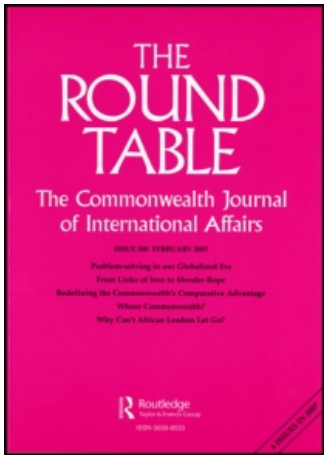

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Democracy and Peace-building: Re-thinking the Conventional Wisdom

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ABSTRACT *This article, which is a systematic analysis of the practical experiences of the authors in facilitating workshops to help resolve African conflicts, argues that we need to think again about how we both conceptualize and operationalize peace-building techniques. As the Iraq debacle may be said to show, to impose a peace settlement and democratic government institutions on a state and people after a war does not, by itself, work. What is needed is a much deeper understanding by the parties to the conflict that they have shared interests, a common vision and must learn to work in collaboration with one another. In their work in Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Liberia, the authors and their team have developed new training techniques that are based on experiential learning. They organize workshops that bring key leaders together in a long-term process designed to resolve the tensions and mistrust that are the inevitable by-product of conflict and war, and to build (or rebuild) their capacity to work effectively together across all of the country's lines of ethnic and political division. Through the teaching of concepts such as 'interest-based negotiation' they aim to develop better real communication between the parties and to enhance collaborative capacity that will help build really solid personal and institutional relationships and lasting peace.*

KEY WORDS: Peace-building, capacity-building, Democratic Republic of Congo, interest-based negotiation training, Burundi, leadership

Introduction

The case of Iraq may be the most dramatic and horrific example of the international community's failure to successfully advance peace and democracy in a divided society – but it is only one of a legion of such cases. Indeed, the majority of countries that fight internal conflicts and then sign peace agreements remain unstable and often return to hostilities within a few years—notwithstanding the best efforts of the international community to assist in their post-war reconstruction. Yet, would-be makers of peace and promoters of democracy keep repeating the same mistakes, over and over again. Among psychologists, this is the definition of a neurotic compulsion:

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the constant repetition of the same behaviours despite the fact that they continue to yield the same undesirable consequences. Isn't it time to re-examine the assumptions underlying traditional approaches to peace-building and democracy promotion?

Typically, peace agreements are the product of extensive external pressure on the belligerent parties to a conflict. That pressure may in fact yield an agreement to sign a peace accord. But there is no reason to believe that the signatories of such an externally induced (or imposed) agreement see each other any differently the day after they have signed the agreement, or understand their conflict any differently. Nor is there any reason to believe that the leaders are any more willing to address the underlying structural inequities—economic inequalities, the political exclusion of one party or another—that gave rise to the conflict in the first instance.

Policy-makers often speak of the 'institutional' prerequisites of transparent, democratic governance: multiparty electoral competition, a separation of powers, the rule of law, a free and vigorous press and the like. The policy dialogue, however, typically has a mechanistic quality and seems to reflect little appreciation of the dependence of institutions on the individuals that comprise their constituent elements. Indeed, institutional transformation requires in the first instance the personal transformation of individual leaders—in the way they understand their conflict, in how they relate to one another, and in their capacity for collaborative decision-making.

The principal challenge in building peace and democracy, not only in Iraq but in all divided societies, lies not in abstract, sector-specific institutional 'fixes', but, rather, in bringing key leaders together in a long-term process designed to resolve the tensions and mistrust that are the inevitable by-product of conflict and war, and to build (or rebuild) their capacity to work effectively together across all of the country's lines of ethnic and political division. Failing that, institutional transformation will have little substance and no sustainability.

The Conventional Wisdom

The 'conventional wisdom' about peace-building and democracy-promotion—played out with a vengeance in Iraq—has the following characteristics:

First, there is an assumption that the principal challenges to the building of peace and democracy are essentially rational and structural: put in place a constitutional framework and a body of laws and regulations, get the structures and institutions of the state right, and you will see the development of secure, stable and democratic states. So international political engineers have their 'check list' of post-war reconstruction tasks to be accomplished: creating a political structure that assures that there will be checks and balances between the executive and the legislature, standing up a multi-party electoral system, establishing an independent judiciary and the rule of law, providing support for a strong civil society and a free and robust independent media, and supporting the reform and integration of the security sector.

Second, conventional democracy-promotion and good-governance programs are typically rooted in Western liberal-democratic principles that stress the competitive dimension of democratic societies. Vigorous, free and open political debate is seen as the best means of developing sound public policy and avoiding the frustrations that

can erupt in violence. In keeping with the adversarial paradigm that shapes Western democratic thought, democracy and governance assistance tends to give particular emphasis to building multiparty electoral systems. Indeed, for many, it is elections that have become the be-all and end-all of democracy. Support is also typically provided to political parties to assure their competitiveness and strengthen political pluralism and to civil society organizations to create a counter-balance to a potentially overbearing government.

Third, traditional approaches to peace and democracy-building take, as an article of faith, that moral and political pressure, combined with the threat of legal sanctions, is the most effective means of deterring bad behaviour. So the international community lectures a lot—about human-rights principles, about international conventions, about moral obligations, about what is 'right'—and threatens to bring human-rights violators before international criminal tribunals. It is as if we believe that the perpetrators of massacres and other human-rights atrocities are simply lacking in sufficient understanding of the moral depravity of their actions, or that the threat of judicial accountability and imprisonment will deter acts of mass violence or genocide.

What's Wrong with this Picture?

Traditional methods of peace and democracy-building have too often failed to sustain democratic transitions because the conventional wisdom is wrong in two fundamental ways.

First, the conventional wisdom misunderstands democracy. Enduring democratic societies require more than pluralism and open political competition. Democracy depends also on an underlying set of agreements, both tacit and legal, and understandings among the members of the society—a common 'vision', if you will—on the definition of the national community, on the 'rules of the game', on the way in which leaders communicate and relate to one another. In short, *democracy depends as much upon cooperation as upon competition*. Indeed, it is the presence of this underlying vision, and the recognition of the 'common ground' that exists among the diverse members of the society, that enables democratic societies to tolerate political competition; absent these, political competition is threatening and, therefore, destabilizing.

Second, the conventional wisdom neglects the attitudinal dimension of divided societies—and mistakes differences in perception for a conflict over values. Many culturally plural states, such as Iraq, have a very uncertain sense of national identity and community. The ethnic communities that comprise divided societies typically do not see each other as inter-dependent parts of a single national entity. This is especially true in nations whose national boundaries and institutions were a product of external or colonial imposition, like Iraq. To the contrary, in such divided societies members of each ethnic or religious group often perceive members of other communities as 'outsiders', or, in the extreme, as dehumanized and threatening hostile adversaries. Thus, the fundamental challenge of democratization and peace-building lies not in the absence of democratic values, but rather, in the fact that members of many culturally plural states simply do not see themselves as part of the same national community.

The Four Imperatives of Sustainable Peace and Democracy

While every national conflict has its unique elements, common to all are four key challenges to the building of sustainable peace and democracy in divided societies. Unless these four challenges are effectively addressed, peace and democracy will be at best ephemeral.

First, a way must be found to transform the pervasive zero-sum, winner-take-all mentality that is both the cause and the product of conflict. The leaders of the belligerent parties must come to see collaboration—even with former foes—not as an abstract ideal or as an act of altruism, but rather as a matter of enlightened self-interest. They must be able to see themselves as emerging stronger and more secure through collaboration with others. Democracy and peace are sustainable only when leaders of a divided society have come to recognize that, whatever their conflicting interests, they share more important commonalities. It is only when they come to see themselves as dependent upon one another, as fundamentally part of the same social and political universe, that they will have the will and the capacity to attack the underlying social and political inequalities that gave rise to their conflict in the first instance.

Second, the relationships and trust among key leaders that have been fractured by their conflict must be restored, so that there can be confidence that agreements will be honoured. This is no easy task, but it is essential to the mutual confidence and predictability required for enduring democratic political discourse.

Third, a new consensus must be forged among key leaders on 'the rules of the game', i.e., on how power will be shared and organized, and how decisions will be made. For such a consensus to have broad legitimacy, it must be developed in a process that is wholly owned by the leaders themselves and that is inclusive of all key elements of the society. Absent the development of such an inclusive consensus, sustainable peace and democracy are unattainable.

Fourth, the leaders of the formerly belligerent parties need to learn (or relearn) how to hear each others' concerns and how to express their own views in ways that encourage a search for common ground and for solutions, rather than invite further confrontation and endless blame-throwing. In conflicts—especially violent conflicts—communications between the parties degenerates. Leaders tend to espouse positions and make demands based solely on their own perceptions of their narrowly conceived self-interest. There is little capacity to really 'hear' the other or to plough through the rhetoric and bluster of conflict. In the end, sustainable peace and democracy require effective skills of communications and negotiations.

The Missing Link: Building Collaborative Capacity Among Leaders

On a technical level, the art of building democratic state capacity is well understood. Experts know how to arrange the disarming, demobilization and reintegration of armed belligerents; to organize multiparty elections; to write constitutions and codes of conduct; to deploy international peacekeeping troops; to train new police forces; and to overhaul court systems or macroeconomic policies. But the harder political tasks—helping the leaders of warring factions to find a way to achieve these objectives, to work collaboratively in avoiding war or supporting postwar

reconstruction, and to build democratically accountable links between the governors and the governed—are generally neglected.

What is required is a broader conceptualization of 'capacity building' – one that embraces not only the acquisition of technical skills but also building the 'collaborative capacity' of leaders, i.e., their ability to work effectively together across all of the lines of ethnic and political division that have characterized their conflict. Indeed, absent collaborative capacity, all the technical skills in the world will contribute little to the building of a durable peace and democracy.

Thus, the international community's ability to effectively support the building of sustainable peace and democracy in divided countries requires not only the skills and experience of diplomats and technicians, but also the skills and experience of organizational development specialists or 'trainers', i.e., experts skilled in process and in the techniques of institutional and conflict transformation.

The importance of more holistic peace-building interventions that directly engage the mind-sets and attitudes of key leaders is beginning to be recognized in several post-conflict initiatives—in such war-torn societies as Burundi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Liberia. In these places, diplomatic practitioners and international institutions have employed their neutrality and leverage in securing the participation of key national leaders from diverse social and institutional sectors in training initiatives designed to build (or re-build) their cohesion and collaborative capacity. These internationally facilitated efforts have been directed NOT—as in Iraq—at imposing constitutional or political 'fixes' conceived by external interests, but rather, at providing the key leaders of these divided societies the tools with which they can themselves collaboratively build their own future. While too little time has elapsed to make definitive conclusions about this approach to post-conflict reconstruction, the initial indications are extremely encouraging, so much so that the leadership training model developed initially in war-torn Central Africa is now being considered for extension to other conflict-zones, such as Timor-Leste, Bangladesh and Sierra Leone.

Training Methodology

The building of collaborative capacity involves, in the first instance, overcoming the pervasive zero-sum, winner-take all mindset that is characteristic of the leaders within a divided society. This requires more than 'book learning' and a cognitive understanding of concepts. A paradigm or mind-shift can not be taught: it must be experienced. The same is true of trusting relationships that can only develop over time and involve personal emotional investment. Likewise, an appreciation of the importance of process will emerge only through direct experience with others. Consequently, training for collaborative capacity depends far less on traditional didactic training techniques of readings and lectures than on experiential learning methods: simulations, interactive exercises, mock negotiations, role-playing—all designed to enable the participants to acquire insight, through their own experience of reacting to a series of hypothetical situations, into the attitudes and perceptions that condition their behaviour and that of the 'others'.

In a training program directed at the building of collaborative capacity, the participants, rather than being the passive recipients of knowledge, learn primarily

by 'doing', by being immersed in hypothetical situations that confront them with the same kinds of dilemmas and conflicts they face in the real world. Simulation exercises have the advantage of enabling the participants to be more objective and less defensive in assessing the impact of their behaviour and decisions. Then, having absorbed the lessons of the simulation, they are able to apply their insights to their real-world situation.

By design, training for collaborative capacity begins with 'process', not 'substance'. The initial focus is on strengthening the understanding of the participants of the advantages of collaboration and the dangers of a 'winner take all' mentality; on building a degree of trust among the participants; and on strengthening their skills in communication and negotiation. One of the most frequent errors of well-intended peace-building initiatives is to attempt to immediately engage the belligerent parties in a discussion of the issues and grievances underlying their conflict. But when issues and grievances are the starting-point for dialogue, the participants are effectively being asked to see each other in terms of their narrow adversarial identities, rather than as whole individuals, and they feel they must defend their partisan positions; in so doing, the sense of distance between them is reinforced, rather than narrowed. While issue-centred talks may, over time, begin to lead to improved communication and strengthened relationships among the participants, they are not the most efficient starting point. If a modicum of trust and confidence can first be established between the parties, and if they have first acquired the skills of effective communication and negotiation, they will be in a far better position, in terms of both skills and confidence, to tackle the substantive issues that have divided them.

In training for collaborative capacity, particular emphasis is given to the concept of 'interest-based negotiations', in which decision-makers distinguish between their 'positions' or idealized aspirations, on the one hand, and their underlying 'interests' or fundamental needs, on the other. Sustainable decisions are far more likely to result from a process that turns not on attempts to impose one's position on others but, instead, on the search for common ground and for the means of accommodating the priority interests of all.

The power of 'interest-based negotiations' is two-fold. First, it provides a systematic means for the parties to a conflict to clarify not only their own interests, but also to understand those of the other side. The ultimate goal is to have the parties learn to 'walk in the shoes of the other'. They are then better able to develop solutions that will serve the interests of all. Second, interest-based negotiation enables the participants to begin to comprehend more clearly that, whatever their conflicting interests, they share still more important interests in common.

Often, sharp inequalities in power and resources fuel violent conflict in culturally plural societies, and sustainable peace and democracy are attainable only when the underlying social and political inequities are corrected. Yet the resolution of these inequities becomes virtually impossible if there is no recognition of interdependence and common interests. Democratic nation-building is not simply a matter of persuading political leaders to subordinate their parochial interests to those of the nation. Real transformation requires not greater altruism from leaders and citizens, but rather a new recognition that their self-interest can be more effectively advanced through collaboration and inclusive political processes.

Another principal training objective is to form a climate of mutual trust. This is because sustainable agreements among competing parties require not only a sense of shared interests but also a set of working human relationships. This means seeing each other as discrete individuals and not merely as members of hostile groups; it also means that each is able, as mentioned above, to put him or herself into 'the shoes of the other'. In every post-conflict society, protagonists know each other—often have schooled together, served in past governments, have familial connections and meet at the same club for drinks. But, when one scratches the surface, it turns out that they don't really 'know' each other and assume characteristics or motivations about the other that are born of distorted perceptions and stereotypes.

Effective communication is a major preoccupation of programs designed to build collaborative capacity. Participants learn the role that communication plays in developing or destroying trust (that messages can be meant in one way and understood in another), the danger of acting on the basis of untested assumptions, and the ways in which the methods of decision-making and the distribution of resources can affect inter-group attitudes. A powerful lesson emerging from simulations to which the leaders are exposed is that durable solutions to issues driving conflict can only be found through inclusive, participant-based processes—that is, through means that are essentially the definition of democracy.

There is no quick fix for the attitudinal and perceptual barriers that prevent leaders of divided societies from working together effectively. Training for collaborative capacity must be conceived not as a single, one-off training event but, rather, as a long-term process. No matter how much impact is felt in the initial training experience—and generally the transformational impact of only a few days of training is quite dramatic—the participants inevitably return to the 'real world', in which others have not had their training experience and will have difficulty fully comprehending the altered mind-sets of workshop participants. Moreover, like all learning, the 'learning' of collaborative decision-making must be constantly reinforced—by the practice of skills learned, by the strengthening of relationships and by actual collaborative initiatives. Otherwise, with time the new collaborative capacity will erode.

The Strategic Challenge: Getting the Right People into the Room

There are two keys to the building of collaborative capacity—be it in conflict prevention or as part of post-war reconstruction. The first is to recruit qualified trainers who are skilled in the tools and techniques of conflict and institutional transformation. The second, and generally far more difficult task, is to get the right people into the room, i.e., key leaders within all social and institutional sectors who, by virtue of their formal roles or their informal influence, can strategically impact on the broader society. Sometimes a single country or an international institution such as the United Nations or the World Bank will have sufficient leverage to secure the participation of key leaders. In other situations there may be a particularly credible neutral person or institution within the society that can serve to kick-start the process. On occasion, however, it may be

nigh impossible to find a neutral third party, either within the country or within the international community, with sufficient credibility and gravitas.

One of the advantages of approaching the task of peace and democracy-building as a matter of technical capacity-building is that it makes it easier for persons who have been mutually demonized in the course of their conflict to begin to re-engage with one another. It is vital, however, that the process used to identify and recruit the key leaders is seen not as a process manipulated by external actors, but as a process in which the selection of key leaders is an accurate reflection of the views of the parties involved in the conflict. In effect, the training program must come to be seen as 'owned' by these parties, and as a genuine partnership between the parties and the international team mounting the leadership training program.

Conclusions

As noted at the outset, Iraq is a dramatic example of the international community's inability to assist a divided society to build either peace or democracy—but it is not the only example. Repeatedly, conventional approaches to peace and democracy-building have produced neither sustainable peace nor sustainable democracy—largely because the assumptions underlying such interventions have been deeply flawed. They have assumed that the principal challenges are structural and intellectual, and that proper 'education', including the transmission of democratic values, and new institutions will provide a solid basis for a war-torn society's peaceful, democratic transformation.

But in a divided society, peace and democracy will be attainable only when all key leaders of the society perceive themselves to be parts of the same national entity, and move out of a zero-sum, winner-take-all mentality; when trust and relationships among key leaders are restored; when a new consensus has been built on the rules of the game, and when accepted and practiced modes of discourse encourage problem-solving rather than blame-throwing. These objectives are attainable, but only through a more holistic approach to peace and democracy-building—one that directly engages the mind-sets of key leaders of the society in a long-term training program directed at the building of collaborative capacity.

The building of collaborative capacity requires more than effective diplomatic interventions; it also requires the utilization of organizational development specialists or 'trainers', persons specialized in the techniques of institutional and conflict transformation. Diplomats are in position to access the key leaders of a society, and to exert the leverage required to bring these leaders into a long-term training process. But it is the trainers who are specialized in 'process' who must implement the training program and do so independent of governments or international organizations that have a stake in the outcome and may be perceived, rightly or wrongly, as seeking to manipulate the process. Working together, diplomats and trainers comprise a powerful synergy, capable of addressing in a holistic way the fundamental challenges of peace and democracy-building in all divided societies. Absent one or the other, we are destined to continue to produce further Iraq-style debacles.

Note

1. **Howard Wolpe**, a former US congressman who chaired the House's Africa Subcommittee and later served as presidential special envoy to Africa's Great Lakes region, directs the African Program and Leadership Project at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. **Steve McDonald**, a former Foreign Service officer, is consulting project manager of the Wilson Center's Africa Program and Leadership Project in Burundi, DRC and Liberia. This article expands upon earlier publications of the authors, written in collaboration with Elizabeth McClintock of CM Partners, and Alain Lempereur, Director of the ESSEC Institute for Research and Education on Negotiations in Europe.