peace?' (Caplan, 2019, p. 1). Caplan emphasizes at the outset that his book is about measuring peace consolidation, not about evaluating peacebuilding success. He argues that the two topics are closely related but distinct (p. 7).

How we measure peace is deeply and inescapably political. It is determined by how we define peace, and by our position and interest in the peace we are assessing. This does not mean that assessing peace cannot be useful, but it does mean that we need to be mindful of who is assessing the peace and for what purpose? It also means that we need to be humble about our truth claims, because peace is not a material substance that can be measured. In Caplan's concluding chapter he has abandoned the 'measuring peace' terminology, switching instead to the term assessment (p. 123). And he has all but abandoned the attempt to focus on measuring peace consolidation, as most of the main findings of the book focus on how to improve the assessment of peacebuilding.

Measuring peace is not only complicated by how we define peace, but also by what Caplan frames as the lack of effective means of assessing progress (p. 4). In other words, the credibility of the methods and tools at our disposal, and the lack of an agreed methodology to measure the durability of peace, are also major inhibiting factors in our ability to meaningfully measure peace. This is why one of Caplan's core arguments is that more rigorous assessments of peace are needed (p. 123). In his findings he emphasizes a number of principles of good practice that can contribute more rigour to the assessment of peacebuilding initiatives.

The first is the importance of contextual knowledge. Caplan points out that there is a tendency for peacebuilding organizations to rely on pre-conceived models or templates because that allow them to respond quickly and deliver results. Caplan argues that the lack of contextual knowledge, or what he also refers to as the 'ethnographic approach',

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is the chief obstacle to measuring peace (p. 113). Others include the need for early and continuous conflict assessments. The need for continual strategic reassessment, to reflect on the theoretical assumptions underpinning the peacebuilding tasks and to identify what changes, if any, are required in the assumptions and associated tasks. The importance of ensuring that benchmarks and indicators are realistic, measurable, sensitive to nuance (fine-grained) and meaningful. And finally, Caplan stresses that it is critical to incorporate local perspectives into strategic assessments, both in order to achieve local buy-in and to help ensure accuracy (p. 117).

Caplan also explores a number of obstacles to good practice that helps to explain why what may otherwise seem obvious, may not always be possible. One is the availability of reliable data. Another, which Caplan flags as the greatest obstacle, is the tendency to politicize metrics design and reporting (p. 119). He also notes the difficulty for any organization to evaluate its own performance in an entirely disinterested manner, and he recommends to delegate responsibility for assessment to independent bodies, inside or outside the organization (p. 121).

The core question Caplan grapples with in *Measuring Peace* is whether there is an objective scientific way in which we can measure peace. The first challenge he explores is the lack of a common understanding for what we mean with peace. In some contexts, depending on who is asking the question and why, peace may be understood as the absence of violent conflict or negative peace. In other contexts peace may be understood as the outcome of social justice or positive peace. Caplan refers to these two poles as the minimal and maximal conceptions of peace (p. 14). Caplan does not discuss the Sustainable Development Goals, but they contain 36 targets, across eight goals, that measure aspects of peace, inclusion or access to justice (Centre for International Cooperation, 2016). The SDGs are probably the closest thing we have today to an internationally agreed universal set of goals, targets and indicators that capture what we mean with peace. These targets and their indicators represent a mix of negative and positive peace factors that approach what Caplan refers to as a more differentiated conception of peace (p. 20).

Indicators, such as the number of deaths, the number of internally displaced persons, and the infant mortality rate, to name a few, are indicative of the quality of the peace. Indicator data is necessary but not sufficient to measure peace. The data can't tell us objectively if a peace process has been consolidated. A country like South Africa may have a higher number of violent deaths per year than, for instance, Sudan, but South Africa is generally regarded as a country where the peace has been consolidated after the end of apartheid. There are thus a number of other factors that we have to take into account to analyze what the data provided by the indicators mean in a specific context. One researcher's findings may be different from another's, even when they use the same data and methodology, because their analysis may differ. This is why Caplan starts his Conclusion with the following question and answer: 'Can we know with any certainty whether a peace is a stable peace? The short answer is "No"'. He goes on to argue, however, that 'The limitations notwithstanding, it is possible … to ascertain the quality of peace, and the vulnerability of that peace to conflict relapse, with higher levels of confidence' (p. 123).

The reason why we can't measure the sustainability of peace with any certainty is because social systems are empirically complex. This means that they demonstrate the ability to adapt, and that they have emergent properties, including self-organizing behaviour. As social systems are highly dynamic, non-linear, and emergent, it is not possible to find general laws or rules that will help us predict with certainty, how a particular

society or community will behave (De Coning, 2016; Cilliers, 1998, p. 3). We cannot undertake a project, for example a reconciliation initiative in Somalia, and predict what the outcome will be. Nor can we use a project design that was assessed to have performed well elsewhere, for instance the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, and expect that it will have the same effect in another context. This uncertainty is an intrinsic quality of complex systems, not a result of imperfect knowledge or inadequate analysis, planning, or implementation. This recognition has significant implications for the degree to which it is possible, or not, to measure peace or evaluate peacebuilding.

The Adaptive Peacebuilding approach provides us with a methodology for coping with this complexity and uncertainty (De Coning, 2018). It abandons the top-down blueprint or pre-determined design approach to peacebuilding planning and assessment. In its place it introduces six principles of adaptive action. First, the actions taken to influence the sustainability of a specific peace process have to be context- and time-specific, and have to be emergent from a process that engages the societies themselves. Second, Adaptive Peacebuilding is a goal-orientated or problem-solving approach, so it is important to identify, together with the society in question, what the peacebuilding project should aim to achieve. Third, Adaptive Peacebuilding is agnostic about how best to pursue its goals, but it does follow a specific methodology—the adaptive approach—that is a participatory process that facilitates the emergence of a goal-orientated outcome. In other words, to use a sailing metaphor, the exact route to our destination cannot be pre-determined because we have to take into account the weather, currents, pirates, and other unforeseen hazards but we have a methodology that will help us navigate around these obstacles so that we can still arrive at our destination. Fourth, one-half of the key to the adaptive approach methodology is variety; as the outcome is uncertain, one has to experiment with a variety of options across a spectrum of probabilities. Fifth, the other half is selection; one has to pay close attention to feedback to determine which options have a better effect. Adaptive Peacebuilding requires an active participatory decision-making process that abandons those options that perform poorly or have negative side-effects, whilst those that show more promise can be further adapted to introduce more variety or can be scaled-up to have greater impact. At a more strategic level this implies reviewing assumptions and adapting strategic planning. Six, Adaptive Peacebuilding is an iterative process, it is repeated over and over because in a highly complex context, our assessments are only relevant for a relatively short window before new dynamics come into play.

These six principles of adaptive action, whilst independently developed, are closely aligned with Caplan's principles of action, including especially the importance he assigns to context, local perspectives, the need for continual strategic reassessment, and sensitivity to precision and nuance. The Adaptive Peacebuilding approach and Caplan also agree that it is not possible to make definitive judgements about whether a society has found a durable and sustainable path to peace, but that one can assess, to a degree, the quality of the peace, and thus also some of its vulnerabilities. In the Adaptive Peacebuilding methodology, assessing peace becomes part of an adaptive process where its specific role is to provide feedback on the effects generated by the peacebuilding initiative, so as to help inform decisions to adapt, or make course-corrections, in order to keep the overall peacebuilding initiative steering towards its destination.

One initiative that was launched as Caplan was finishing his book was the Comprehensive Performance Assessment System (CPAS) for peacekeeping operations that was

launched in 2018 in order to give UN peacekeeping missions a tool with which to measure their impact (De Coning & Brusset, 2018).

CPAS is a context- and mission-specific planning, monitoring, and evaluation system. It enables the mission leadership team to make decisions aimed at improving performance by maintaining or scaling up those activities that have a meaningful impact and adapting or ending those that do not. CPAS assesses mission performance by analyzing its effect on the knowledge, attitudes, and behaviour of the people and institutions the mission needs to influence in order to prevent violent conflict and sustain peace. It does so by analyzing the relevance, extent, and duration of the mission's actions on selected outcomes, identified during the planning process.

CPAS provides the leadership team with evidence of the impact the mission is having, and analysis of where adjustments may be necessary to improve performance. This enables the leadership team to optimize the allocation of resources and to direct the mission's focus in ways that can maximize performance and continuously improve mandate implementation. The CPAS system is an iterative adaptive cycle that starts with a planning process and that ends with adjustments made to future plans and operations, based on an assessment of performance. In large multidimensional missions the system will generate quarterly performance assessments in order to enable these missions to adapt with more agility to their fast-changing circumstances.

The concept, methodology, and implementation of CPAS constitute a revolution in peacekeeping planning and performance assessment. CPAS emphasizes the achievement of results and impact, as opposed to delivery of outputs—and puts in place the methodology and tools to regularly measure progress and adapt to changes in context. The CPAS experience to date validates both Caplan's principles of practice for ensuring better assessment of peacebuilding (p. 113) as well as his obstacles to good practice (p. 118).

Even if it is not possible to measure peace in an objective scientific way, there are initiatives like CPAS that demonstrates that the systematic collection and analysis of data help specific peace initiatives analyze how effective they are meeting their objectives, improve real-time decision-making, prioritize resources, enhance transparency and accountability, and improve stakeholder communications.

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