Conflict Trends 2020-3

The six principles of Adaptive Peacebuilding

By Cedric de Coning

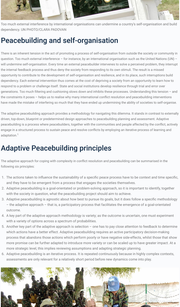
Analysing adaptive peacebuilding – an approach that can help navigate the delicate balance between international support and local self-organisation.

Peacebuilding is about influencing the behaviour of social systems that have been at war, or are at risk of, being affected by violent conflict. Peacebuilding is a complex and adaptive process that requires a long-term, context-specific, iterative, participatory, and flexible approach. Adaptive peacebuilding offers a framework for such a process. Peacebuilding attempts to assist societies to prevent and mitigate the risk of violent conflict. For peace to be self-sustainable, a society needs to have sufficient strong social institutions to identify, channel and manage disputes peacefully.

The resilience of civil society in South Africa, for example, church groups, played an important role in helping communities to manage the tensions that arose from Apartheid-based discriminatory laws and policies.

If a society is fragile, it means that the social institutions that govern its politics, security, justice and economy lack legitimacy and are not able to manage the expectations, grievances and competition between various interest groups, structures and identity under stress. The fragility or vulnerability to violent conflict is a function of social institutions developing resilience – the internal complexity that enables them to self-organise – necessary to cope with the shocks and challenges which arise from internal and external sources and challenges to the social contract. Resilient institutions develop increasingly complex forms of self-organisation. For example, in 1991 in South Africa, some churches organised themselves into a peace committee to mediate between the African National Congress and the Inkatha Freedom Party. National Peace Accord was an agreement that prevented the country from sliding in the latter security apparatus, which was no longer credible or effective, and instead empowered social institutions to self-manage the tensions that arose between communities divided by apartheid. This is an example of how resilience of civil society in South Africa played an important role in helping the country navigate the very sensitive transfer of power relatively peacefully.

Peacebuilding is thus a project with a very specific objective: to influence complex systems to safeguard, stimulate, facilitate and create the space for societies to develop resilient self-organised social institutions that can prevent violent conflict and sustain the peace. Peacebuilding is a complex and adaptive peacebuilding process in a society that enables self-organisation and lead to resilient social institutions which adequately manage internal and external stressors and challenges to the social contract without resorting to violence. Peacebuilding is a complex and adaptive process. However, conflict-sensitive peacebuilding agencies can assist society by facilitating and stimulating the processes that enable self-organisation to emerge.



Too much external interference by international actors undermine a country's self-organisation and build dependency. UN PHOTO/LEAS PAQUIGNON

Peacebuilding and self-organisation

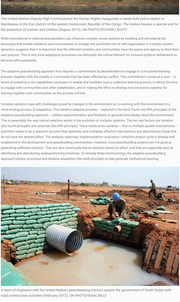
There is an inherent tension between the need for self-organisation and the need to sustain the society or community in question. Too much external interference – for instance, by an international organisation such as the United Nations (UN) with extensive self-organisation. Too much external peacebuilder intervention is a perennial problem. Any intervention in the internal feedback process and flow kills the society from responding to its own stimuli. The result is a mission-dependent society that is not able to self-organise and self-sustain the peace. This creates a dependency and dependency. Each external intervention aims at the cost of depriving a society from an opportunity to learn how to respond to a problem or challenge itself. State and social institutions develop resilience through trial and error over generations. Too much filtering and cushioning does not enable these processes. Understanding this tension – and the constraints it poses – helps us to realise why many international conflict resolution and peacebuilding interventions have made the mistake of trying to do much that they have ended up undermining the ability of societies to self-organise.

The adaptive peacebuilding approach provides a methodology for navigating this dilemma. It stands in contrast to externally imposed, top-down, linear, and mechanistic approaches to peacebuilding. Adaptive peacebuilding is based on the idea that peacebuilding is a process where peacebuilders, together with the societies, are constantly adapting their conflicts, and they engage in a continuous process of conflict-sensitive learning and adaptive mediating as iterative process of learning and adaptation.

Adaptive Peacebuilding principles

The adaptive approach for coping with complexity in conflict resolution and peacebuilding can be summarised in the following six principles:

1. The actors taken to influence the sustainability of a specific peace process have to be context and time specific, and they have to be emergent from a process that engages the societies themselves.
2. Peacebuilders need to be able to self-organise themselves and their approach to be adaptive to identify, together with the society in question, what the peacebuilding project should aim to achieve.
3. Adaptive peacebuilding is agnostic about how best to pursue the goals, but it does follow a specific methodology – the adaptive approach – that is a participatory process that facilitates the emergence of a good-enough solution.
4. The adaptive nature of the adaptive approach methodology is certain, as the outcome is uncertain, one must experiment with a variety of options to achieve a sustainable peace.
5. Another key part of the adaptive approach is selection – one has to pay close attention to feedback to determine which actions have a better effect, and which have unintended consequences and which have no effect. Adaptive process that sensitises those actors which perform poorly or have negative side-effects, whilst those that show promise are allowed to self-organise and self-reinforce, and to be replicated to achieve greater impact. As a more strategic level, this also implies testing assumptions and adapting theory.
6. Adaptive peacebuilding is an iterative process. It is repeated continuously because it highlights complex contexts, assessments are only relevant for a relatively short period before new dynamics come into play.



In Adaptive Peacebuilding, the societies and communities that are embedded in conflict form a conflict-resolution or peacebuilding intervention should be fully involved in all aspects of the initiative. UN PHOTO/ARIANA MUNDER

In the adaptive peacebuilding approach, the same rationality of a conflict resolution or peacebuilding intervention is one of process facilitation. It is thus crucial – as captured in the first principle of the adaptive peacebuilding approach – that the societies and communities that are affected by violent conflict form a conflict-resolution or peacebuilding intervention to be involved in all aspects of the initiative. The specific arrangements will differ depending on the context, but the principle remains that the conflict-resolution or peacebuilding intervention should be facilitated by a process that allows for the participation of the affected community in society, depending on the level and scope of the intervention. Suffice-to-say here implies that the community should be represented in such a way that the diversity and variety of their interests, needs and concerns inform every step in the adaptive process. In other words, it is important that the second principle of the adaptive peacebuilding approach – the affected community should be sufficiently represented in the processes that determine the adaptive process – is adhered to as well as of others related to the analysis, assessment, planning, monitoring or effects, evaluation and selection.

The United Nations Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights inaugurates a newly built police station in Mamfebaya, in the Ituri province of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The station houses a special unit for the protection of women and children (August 2013). UN PHOTO/SYLVAIN LIEVOIS

While international or external peacebuilders can influence certain social systems by enabling and stimulating the processes that enable resilience and inclusiveness to emerge, the prominent role of self-organisation in complex system means that peacebuilders need to be careful not to undermine self-organisation. Peacebuilders need to be careful not to create a dependency on external assistance. This is why it is important that the adaptive approach focuses on the process of learning and adaptation to become self-sustainable.

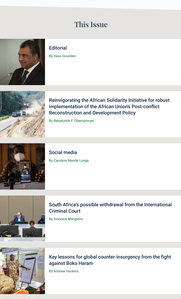
The adaptive peacebuilding approach is thus a process that allows peacebuilders to engage in a process of learning and adaptation together with the society or community that has been affected by conflict. The implementation comes at a cost – in terms of investing in the capacities necessary to enable and facilitate (not to control) a collective learning process, is taking the time to engage with communities and other stakeholders, and in making the effort to develop new innovative systems for learning together with communities and institutions.

Complex systems cope with challenges posed by changes in the environment by co-evolving with the environment in a process of adaptive learning. The adaptive process – captured in the third, fourth and fifth principles of the adaptive peacebuilding approach – utilises experimentation and feedback to generate knowledge about the environment. This is a process that is well-suited to the complex and adaptive nature of conflict. The adaptive approach allows the human principle and relevance for the peacebuilding process. There needs to be systems – that is, multiple parallel interventions – and there needs to be a selection process that replicates and multiplies effective interventions and discourages those that do not have the desired effect. The analysis, planning / implementation / assessment / selection cycle is thus well established in the development and peacebuilding communities. However, most peacebuilding programs are not given a sufficient budget to allow for the kind of adaptive learning that is required. The adaptive approach is a methodology for identifying and adapting programs/planning/strategies. To remedy these shortcomings, the adaptive peacebuilding approach utilises structured and iterative adaptation (the sixth principle) to help generate institutional learning.

A team of engineers with the United Nations peacekeeping mission assess the government of South Sudan with road construction activities (February 2012). UN PHOTO/SAMIC BALLY

The adaptive approach consists of iterative cycles of learning, starting with analysis and assessment. Based on the analysis, multiple possible options for influencing a social system are generated. For example, a peacebuilding campaign – such as a campaign to reduce the use of small arms – could be based on a set of ideas about what might be effective interventions that have worked in other contexts. Based on that, such an supporting the extension of state authority. When the selected options are developed into actual campaigns or programmes, their design must be realist about the theory of change each will employ, so that their efficacy can be assessed. For example, such a strategy may build public stakeholder and support the training and development of new police officers. The idea behind this project may be that these actors will help to extend the reach of the state, and that they will be able to resolve disputes and crimes in a fair and just way. The theory of change needs to indicate clearly how it intends to achieve a change in the behaviour of the social system it intends to influence – that is, how a series of activities is anticipated to generate a particular outcome. For example, how exactly will the training of new police officers lead to the extension of state authority? Will it be because the new police officers will be seen as a service that citizens prefer to deal with? Will it have led they be supported by the rest of the state system, for instance, by the justice system? A selected number of these intervention options are then implemented and closely monitored, with a view to identifying the effects that were anticipated by the system's theory of change and intervention. The feedback is then analysed, after which those responsible for the intervention, together with the affected communities and key stakeholders, must decide which of the intervention options should be selected for further iteration. The decision could be made that those are continued, that certain options need to be adjusted, that new options need to be introduced, that the theory of change to change the community that derives or experiences, if they do not receive their outcomes on time and if they do not have a budget for transport or other such costs for the service when performing their duties. The project can then be adapted to add those elements if they were not foreseen at the outset. Those interventions that perform better may be expanded or replicated, while those that do not may be discontinued. This process of adaptive learning and adaptive peacebuilding is therefore continued and expanded in a variety of ways, so that there is a continuous process of experimentation with a range of options, coupled with a continuous process of selection and refinement.

In practice, this method may not always be as explicitly employed, but the basic tenants of the adaptive approach are usually evident in the work of the peacebuilding practitioner community. For example, the Kofi Annan Commission on Peace and Internal African Republic and Sudan Study together with local counselling, 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 in the Commission, the Study and the Counselling are adaptive practitioners who have the experience and skills to pursue a variety of strategies and tactics. Their adaptive approach is not explicitly stated, but it is implicit in the methodology of explicit methodological approach. It is more a pattern of peacebuilding that experiment with an inductive, iterative and adaptive approach. These adaptive approaches differ fundamentally from the deterministic linear approach that was in vogue in the past, where the logic of the programmatic intervention was predetermined, and the role of the peacebuilders and communities was to implement the programmes as designed.



As part of Kofi Annan commission, the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA) organised a free planting project in Bangui (21 April 2016). UN PHOTO/HERVE SERFATI

An adaptive peacebuilding approach recognises the role of strategy, and outcomes (or processes) that those interventions which appear to be effective lasting will not continue to be so indefinitely. Any intervention will likely benefit some and not others. Those who do not benefit from it are likely to adapt and find other ways to undermine the intervention. Or, the intervention or position themselves to benefit from it. Even successful programmes need to be transformed for signals that may indicate that unintended consequences are taking hold. Adaptive peacebuilding approaches are thus effective in that they are able to monitor for intended results, but also for unintended consequences, and be ready to take steps to deal with the adverse effects that may come about due to intervention.

The adaptive peacebuilding approach is scalable at all levels – the same basic methods can be applied to individual interventions, to programmes, to institutional strategies, and to whole-of-society approaches. Adaptive peacebuilding is thus a complexity theory perspective, the feedback generated by various interventions at different levels should be shared and mediated as widely as possible throughout the system, so that as broad a spectrum of initiatives as possible can self-adjust and co-evolve on the basis of the information generated.

The adaptive peacebuilding approach aims to help societies build the resilience and inclusiveness needed to cope with, and adapt to, changes by developing greater levels of complexity in their social institutions. A less complex social system will have only one way to manage interconnectivity conflict. A more complex social system will have a variety of mechanisms and institutions to manage interconnectivity conflict. Complex systems are more resilient than simple systems. Adaptive, iterative, inclusive, and agile. The adaptive peacebuilding approach aims to work with the communities in which it is engaging, investing in the resilience of social institutions to cope with and channel change positively, and to manage conflict in such a way that it does not become violent. It does so by involving local societies and communities in all decisions related to the peacebuilding process, at a level-to-scale attempted to date.

Conclusion

It includes those who want to understand how social systems leave into violent conflict, how they can prevent or recover from conflict, and what can be done to strengthen their resilience. For a peace process to become self-sustainable, resilient social institutions need to emerge from within – that is, from the local actors, history and socio-economic context. External actors can assist and facilitate this process, but if they interfere too much, they will undermine the self-organising processes necessary to sustain resilient and inclusive institutions.

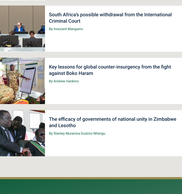
The key to successful conflict resolution and peacebuilding has thus to finding the appropriate balance between international support and local self-organisation, and the role of the conflict-affected communities in conflict. Those engaged in conflict resolution and peacebuilding should their efforts to safeguarding, stimulating, facilitating and creating the space for societies to develop resilient capacities for self-organisation.

Adaptive peacebuilding is an approach that can help navigate this delicate balance between international support and local self-organisation. Peacebuilders, together with the communities and people affected by the conflict, actively engage in a structured process to sustain peace by employing an iterative process of learning and adaptation. The adaptive peacebuilding approach is a methodology that can be applied by conflict-resolution and peacebuilders they need to cope with and adapt to change by developing greater levels of complexity in their social institutions.

Endnotes

1. For more on Adaptive Peacebuilding see: De Coning, Cedric (2018) Adaptive Peacebuilding, *International Affairs*, 94(2), pp. 301–317. Available at: **https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiy001**.

This Issue



Editorial
By Rasa Gasanber

Reinvigorating the African Solidarity Initiative for robust implementation of the African Union's Post-conflict Reconstruction and Development Policy
By Abdoulaye F. Diamanvoye

Social media
By Cordelia Mbelle Lodge

South Africa's possible withdrawal from the International Criminal Court
By Amazwan Mangqana

Key lessons for global counter-insurgency from the fight against Boko Haram
By Andrew Hawkins

The efficacy of governments of national unity in Zimbabwe and Lesotho
By Stanley Mukaronda Dubiwa Nhengo