



Working Paper

Knowledge in peacebuilding : Elements, production, dissemination

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Introduction

This publication is the result of a summer school entitled “Academic Approaches to Peacebuilding in Yemen” held in Amman, Jordan, in September 2016. Advanced academics from the Institute of Oriental and Asian Studies at the University of Bonn and the Gender-Development Research & Studies Center at Sanaa University alongside MA and PhD students from Yemen and Germany, jointly discussed international approaches to and current academic debates on peacebuilding against the backdrop of the Yemeni context. The students involved in the summer school came from a diverse set of academic backgrounds, including gender and development, peace and conflict resolution, public health, political science, social anthropology, Near and Middle Eastern studies, etc. A number of the students had practical experience in conducting research in the framework of peace-building projects while all had a theoretical foundation.

In a joint exercise over the course of two mornings,¹ these student participants, led by the editors of this paper, developed recommendations for researchers and policy-makers on how best to approach, implement and present research on peacebuilding in societies in conflict. The exercise aimed to achieve two objectives: a) to develop a guide for young researchers, NGOs and policy-makers involved in generating knowledge on and for peace-building processes; and b) to subject the summer school participants to a intercultural / inter-academic writing and learning process in which a German and a Yemeni student teamed up to produce one of the below recommendations. The students’ combined practical and theoretical knowledge of academic research principles as well as their understanding of diverse contexts of conflict and civil war (particularly in Yemen) led to the development of the recommendations presented here.

¹ The participants had not received notice prior to the summer school that this writing activity would take place.

The structure of this paper is divided into three main research questions. Firstly, it analyzes what kind of knowledge is required for successful peacebuilding. Secondly, it identifies the producers of this kind of knowledge and elaborates on why their knowledge is important. Finally, it brings forward recommendations on what should be borne in mind in the knowledge production, analysis and dissemination process.

1 What kind of knowledge is required for successful peacebuilding?

1.1 *Peacebuilding in general*

Each separate peace process is highly complex and idiosyncratic. But even if “almost any international assistance effort that addresses any perceived or real grievance can arguably be called ‘peacebuilding’” (Barnett et al. 2007: 44), theoretical and practical knowledge about best practices and lessons learned from processes of peacebuilding worldwide is essential. Among practitioners and researchers, competing definitions of peacebuilding exist. According to Galtung, peacebuilding consists of a “triangle”: peacekeeping (suspension of violent behavior); peacemaking (addressing political and strategic attitudes); and peacebuilding (peaceful social change through reconstruction and development).² These address, among others, four frameworks of peacebuilding: security; political framework; socio-economic foundations; and justice and reconciliation. In sum, it may be said that peacebuilding is comprised of strategies that promote a stable lasting peace in which violent conflicts (whether physical or structural) do not recur. To achieve this goal, peacebuilding requires and depends on the consent and cooperation of key stakeholders. The initiative and agency of local actors is therefore of great importance. International actors should not necessarily intervene but rather support local efforts and provide advice to local peacemakers and peacebuilders. Furthermore, it is required to engage in structural transformation (governance, institutions, laws etc.) and inter-group relationships (reconciliation, trust, attitudes) to consolidate the peace-building process. These are but a few of the widely accepted approaches to peacebuilding. For local and international peacebuilders, it is therefore essential to study lessons learned from other peace-building processes worldwide as well as comparative analyses. Thereby, a repetition of mistakes can be avoided and one’s own initiatives can build on successful experiences from elsewhere. Such theoretical and practice-based understanding needs to be coupled with:

1.2 *Local knowledge*

Local knowledge is certainly among the most important elements of knowledge that ought to inform approaches to peacebuilding. Familiarity with the cultural and social context is indispensable to understanding more about local norms, values and practices that contribute to peace. Local strategies of

² Alternative conceptualizations can be found in Ramsbotham et al. 2017: 12-33.

conflict resolution, known from previous experiences, may also play a considerable role in informing the peace-building process. In this regard, it is also important to bear in mind the regional differences within their context: peace-making and peace-building processes in Yemen's tribal North, for example, may work differently and may involve other actors than in the Yemeni central highlands or in Yemen's South and East. Therefore, local peace-making and peace-building knowledge and strategies need to be assessed before intervening in a certain area, bearing the dynamic convergence of local motives with the "master-cleavages" (Kalyvas 2003) of an ongoing conflict in mind. It is also important to take a gendered and diversified perspective in order to assess the role men, women and people from different social backgrounds can play. An actor and network analysis of potential partners, as well as potential spoilers, is also of great importance. This also relates to knowledge about:

1.3 *Knowledge of the conflict specifics*

When generating knowledge for peacebuilding, one has to consider the underlying drivers of conflict and its complex and interconnected dimensions. In order to maximize the efficiency of peace-building processes, realistic and regularly updated assessments of the conflict dynamics and its changing actor alliances need to be the foundation of any intervention or project. For example, a comprehensive analysis of the conflict should include economic drivers; political goals; religious and cultural norms and values appealed to by the conflict parties; the regional and international context; and the specific (local) interests and strategies of actors. Inappropriate remedies based on concepts which lack a connection to the context of the conflict and its specifics bear the risk of jeopardizing the chance for effective, durable peace-making and peace-building outcomes. Such analysis should also specifically focus on:

1.4 *Knowledge of local actors*

Local actors play a critical role in peacebuilding and there are several elements that need to be kept in mind when assessing them. The implementation of peace-building measures can be difficult in case of an insufficient understanding of cultural and religious norms and values, of gender aspects, and of the roles and networks of local actors. Cultural norms and values shape the discursive tools the different parties to the conflict employ when mobilizing their followers. In Yemen, for example, references to tribal norms and values (e.g. honor) can contribute to a mobilization for war as well as for peace. Honor can be appealed to when calling for men to protect their land and their "nation" against an aggressive outsider; but honor can also be referenced when reminding men that it is honorable to go through established channels of peacemaking (e.g. tribal mediation) rather than seeking justice by force.

Gender analysis, too, can illuminate important aspects relevant to peacebuilding: the experiences of men and women during conflict and peace, their specific needs, and the changing gender roles during conflict and peace. In Yemen, for example, the protection of 'the weak' [al-du'afa'], particularly of women and

children, is an essential cultural obligation for all men. Males are thus mobilized to fight as they will not be considered 'real men' if they cannot protect the women and children of their families. As recent studies (e.g. Heinze & Baabbad 2017) show, there are women in Yemen mobilize their men to join the war based on such norms (while there are also many women who try to prevent their husbands and sons from joining the war). Peace-building initiatives thus need to bear such norms and values in mind, and it is important to discuss with local actors how they can employ or redefine local values to contribute to peace.

In addition, it is important to conduct an actor analysis prior to intervention in order to understand the variety of local state actors, civil society organizations, and local community and religious leaders, as well as their political and personal affiliations. It is also imperative to consider sectors of society that are not generally represented in decision-making processes, such as women, children and other socially and politically marginalized groups. Peace-building efforts on the local level need to be as inclusive as possible in order to be successful.

1.5 *Knowledge of donor and INGO interests*

Donors and international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) play an essential role in every phase of the peace-building process: In many contexts, certain peace-building activities cannot be established and implemented without international funding and expertise. Their support is needed to build the capacity of local staff of civil society organizations (CSOs) and local partners in state institutions. Additionally, INGOs often have better access to data and can provide important communication channels between local voices and the international community. Before entering into a partnership with INGOs and international donors, CSOs should critically assess the following: Firstly, what is the agenda (i.e. motivation) of the INGO or the donor behind its activities and what experiences have other CSOs or similar actors made with this donor or INGO in the same country or in other countries. Secondly, in case of solicitation by a donor or INGO to implement a project or service in their name, CSOs should make sure that the project or service is conducive to the objective it claims to achieve and does not cause harm, e.g. by unknowingly contributing to further unrest through unbalanced treatment of stakeholders (due to a lack of knowledge of local stakeholders). And thirdly, local CSOs need to bear in mind that international organizations are often interested in establishing networks of local stakeholders to avoid duplication when designing and implementing projects and in order to provide platforms for informed dialogue. CSOs thus need to be aware of the rules and regulations of the donors throughout the whole project cycle in order to build trust. Inclusion of monitoring and evaluation systems or tools will increase chances of approval by donors. Cross-cutting issues such as gender, peace, conflict prevention, do-no-harm, disaster risk reduction and climate change are important topics to address when applying for international support.

2 Who produces this kind of knowledge? Why is their knowledge important?

When aiming to get access to the above-defined elements of knowledge relevant for peacebuilding, the following sources of knowledge can be valuable.

2.1 *Local actors (politicians, tribal leaders, etc.)*

Local actors such as local authorities, tribal or religious leaders, representatives of marginalized groups and the heads of civil society organizations (among many others) are in possession of practical context knowledge. These sources are essential when aiming to understand local norms and values, networks among different actors, and available mechanisms and strategies of achieving a certain goal in a certain field. These sources can be tapped into by conducting, for example, individual interviews or focus group discussions. Involving local actors in the preparation of a project on the local, governmental or national level can also contribute to gaining their support in the implementation process. If they feel that their interests are taken into account, they will be less likely to act as spoilers.

2.2 *Artists*

Art is the beating heart of societies. People enjoy reading poems, watching their favorite actors, or listening to their favorite songs. Additionally, it is a crucial source of various types of knowledge that can be used in different contexts. By using poems, sketches, pictures, songs, and other forms, artists reflect the past and/or the present of specific situations and enable the 'outsider' to critically reflect on their surroundings. Artists thus contribute to a better understanding of society by providing knowledge about the structure of society, about its history as well as regional knowledge (in the sense that a specific type of art might originate from a specific area), amongst others. Art can be considered a 'tool box' of local and cultural references which can often only be understood by people who have grown up in this society or who have become very familiar with it. For example, the *zamil*, which is a popular poem in (tribal) Yemen, reflects many dimensions of Yemeni society. It is used in different aspects of life, but is particularly relevant in any sort of conflict (between neighbors, communities, tribes, and beyond). It can contribute to furthering a conflict by mobilizing one's followers, but it is also very often used to prevent or end conflict. A *zamil* makes reference to Yemen's geography, history, politics, culture, etc. and so provides researchers with a wealth of local information. Artists and their art can accordingly be considered as an entrance point to local perceptions and interpretations of the term 'peace', for example, which can help policy-makers and NGOs to better formulate, implement and support local strategies for conflict resolution. To sum up, art helps peacebuilders uncover hidden messages, tap into sensitive topics and understand current trends within societies in order to develop strategies tailored to specific communities for the purpose of achieving peace. Art can moreover add value when raising public awareness about the significance and conditions of peace. Art is much more than an amusing, entertaining, or aesthetic tool; it is a critical gate to knowledge about different contexts.

2.3 *Journalists and the media*

Local journalists not only have better access to information due to their networks and their language abilities, they usually also have better capacities to place and interpret the information received into a broader context due to their local understanding. At the same time, journalists and the media can become personally embroiled in a conflict. In Yemen, for example, there are currently no independent media reporting on the conflict. Due to funding necessities, media companies are affiliated with and financed by different actors. Accessing media or interviewing journalists for information thus necessarily needs to take into account their political affiliation. When this potential bias is taken into account, however, journalists and the media can become an important source for understanding the political discourses of the various parties to the conflict via how they frame their grievances and goals, how they try to mobilize followers and how they interpret events as the conflict unfolds. Gaining such an understanding is important for researchers and policy-makers who wish to contribute to peacebuilding, as respective projects and interventions necessarily need to take the various worldviews of actors on the ground into account. At times, such worldviews or narratives can then be used for constructive rather than destructive messaging. Such an understanding can also help policy-makers, researchers and NGOs to critically reflect on certain terms used in media discourses and how these terms negatively contribute to the conflict. For example, in Yemen the term *dehbashy* (pl. *dahabshe*) is used by Southerners, including Southern media, in reference to people in Northern Yemen. This term stereotypes all Northerners as backwards, uncivilized and violent and thus dehumanizes them, justifying the hatred of the South towards the North and their aim to establish an independent Southern state. Similarly, Northerners refer to people from certain areas in the South, including Ta'iz, as *laghalighah* (sing. *lughlugh*; also: *burghuli*) in reference to the tendency in these areas to pronounce the letter *qaf* as *gha*. The term is meant to emphasize the perceived non-tribal background of this part of the Yemeni population and thus their lack of supposed tribal characteristics such as strength, fortitude, courage, generosity and honor.

2.4 *National and international NGOs*

National and international NGOs can be sources of knowledge in two different ways: Firstly, NGOs can be producers of knowledge via research projects they support, fund or implement themselves for the sake of furthering their own projects. Through such research, new knowledge is produced that is often also accepted as more objective and non-partisan than knowledge produced by state-affiliated actors. Moreover, national and international NGOs are in possession of a wealth of information on the relevant actors, networks and mechanisms in their respective fields of engagement. NGOs working on the penal system, for example, know better than many others about the situation of prisoners, the structures and mechanisms of the prison system, its benefits and challenges. Humanitarian organizations, as another example, usually have an excellent understanding of the current requirements and challenges in providing

the necessary aid. Depending on the project or intervention for peacebuilding, such knowledge can be highly relevant. National and international NGOs are thus not only producers of knowledge by implementing or supporting research, but are sources of highly relevant knowledge themselves.

2.5 *Local and international academics*

Academics such as anthropologists, political scientists, historians and conflict analysts are an important but, as this report shows, not the only source of knowledge. In complement to the other sources of knowledge presented in this section, however, academics – due to their long-term focus on specific areas of research – can provide deeper and broader insights on aspects relevant to peacebuilding, conflict mechanisms, social structures, values and discourses, etc. The extent of their theoretical knowledge takes analysis to another level and their knowledge of peace-building and conflict mechanisms in other countries allows for comparison and a better understanding of best practices and lessons learned. Their methodological knowledge can moreover help guide research by other actors.

3 What should be borne in mind in the knowledge production, analysis and dissemination process?

3.1 *Production of knowledge*

3.1.1 Contributors

Knowledge production on peacebuilding should be a participatory process, particularly if researchers from both without and within the context are involved – an inclusive research method that is highly recommended. Researchers from outside can bring new perspectives to the discussion and help local researchers take a step back from the conflict they are inevitably affected by. Local researchers usually have a much deeper understanding of the context and the references made by the sources. Through a participatory research process from the onset, a research project can be designed that takes into account challenges and particularities of the research context and that allows for a deeper discussion of the results. Throughout the research process, it is important to remain open to all sides and to constantly critically reflect on and contextualize the information provided by the sources. An analysis that reflects the interests and strategies of all relevant actors in conjunction with a critical analysis of these will best lay the foundations for successful project implementation.

3.1.2 Positionality and the role of researchers

For one's own work as a researcher, as well as for every source that is used for research, it should be remembered that absolute objectivity is not possible. The researcher should take their position in relation to the research subject, sources and informants into account, as well as how their own upbringing and

socialization (class, race / ethnicity, nationality, gender, etc.), education received, etc. impact on the ways they analyze the information provided. Acknowledging one's own positionality serves to better understand one's position towards the subject matter and how this may impact on the ways information is analyzed and presented. Good academics thus regularly and critically question their own assumptions and reflect various viewpoints in their analyses.

This also relates to working with other academics: Their theoretical and political standings need to be taken into account as does their personal background. Just like every other actor, academics – even though their analyses, based on years of rigorous methodological training, are meant to be as objective as possible – tend to see the world through their own eyes and are influenced by their positionality.

3.2 *Analysis of knowledge*

The various methodologies available to analyze data are beyond the scope of this paper. However, from our own practical experience of implementing research projects to support policy-making, we want to emphasize two specific points: Firstly, we recommend that a continuous updating of relevant data, particularly on changing conflict dynamics, is planned into the research design from the onset so that any analysis or recommendations resulting from the research are as up-to-date as possible. Secondly, in re-emphasis of the point raised in 3.1.1, it is recommended to include other researchers and academics in the interpretation of the data gathered. For researchers from outside the context, it is recommended they discuss their findings with local experts and researchers to gain a deeper and broader understanding of how to contextualize the data gathered. For researchers from within the context, it is recommended to discuss the findings with other colleagues from within or outside the context to gain different perspectives on how the data could be interpreted. Such collaborative analysis allows individual researchers to look beyond their own assumptions.

3.3 *Dissemination of knowledge*

3.3.1 Channels of knowledge transmission

Next to sharing one's findings with the relevant policy-community through one's own networks (generally through an e-mail, regular mail or social media), the knowledge gathered should also be made available to a broader audience, when possible. General knowledge of the media landscape and existing channels of knowledge transmission, as well as their specific characteristics, are thus important before disseminating the produced knowledge.

Before dissemination, of course, it is important to make sure that all anonymous sources are protected and that the publication of findings does not endanger researchers involved on the ground. Moreover, it is important to assess which target group one wants to address and through which channels of information this

target group can best be reached. The necessary task here is the collection of data about the *preferred source of information* of the target group in order to be able to select especially useful and accepted (media) channels before the process of knowledge dissemination begins. In Yemen, for example, if the target group is educated youth from urban areas, then using Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp will probably be successful channels of knowledge dissemination. In contrast, if the target group is illiterate women in rural areas, an assessment of their preferred channels of media consumption may need to be conducted first, and person-to-person forms of dissemination (i.e. through workshops, etc.) should also be considered.

Regarding the media landscape, it is of course important to be aware of the channels' *affiliation* with the various parties to the conflict. Dissemination should either go through politically neutral media, or – if this is not possible – via a variety of channels with different political affiliations in order to avoid the impression that the knowledge producers are taking sides.

If possible, the knowledge producer should make use of a *feedback mechanism* to be able to enhance the ability to disseminate knowledge more efficiently to a target group either by changing the channels of knowledge dissemination or the way it is presented.

3.3.2 Language

The success of peace-building projects and interventions is highly dependent on the awareness of language issues in the dissemination process. The first point to consider here is the issue of translation, particularly when the research is produced, written and disseminated in different languages. Translators who are not familiar with the context and the conflict may end up using highly politicized or controversial terminology when translating.

Another aspect concerns the target group of the research: Locals often use different terms than NGOs or academics. So, in writing for an academic audience, keywords from the academic discourse can be used as they will be understood by the target group; the same holds true when writing for the policy community with its own technical language. When writing for any target group, therefore, their distinct standard use of language and codes needs to be referenced, and – if possible – the product is reviewed by a member of that target group to ensure the message is understandable. Terms and concepts (either from the local context or from academia or policy-related discourse) that cannot be translated should be explained in brackets or footnotes, depending on the type of publication.

3.3.3 Transparency

When publishing the research findings, it is best to lay open the methodology utilized and to cite all written sources used. Particularly regarding research in a context of conflict, credibility of the research can

best be achieved and maintained if the researcher/publishing institution is as open as possible about methodologies employed and obstacles encountered.

An important point to carefully consider is the publication of names: Researchers need to walk a fine line between protecting sources that might be endangered by the publication of the research findings and ensuring credibility of the findings by laying open the source. If the publication of names is being considered, this point is best raised at the time of the interview. If publication of names is not possible, the affiliation of the interviewee needs to be stated when citing a quote.

3.3.4 Publication

Finally, the time for the publication release should be wisely chosen. It is first of all important to consider whether there have been any other recent publications on this topic. If so, make sure to take these publications into consideration before releasing your research and to include their authors in your dissemination networks. When publishing, you might also want to refer to previous publications and explain how your research adds extra knowledge. Additionally, consider how the time of publication will affect how your research will be read and accessed by the relevant audience. Avoid publishing on weekends or during vacation time, and especially avoid publishing when you are aware that your target audience is so deeply embroiled in another issue that your results and recommendations will not receive any attention. Also, with a view to an ongoing conflict, consider whether the publication of your results in close proximity to ongoing discussions among actors involved in the conflict might positively or negatively impact on these debates, as well as the overall conflict dynamics. "Do no harm" should be the guiding motto in all you do and write.

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About this project

This paper – and the summer school this paper is a result of – are part of the project “Academic Approaches to Peacebuilding and Statebuilding in Yemen”, which is funded by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) in the framework of its Transformation Partnership. Against the backdrop of the ongoing war in Yemen, this project aims at contributing to peacebuilding and statebuilding in the country. This objective is to be achieved by strengthening ties between researchers, academic staff, students and – subordinately – to experts in the policy and development community in order to develop ideas and find new ways of academic support to respective endeavors. A particular focus is placed on the promotion and support of young academics and women. Marie-Christine Heinze and Dr. Bilkis Zabara are jointly coordinating this project and are co-editors of resultant paper.

Website: www.bonn-sanaa.de

Project partners

The *Institute of Oriental and Asian Studies (IOA) at the University of Bonn* was established in 2005 and currently has approximately 1,700 students and 45 academic staff (incl. 15 professors). The University of Bonn is a general university located in Bonn, Germany. It was founded in 1818 and has 544 professors and approximately 32,500 students. From 2012-2014, the Department of Near and Middle Eastern Studies at the IOA successfully implemented a research project on the 2011 upheavals in Yemen and the subsequent transition process. This project, also coordinated by Marie-Christine Heinze, was funded by the Volkswagen Foundation and co-implemented with an independent Yemeni research institute, the Yemen Polling Center.

Website: www.ioa.uni-bonn.de

The *Gender Development Research & Studies Center (GDRSC) at Sanaa University* was founded in 2003. It is institutionally part of Sanaa University, but financially independent. It offers a 'Master in International Development and Gender' in English, providing students with concepts, theories and methodologies of development studies with a particular view to gender issues. Given the situation in the country over the past years, issues relating to peace and conflict studies have necessarily become a focus of staff research interests as well as training and consultancy. Two thirds of its students are female and – until the deterioration of the security situation– almost 90% were working in national and international institutions in the policy and development sector (World Bank, GIZ, Oxfam, CARE, etc.) and various embassies. The above mentioned master thus aims at linking research with policy. The director of GDRSC is Dr. Bilkis Zabara, co-editor of this paper.

Website: www.gdrsc.net

The *Center for Applied Research in Partnership with the Orient (CARPO)* was founded in 2014 by Germany-based academics trained in the fields of Near and Middle Eastern Studies, Political Science and Social Anthropology. Its work is situated at the nexus of research, consultancy and exchange with a focus on implementing projects in close cooperation and partnership with stakeholders in the Orient. The researchers in CARPO's network believe that a prosperous and peaceful future for the region can best be achieved through inclusive policy-making and economic investment that engages the creative and resourceful potential of all relevant actors. Therefore, CARPO opens enduring channels for interactive knowledge transfer between academics, citizens, entrepreneurs, and policy-makers. Since its inception, CARPO has implemented several projects focusing on Yemen.

Website: www.carpo-bonn.org