



Chuck Thiessen

Local Ownership of Peacebuilding in Afghanistan: Shouldering Responsibility for Sustainable Peace and Development

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International peacebuilding operations have suffered a barrage of criticism in recent years for assuming inappropriate levels of control over local political processes and for attempting to foist externally designed models of action onto unwilling or under-prepared local populations. As consensus emerges that the sustainability of peacebuilding efforts depends on 'hybrid' arrangements that blend local and international elements together,¹ scholars, policymakers, and practitioners have been searching for ways to encourage more local ownership of peacebuilding. Local ownership is envisaged as the key to long-term popular legitimacy for the political changes which peacebuilding demands. Unfortunately, this pivotal issue has received scant attention beyond the level of rhetoric, and many local voices continue to be sidelined in war-torn societies where the international community is engaged.

In his highly readable new book – *Local Ownership of Peacebuilding in Afghanistan: Shouldering Responsibility for Sustainable Peace and Development* – Chuck Thiessen explores why local and international actors are 'still struggling [...] to define and implement an effective strategy that leads to significant advances in local Afghan control over peacebuilding prioritisation, project design, and evaluation' (p. 3). He offers practical policy advice and important theoretical insights to guide efforts at supporting local ownership. The book is based on a series of interviews with (primarily Afghani) peacebuilding leaders from government, civil society, international, and NGO backgrounds, and the author describes some of the under-reported realities of intervention, and the implications of handing over ownership of its various aspects to the control of different local actors. While the findings would perhaps benefit from corroboration by data from additional sources besides the featured interviews, the author's deferential treatment of participants and their perspectives allows the reader a rare opportunity to witness the sophistication of local analyses of the complex dilemmas impeding progress towards local ownership. It is these dilemmas which provide the structure for the book and which form the basis for Thiessen's own promising theoretical contribution, developed in the final chapter.

The first three of the book's six chapters set the stage for the bulk of the analysis, which unfolds in the volume's second half. After the first chapter's brief introduction to the topic of local ownership of peacebuilding, chapter two provides a thorough review of the academic literature on this issue. The chapter is structured according to a division between two competing schools of thought: the Western-driven '(neo)liberal' peacebuilding paradigm which insists on the universal applicability of certain norms and standards; and the as-yet-untested 'emancipatory' approach to peacebuilding, which favours locally sourced definitions of peace and progress. Both bodies of literature still wrestle with the question of who the 'locals' are, and what effects their 'ownership' would have on macro-level peacebuilding success. Chapter three provides an overview of several major historical trends in Afghanistan, illustrating the importance of a historical contextualisation for many of the difficulties faced by the current intervention. Decades of joining with adversaries and outside powers (or



playing them off against each other) have made Afghanistan's tribal groups very adept at surviving and influencing the machinations of foreign invaders, but the chapter also sounds a note of cautious optimism, pointing to periods of 'sustained peace and political and economic development' (p. 66) as proof that progress is eminently possible.

Chapter four identifies major roles for foreign actors in the provision of physical security; the supervision of political reform and capacity-building; and the delivery and coordination of aid. However, the chapter also highlights the limits of foreign interventionism, and Thiessen argues that international efforts have been tainted by waste and inefficiency, periodic abuses, mistrust for Afghani counterparts, and interference from regional spoilers, including elements within Pakistan and Iran. Likewise, chapter five outlines the strengths and weaknesses of various local actors as prospective peacebuilding partners. Thiessen draws distinctions between government and civil society actors, as well as between national-level (elite) Afghan ownership and more grass-roots (often rural) forms of ownership. The author then makes a compelling case for shifting the current priorities of civil society actors away from service delivery management, and more towards the provision of citizen advocacy and oversight of the government. Corruption, sectarianism, and the culture of impunity surrounding predatory 'warlords-turned-politicians' (p. 122) remain key barriers that prevent more effective local ownership and capacity building. It is surprising to see no real discussion of the impact of opium, organised crime, and the illegal economy,² but Thiessen's treatment of local stakeholders is otherwise very thorough.

The book's major theoretical contribution lies in reconceptualising local ownership, not as a means toward achieving better peacebuilding results, but as an actual dispute in its own right. Thiessen argues in chapter six that, as such, the ownership issue should be susceptible to management using existing tools of conflict resolution. Theorising local ownership in this way has the advantage of acknowledging the roles of multiple indispensable actors, all of which have legitimate perspectives on how to advance peacebuilding, and none of which should be allowed to dominate discussions at the expense of others. The author does an excellent job of canvassing these actors, and explaining the roles and limitations of each. The book would be an ideal core text for university area studies courses covering Afghanistan, or as supplemental reading for courses geared more generally towards peacebuilding interventions in the post-September 11th world. In a future edition, the work could reach a wider audience by exploring how the findings might be generalised to settings beyond Afghanistan.

As it stands, the book should already appeal to practitioners and policymakers in particular – Thiessen advocates '[entrusting] the creation of an appropriate peacebuilding space into the hands of a more inclusive and broadly participatory process such as a strategic "dispute resolution system" (DRS)' (p. 153) – a forum for planning a coordinated and locally owned strategy for peacebuilding. While Afghanistan has seen its fair share of aspiring coordinating bodies, and buy-in from local and international actors would be essential, the ethos of respectful, inclusive deliberation underpinning such a forum could be exactly what is needed to break the local ownership impasse. Whereas international stakeholders have been



wondering how to transfer ownership to local actors who fail to meet certain standards, Thiessen declines to provide answers, but offers a mindset and tools to allow local actors to provide their own collectively acceptable answers. He offers fairly detailed policy recommendations for supporting such a system with educational advances, advocacy services, and a non-violent dispute resolution procedure. Whether or not the proposals in the book prove to be workable in the Afghan context, Thiessen has taken an important step forward in setting a new frame for the conversation about local ownership of peacebuilding.

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¹ Richmond, O. and Mitchell, A. (2011) eds. *Hybrid Forms of Peace: From Everyday Agency to Post-Liberalism*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan; MacGinty, R. (2011) *International Peacebuilding and Local Resistance: Hybrid Forms of Peace*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

² See, for example, Hodes, C. and Sedra, M. (2007) *The Search for Security in Post-Taliban Afghanistan*. IISS Adelphi Papers, 391. London: Routledge.