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Postconflict democratization partnerships:

The role of the international

Abstract

Sustainable international peacebuilding needs good partnerships with local actors. This is increasingly recognized by scholars (Crocker et al 2015), policymakers (U.S. Global Development Policy 2010), and practitioners (Campbell 2011) alike. However, decades of critical research on have highlighted the many problems with external involvement in local peacebuilding and democratization efforts. These macro-narratives include interventions reproducing colonial relations of domination (Paris 2002), disciplining civil society through 'NGO-ization' (Bernal and Grewal 2014), or anecdotes of internationals naively falling prey to cunning locals. Given these potential pitfalls, what are international donors to peacebuilding efforts to do?

This paper begins to analyze how constructive roles are narrated and practiced by internationals themselves, aspects found (Autessere 2014) among the prime obstacles for effective peacebuilding. Specifically, I analyze three websites of peacebuilding organizations and identify a gap between these micro-narratives of almost invisible international actors and the macro-narrative of dominating internationals, providing inspiration for future research.

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Introduction

What is good partnership in peacebuilding and democratization? Particularly, what is the role of the international in such partnerships? Decades of critical research have drawn our attention to the many problems with external actors getting involved in local peacebuilding efforts. For example, research on the 'liberal peace' has shown how colonial relations of domination are reproduced through peacebuilding interventions (Paris 2002), the disciplining of civil society organizations has been criticized as 'NGO-ization' (Bernal and Grewal 2014), and anecdotes about naïve aid workers fooled by cunning locals abound in the field. Still, taking seriously the interdependence of international politics, trying to "stay out" seems just as naïve as "going in". So, what are potential international supporters and donors to peacebuilding efforts to do?

Increasingly, scholarship (Crocker et al 2015), policy (U.S. Global Development Policy 2010), and practitioner evaluations (Campbell 2011) all acknowledge that international actors need to build good partnerships with local actors in order to achieve sustainable results. But what is a constructive role for the international actor in such a partnership, given the potential pitfalls described above? This paper attempts to begin a larger project analyzing constructive roles for international actors, particularly as narrated and translated into practices by international actors themselves who explicitly strive for equal partnerships with local actors. How do they articulate their role and navigate these challenges in their everyday?

This is important because recent literature identifies everyday "practices, rituals and narratives" (Autessère 2014) of internationals as among the prime obstacles for effective peacebuilding and responsible for many of the failures associated with international interventions. For example, many internationals socialize mostly with other internationals, follow strict security routines, and continuously suggest capacity building for local partners. While seemingly reasonable,

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these common practices can create distance to locals, even resentment, and thus unintentionally hinder crucial peacebuilding partnerships (ibid). This paper focuses on narratives about the roles of external peacebuilding partners, ending with some suggestions for how practices can be studied in a later step. Research on narratives shows that they can shape peacebuilding actors' views of identities as well as of what actions are seen as desirable, or even possible (Autessere 2012). Understanding how donors themselves narrate their role in these partnerships can therefore provide valuable clues for change and improvement.

Cases and Sources

I assume that these dilemmas are more pronounced in donor-grantee relationships where both parties recognize potential power dynamics and strive for equal partnerships. After all, if an international organization had a worldview of being inherently superior to local actors they would simply see a hierarchical relationship as a desirable or inevitable outcome rather than as problematic. If, however, they strive for an equal partnership with local actors, through a supportive role which enables the strong local ownership recommended by scholarship, policy and practitioner experience, we should expect them to struggle with these dilemmas more openly and their narratives to make visible alternative roles.

Therefore, I am particularly interested in partnerships between international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) who have explicitly committed to equal partnerships with local partners. In this preliminary study, I examine the websites of three feminist organizations supporting women peacebuilding activists in areas of wars and armed conflicts. I call these organizations A, B, and C. They have a few things in common: They all fund women's organizations or women-led initiatives, see themselves as part of a women's movement (including

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their grantees), and include advocacy in their activities. This is good for the study, as it means they all strive for a partnership based on equal terms, and are likely to *aim* to incorporate feminist and postcolonial insights into power dilemmas (whether this is implemented is another question).

They also differ from each other in their long vs short term funding (with B being the most long-term, and C the most short-term), and their hands-off (A and C) vs hands-on (B) approach to donor monitoring and follow-up of grantees. These factors could influence what type of role they see as appropriate for a donor. Two (A and C) are based in the U.S. while one (B) is based in Scandinavia, which could imply different approaches both to the donor role, and to storytelling.

In addition to studying these three websites, I have had conversations with two people with experience from such organizations, to validate and complement my own experiences from such work, in order to explore overlaps and gaps between narratives and lived realities of donor dilemmas.

Set-up

The outline is as follows: In the first section, I briefly outline three interdisciplinary clusters of literature the project relations to: on peacebuilding roles, on civil society contribution to postconflict democratization, and on narratives and practices in international relations. In the second section, I discuss the role of narratives in shaping identity and behavior, in particular the construction of "paradigmatic narratives" (exemplary stories). These are based on fragments and examples of donor stories and may say something about their view on appropriate ways to be involved in peacebuilding. In the third section, I do a preliminary analysis of the three donors' websites to piece together such a paradigmatic narrative. The analysis shows that these donors are almost invisible in their own stories, which instead highlight the work and lives of their grantees. That is, I identify a

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gap between the macro-narratives of problematic and heavy-handed donor roles as they are described above, and the micro-narratives of – surprisingly – invisible INGOs examined here. Fourth, using the exploratory conversations and feminist (Haraway 1988) and postcolonial (Spivak 2010) theorists, I discuss how such a "transparent" paradigmatic narrative ignores and obscures problematic issues in the donor role raised in academic literature and donor realities alike. Fifth and finally, I conclude by suggesting future research that could get at these questions in more depth.

Existing Literature

The project builds on inter-disciplinary literatures examining three themes: Peacebuilding roles, particularly between international and local actors; Civil society contributions, particularly INGO support to local organizations; and narratives and practices in international relations.

1) <u>Peacebuilding</u>: Both bargaining (Fortna and Howard 2008, Walter 2009) and strategic (Lederach 1997, Philpott and Powers 2010) peacebuilding approaches in political science identify distinct post-conflict roles for external actors. Whereas policy-oriented research relies on the international-local distinction to come up with recommendations for democratization (Jarstad and Sisk 2008), critical scholarship acknowledges these categories as fluid and "hybrid" but often ends up using them with minor adjustments (MacGinty 2011, Richmond and Mitchell 2012). Post-colonial approaches emphasize international actors' continuities with the colonial "mission civilicatrice" (Paris 2002) based on representations of difference in both African and Balkan contexts, not least regarding people's capacity for agency and sovereignty (Grovogui 2009, Jabri 2013, Paris 2002, Todorova 2009). Regardless of approach, the international-local distinction works to produce analysis of either friction or complementarities between the groups (Bigo and Walker 2007, Björkdahl and Höglundh 2013). This study adds to the literature by examining the self-narratives of

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international peacebuilding actors, specifically value-based INGOs with local partners.

2) <u>Civil society</u>'s contribution to democratization is subject to lively debates within peace research (Belloni 2008) and informs this project's focus on INGOs. Quantitative (Nilsson 2012, Wanis-St John and Kew 2008) and qualitative studies (Paffenholz 2014) find that local civil society involvement increases legitimacy of peace processes, using the DRC as a positive example. The value of international allies to such local groups also finds strong support (depending on donor context, see Murdie 2014), across conflict-cases (Paffenholz 2010), in Eastern European transitions (Bunce and Wolchik 2011), and in African post-conflict settings (Tripp et al 2009). However, INGOs can also be problematic partners for locals (Verkoren and Van Leuwen 2013), which prompts the project's investigations of organizational cultures and the narrative of helping. While well-meant, stories about internationals helping locals frames the relationship in unequal terms. Placing international actors as capable and resourceful partners to weak and needy locals risks cementing this pattern (Galtung 1996, Jutila et al 2008). A rich set of anthropological ethnographies detail problems with such INGO "help" (Barnett 2002, Bernal and Grewal 2014, Nordstrom 1997, Redfield 2013) and a recent contribution investigates the motivation of international "helpers" (Malkki 2015). The project thus builds on insights into dilemmas of INGO partnership in humanitarianism and investigates the specifics of peacebuilding.

3) <u>Practices and Narratives:</u> Recently, the discipline of International Relations (IR) has taken up "the practice turn" (Bourdieu 1990) with scholars calling for research on specific communities of practice, including discursive and material aspects (Adler and Pouliot 2011) – as that addressed by this project. For this paper, I draw on the sociology of narratives to analyze how practices interplay with stories to shape professional or activist identities (Polletta and Jasper 2001, Shapiro 2005) by "teaching tales" about the culture and "how we do things here" (Linde 2009). That narratives matter

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in peacebuilding has been shown by for example Autessere (2009) and Eriksson Baaz and Stern (2008) who demonstrate that master narratives of the DRC as a post-conflict situation where brutal violence is normal shape which actions international "helpers" perceive as possible. In this paper, the examination of web pages can contribute to how INGOs see their own role in relation to that of their partners, giving clues for what INGO practices become possible.

Narratives and Paradigmatic Narratives

There is a growing literature on the role narratives and narration (can) play in shaping and articulating our identities as individuals (Presser 2004) and groups (Prins et al 2013), their strategic use in organizational management and change (Boje 1991), as well as in persuasion (Green and Brock 2000). However, not all storytelling is effective for all ends (Boje 2006), or even its purported aims (Green and Brock 2000). Instead, some even risk being counter-productive to their original purpose, for example, by unintentionally victimizing agents it aims to empower, such as women in abusive relationships (Polletta et al 2013) or witnesses in transitional justice mechanisms (Madlingozi 2010). In addition, the interpretation of stories depends on the context in which they are read or heard, both in a more immediate sense of institutional setting (Conley and O'Barr 1985), and in a wider sense of cultural context – stories get their meaning from other stories that provide interpretive scripts for the audience (Scheppele 1992).

In this paper, I use the tool of "paradigmatic narratives" (Linde 2009), which combines several of these aspects of storytelling: A paradigmatic narrative shapes identities, is useful but not deterministic in inspiring change, and gets its persuasive force from its institutional and cultural context. Paradigmatic narratives can be described as "exemplary narratives, teaching tales about how a member of the institution should act under a variety of circumstances /.../ [it's] about ordinary

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members /.../ [and] offers patterns for a model life course" (Linde 2009, p. 141). They are not necessarily existing, distinct, and coherent stories, but can be pieced together from snippets of stories revealing common expectations and exemplifying typical events and actions, that together form a pattern. While Linde's paradigmatic narrative was developed to describe an exemplary employee's appropriate action to succeed within an organization, here I use it as a model story for appropriate behavior by another type of actor (INGO donors) within another setting (peacebuilding). That is, by analyzing the narratives donors use about themselves and their work, I will construct a paradigmatic narrative of how they view appropriate ways of being an exemplary donor. As the paradigmatic narrative can get reinforced (or undermined) by institutional or contextual material incentives, I will try to identify connections to expected returns of the paradigmatic narrative from fund-raising, and from norms in the donor community.

Generating a Paradigmatic Narrative of INGO Donors' Role

To construct a preliminary paradigmatic narrative of INGO donors, I analyze the three donors' websites, particularly looking for two types of stories: About the donor itself (under "who we are"-type headings), and about the donor as part of their stories about their grantees. The analysis shows that, first, the donors did not tell rich stories about their origins as organizations, despite obvious possibilities for displaying resolute agency and even heroic drama. Instead, there was a paragraph or two with brief stories of, in each case, a few women reacting to the lack of funding for women's organizing (A), to the slow and bureaucratic process for activists needing funding (C), or to the stories of mass rapes and genocide in the 1993 war in former Yugoslavia (B). This suggests either that narratives are not considered appropriate, or (perhaps more likely) that donors prefer to highlight their grantee's work.

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Regarding the stories about their grantees, they are quite different from each other, but in each case richer than that of the donor. Under the heading "success stories", one donor (A) tells empowerment stories about (mostly) girls in different countries through "modernity" narratives. In these stories, girls battle traditional attitudes, make unusually modern decisions (helped by progressive parents or other mentor/authority figures), and though they meet resistance, they overcome, emerge empowered and ready to face greater challenges. (Where the story is about adult women, the resistance they face is more specific and framed through contemporary politics, even if rooted in "traditions" or "religion".) Meanwhile, some stories mention the donor as a key success factor; "without A we couldn't have done it", while others do not include them at all. Another donor (C) gives short and structured accounts for each grantee, under "background" (the hostile political or social context), "the rapid response" (what the donor support enabled the grantee to do), and "the impact" (such as raised awareness, new meeting places). The role of the donor is built in through the sub-heading "the rapid response [by the donor]", but not elaborated on or mentioned in the story itself. The third organization (B) provides richer, personal portraits of women's rights activist – how did her activism start, what (often hostile, even violent) resistance has she met, how did she overcome it, and what is the present situation or future challenge. Here as well, the donor is only occasionally alluded to, in phrases such as "Activist so and so, *from B's partner organization* X".

Taken together, these findings suggest that donors do not want to be seen as too active themselves, or as influencing the activists. Instead, they come off as a transparent channel, where money goes in one direction, and stories of heroic and authentic activism in the other. Through their web sites, the donors are providing an arena, a link for people to connect directly with the activists, get their real stories. The paradigmatic narrative, as pieced together from these web stories, is that of a donor role that is simple, enabling, and hands-off, at the same time as it is based on solidarity

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and close enough to allow for intimate conversations about life choices, family, threats and struggles.

Material incentives for this type of narrative could include the paradoxical but well-known antipathy of individual and institutional donors against giving money to INGOs own organization and staff (with the argument that money should go directly to the local partners). Despite being necessary for INGOs to develop such close partnerships (and financial control), funds for their own organization are often derided as unnecessary "bureaucracy". This provides an incentive for INGO donors to deflect attention from their own staff, offices, work, and role, and to keep their constituency focused on their grantees. However, the transparent paradigmatic narrative contains no trace of the academic critiques of colonial domination, disciplining NGO:ization or corruption that suggest that donors risk perpetuating imperialism, or paternalism, or simply be fools.

Silences, Gaps, and Internal Narratives

There is thus an interesting gap between the paradigmatic narrative of invisible INGO donors constructed here and the literature identifying problems with too heavy-handed external involvement in peacebuilding. Can this be attributed to these donors simply not having encountered any such problems? And what effects, intended or unintended, can such a narrative silence have on the field of peacebuilding?

Exploratory conversations with two donor representatives (here called D, and E[1]) bring up at least two problems that such donors often encounter within the relationships with grantees, and two problems with the wider field of peacebuilding. First, the transparent paragidmatic narrative hides

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1 I got these contacts through previous professional connections, having worked in such an organization before pursuing my studies. One of them (E) works for one of the three organizations, while the other (D) has previously worked for several similar organizations. Although, they were aware of my research interests, it was not a formal interview, but a background conversation.

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INGOs' often major impact on what activities local activists can do and how. According to E, in her previous experience from a donor coordination network in a peacebuilding region, donors often complained about grantees' lack of capacity and effectiveness, and their short term planning and administrative focus *"with no sign at all that they [donors] understood that they were contributing to that"* (quote). That is, application, reporting and financial procedures, and other donor field practices, do not only enable grantees, but strongly shape the conditions for their work (Autessere 2014). Second, according to D, donors and grantees might develop such a strong, and mutually reinforcing relationship (*"when money is involved, it creates this intimate bond, it's like sex"* (quote)) that the grantee does not develop stronger ties with its own constituency, which both donors and grantee might construct as backwards and hostile. Bluntly put, in contexts where grantees are controversial human rights activists, donors feel good in hanging out with such "heroines", and provide safe spaces and "love-bombing" as an alternative to the common threats and attacks from grantees' own compatriots. A consequence can be that "the public" is not addressed or engaged in the issues, and broader social change is foregone. Clearly, this is not the "equal" relationship aimed for, and not the "authentic" activities that they purport to be supporting, and often donors ignore their own role – just like in their narratives.

In addition to these within-relationships effects, there are two other, perhaps subtler effects of the transparent paradigmatic narrative. First, by solely portraying grantee's work, it keeps their audience – generally the Western public and institutional funders – focused on what is happening "over there". It denies the fundamental interconnectedness of conflict dynamics, and lets Western publics and their political representatives off the hook for any conflict-driving policies. This preoccupation "with changing the behavior of others, not ourselves" (Darby 2011, p. 8) perpetuates the colonial practice of seeing "the South as the site for action" (ibid), instead of turning the gaze on

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contributing factors located among the "powerful" in these relationships (for example by making them the objects of research (Eckl 2008), such as this proposal aims to do). Second, the type of heroine portraits of exceptional individuals that two donors (A, B) used on their websites, might be inspiring and create the sense of a protagonist "worthy" of support (Polletta et al 2013). However, it also hides the mundane, long term, unglamorous work and collective organizing that is part of most activists' life. In the long term, it might deter funding from less "exciting" work, and even be divisive for the grantee organizations, if some leaders are constantly hailed as "the bravest women in the world" (B website) and perhaps develop such qualities and identities (Madlingozi 2010) while others are left in the shadows. This also goes for the INGOs' own work, where hiding their own role is not, for example, in the long term increasing their own donors', individual or institutional, understanding for their need of funding for their own staff and organization.

Postcolonial perspectives highlight how the colonial power dynamic often is reproduced, even when unintended. For example, in her seminal piece "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Gayatri Spivak (2010) criticizes Michel Foucault for not acknowledging his own – privileged – position, even as he explicitly aims for the emancipation of oppressed narratives. She calls this the "transparent" researcher, meaning he (because it is often a he) is "invisible". One cannot grasp the transparent researcher, he is see-through, and unaccountable, though seeing others and making them accountable. This "view from nowhere" has also been criticized by feminist scholars, who argue that it renders the dominant "gaze" not only unaccountable, but unavailable for conversation, in particular for the "power-sensitive" conversation (Haraway 1988) necessary to address global inequalities. This effect, I argue, also results from the paradigmatic narrative of INGO donors – by making themselves invisible they direct the audience's gaze to their grantees, and what goes on "over there", averting scrutiny, accountability, and involvement for themselves, and in "their own"

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political spheres, contributing to the counter-productive practices that undermine the long term aims of peacebuilding (Autessère 2014).

Conclusion

In this paper, I have explored the self-narratives of three donor INGOs who aim for equal partnerships with their local peacebuilding counterparts. These micro-narratives portray the INGOs in minimalist terms, as almost invisible, instead highlighting the activities, personalities and roles of their local grantees. I thus identified a gap between these micro-narratives and the macro-narratives of aid, which often portray external actors to local partners in terms of imperialist domination, or paternalist disciplining of NGOs. While my hypothesis was that value-based INGOs would try harder to avoid these negative roles, I did not expect them to make themselves invisible, and I discussed a few possible reasons and problematic consequences of such a transparent narrative. The identified gap between the micro- and macro-narratives thus provide inspiration for future research into narratives and practices of value-based INGOs. If narratives of INGOs oscillate between destructive heavy-handedness and invisible, hidden or silent roles, do the actual (or imagined) practices express more constructive roles for external peacebuilding partners?

Further research could provide clues for how international organizations which strive for equal partnerships with local peacebuilding partners articulate narratives for their roles in such partnerships and how (if) such narratives enable different practices than those identified as counterproductive to peacebuilding goals (Autessere 2014). In brief, future research could be carried out using archival research, further interviews with and participant observation of individual INGO donors, as well as interviews with grantees, the INGOs own donors and regional experts on peacebuilding. Particularly, interviews with INGOs as well as studies of internal documents,

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applications and reports and other external communication material could provide further insights into the paradigmatic narratives of an egalitarian INGO donor: How do they see their ideal role vis-à-vis that of their partner organizations, and on what grounds? Previous research has used stories from professional dilemmas to explain public officials' ("cops, teachers, counselors") different action towards different "clients" has shown the importance of identity construction of self and other (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003). Similarly, asking INGO representatives about their own stories of positive and negative instances of good partnership can illuminate organizational drivers and effects for realizing good v. bad partnership practices, as well as enabling and disabling external conditions.

Further, participant observation combined with interviews with grantees and regional experts on international peacebuilding activities could get at how such narratives are translated into/expressed through everyday practices.

As strong partnerships between local and international actors have been identified as key for peacebuilding success, it is of outmost importance to analyze the narratives and practices of INGOs which facilitate, rather than obstruct, such partnerships. Improved understanding of how INGOs construct their identities vis-à-vis their local partners will clarify what alternative actions they see as desirable, whereas a better idea of their perceived organizational drivers and effects and external conditions may clarify what actions they see as possible. In sum, this will contribute to a better understanding of constructive roles for international actors in peacebuilding and post-conflict democratization, as well as why they are not always realized.

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WORK IN PROGRESS – DO NOT CITE PLEASE

A's website

B's website

C's website

<u>Conversational interviews</u>

Donor representative 1 (D)

Donor representative 2 (E)