Workshop Report

Democratic Interventionism and Local Legitimacy

Duisburg, Germany 22 - 23 May 2013

International Workshop organised by the Käte Hamburger Kolleg / Centre for Global Cooperation Research (University of Duisburg-Essen) & the School of Political Science and International Studies (University of Queensland)
I) Background to the Workshop and Research Objective

After the end of the Cold War and twenty years of peacekeeping missions and peacebuilding interventions, scholars of peace and conflict have raised serious questions about the possibilities of Western democratic interventionism in other cultural regions. ‘Democratic interventions’ into ‘local politics’ frequently presuppose particular models of democratic politics and the nature of the state – models that are arguably contested.

Most recently, with the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, it becomes clear that peacebuilding is one of the most complex joint actions in the field of global security cooperation as well as a permanent source of conflict between global and local narratives of democracy through multiple practices of everyday life. This makes ‘peacebuilding’ an interesting case in general terms to analyse problems of global cooperation.

Peacebuilding, or the effort to support it, involves working across division. One area of division, sometimes one of the most fundamental ones, is significant cultural difference, including different understandings of the person, community, rationality, economic life and socio-political order. These divisions are frequently at play in international peacebuilding and statebuilding enterprises. They are also entrenched more broadly in many states of the Global South where a significant gulf is in operation between the form of the state (and the expectations of international and national development) and socio-political practices animating most of the country. These gulfs are frequently concomitant to violent conflicts, serious friction, confusion and abuse or the cause of disenfranchisement and marginalisation.

Against this backdrop, the practice of peacebuilding in the actual debate is understood as a contingent process of necessary mutual cooperation between different global and local actors. Thus, the critical debate on the relationship between democratic interventionism and local legitimacy requires a shift to consider interactions among people and social and cultural orders, including differing claims to legitimacy and authority.

Tackling these issues, the workshop aimed at elaborating responses to three interrelated areas of inquiry:

1. Theorising the contested Concept of Democracy between the Global and the Local

2. Understanding Community across Cultural Difference

3. Contributing to Cultural Conflict Studies and Global Cooperation Analysis through reflecting on Difference in Peacebuilding
II) Theoretical and Methodological Implications for the Workshop

The conceptual framework for working across difference within the form of the state offered by liberalism (i.e., the bounds of toleration within the public space of the state) is not adequate for the depth and scale of difference which contemporary interventions in post-conflict fragile settings have to grapple with. Engagement across significant difference raises real challenges in the domains of epistemology and ontology. It raises questions with regard to conceptualisations of rationality, personhood and political community. And it also raises serious challenges in practice. Engaging these issues in peace and conflict studies requires locating the main driving forces of conflict in different cultural everyday practices and diverging narratives about the right way to live.

The workshop sought to bring together researchers with different backgrounds who have worked on democratisation, Western interventionism, peacebuilding, human rights and cultural conflicts in world politics in order to foster the discussions on these issues. The workshop aimed to reflect on conceptual strategies and explore empirical cases to identify the major conflict mechanisms between democratic interventionism and local legitimacy.

III) Workshop Participants

Over 30 participants from a diverse range of research backgrounds and epistemologies attended the workshop, including scholars of International Relations, Political Theory, Anthropology and Ethnology. The participants represented a good selection of research institutions including the Centre and its partner institutions the Institute for Development and Peace (INEF) and the German Development Institute (DIE), the School of Political Science and International Studies (University of Queensland), independent researchers and a range other national and international institutions.

IV) Interactive Format of the Workshop

In order to provide a stimulating and interactive framework in which the different participants could interact, dialogue and discuss cutting-edge approaches to research and policy-making, the workshop employed an interactive format which included a mixture of large group presentations and discussions; small group ‘World Café’ discussions; and medium-sized group ‘Fishbowl’ discussions.

The ‘World Café’ format involves workshop participants convening in a café-style scenario where tables of up to five people discuss a range of questions provided. A nominated ‘table host’ ensures everyone has a chance to participate. Different groups are then re-formed with the table host remaining in place to provide some continuity and cross-over of the discussions. This interactive and inclusive method encouraged
diverse small group discussions (no more than four people in one group) so that all participants had the chance to discuss diverse views and research approaches.

In the ‘Fishbowl’ discussion the table hosts come together in a discussion circle to continue the discussions begun around their tables while all other participants observe the debate. One chair in the discussion circle is kept empty for the observing participants to temporarily join the group discussion or comment on it when they feel the desire to participate. This structure was aimed at satisfying the need for deeply engaged discussions across different backgrounds beyond that which can occur in large groups and structured presentations.

V) Workshop Proceedings

The workshop started with an interdisciplinary session about the contested concepts of democracy, democratisation and peacebuilding during which some of the participants gave some short inputs from their particular research perspectives and, thus, opened the floor for the first interdisciplinary discussion. David Chandler (KHK/GCR21-Fellow) started with a description of a shift within the discourse of democratisation and peacebuilding where the underlying foundations of previous linear and teleological approaches were being questioned or discarded in favour of a more relational approach. Daniel Gaus (KHK/GCR21-Fellow) talked from a political philosophy perspective about democratic universalism as a historical problem. Further perspectives were presented by Lothar Brock (KHK/GCR21-Fellow), who talked about the normative background of democratisation, the risks of framing peacebuilding interventions around perceived deficiencies and the need for self-reflexivity by interveners. Finally, Kristina Weissenbach (University of Duisburg-Essen) talked about the consolidation of democracy through political parties and political institution and the influence of Western interveners in this process.

After a very stimulating joint debate, the workshop adjourned to the World Café to foster the discussion on some core questions regarding the concept of peacebuilding and democratic intervention in small groups including: “What are the different historical and cultural manifestations and understandings of democracy that we need to be aware of?” and “What does “democratic” mean?” with the sessions involved intensive discussions around the different tables about the concept of “democratic intervention” as an oxymoron.

To further develop the debate and discuss questions of practical implications to peacebuilding and research in these areas, some of the workshop participants presented short case studies from their work in different fields afterwards. Volker Boege (University of Queensland), Serge Loode (University of Queensland), Morgan Brigg (KHK/GCR21-Fellow), Louise Wiuﬀ Moe (University of Queensland), Hannah Neumann (University of Berlin) and Kai Koddenbrock (University of Bremen) presented their experiences and perceptions from their research work on the Pacific Island of
Bougainville (Papua New Guinea), Vanuatu, Somalia, Liberia and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. These presentations dealt with questions of different perceptions and concepts of democracy and peacebuilding between the internationals, the local authorities and the population on the ground. It became clear that not only the concepts are very different, but also the expectations and aims of the missions. The case studies described not only the problem of differences between the internationals and the locals, but also different understandings and aims within the intervened state and community. Furthermore, the presentations illustrated the enormous gap between abstract concepts of democracy, human rights, gender, development and the rule of law in research and the reality on the ground. The case studies offered revealing insights in the researchers lives, experiences and challenges in the field of intercultural contexts and peacebuilding areas and served as a starting point for a second World Café session and discussions in small groups which tackled questions regarding understanding community across difference and working in intercultural contexts. These discussions ended up with the questions: “Who are the locals?”, “How does the everyday cross-cultural encounters between ‘internationals’ and ‘locals’ change their understandings of political order and legitimacy?”, and the conclusion that there is a need for new approaches to conceptualizing and researching the “local” and peacebuilding in its complexity.

To gather the small discussions of the World Café sessions, the first day ended up with a joint session in the format of a facilitated “Fishbowl” around the question on how we can study cultural conflicts and different legitimacy claims between international interveners and local authorities in peacebuilding processes. This Fishbowl discussion helped to synthesize the knowledge generated in the small group discussions of the World Café and allowed all participants to learn from the discussions on the different tables and to contribute to the development of joint ideas and questions for the second day of the workshop.

VI) Key Puzzles

After a very interactive first day which raised a range of challenging questions, the second day of the workshop started with a short joint wrap up round and the presentation of the main themes of the discussions as well as a clarification of the terminology. As a result of the first day of the workshop, the group identified four innovative key themes for the further debate. To deepen the discussions around these key puzzles, the workshop continued with discussions in four working groups dealing with the topics:

1. Conceptualizing the “local” and the “international”
2. Legitimacies
3. De-equipment and re-equipping the international and the nature of exchange
4. Democracy in peacebuilding
These working groups aimed at further developing the discussions on important key dimensions and common topics of interest between the different researchers and helped the participants to build relationships with other participants who are working on related topics and questions. The groups worked in the first phase on “patterns and puzzles” and in a second phase, from a research perspective, on “new questions and methods”. The group discussions offered the participants the possibility to further engage in discussion on a specific question of interest, to hear a variety of different views from other high knowledgeable participants and to exchange ideas for common research questions and projects.

To bring the different working groups together, this session was followed by a joint discussion on the themes, with the different groups summarising the main elements of their discussion.

A key issue highlighted in these discussions which came to be a focus for the remainder of the workshop was a discussion of the changing nature (through both discourse and practice) of the interaction between the ‘international’ and the ‘local’ in contexts of peacebuilding interventions. A number of participants identified this shift which (in part responding to previous failures in peacebuilding interventions) resulted in a new level of self-reflexivity on the part of the intervenor, an attempt to reconfigure power relationships with the ‘local’ and a questioning of previous assumptions about the ability to achieve predetermined outcomes. To aid discussion, the workshop called this a ‘relational sensibility’. The topic generated a controversy among workshop participants as to the ontological and epistemological consequences of such a shift, and whether it could or would lead to improvements in peacebuilding activity, or in fact entrench or worsen the current challenges.

This discussion was continued in two rounds of World Café reflecting on the various aspects of relational sensibility and its consequences and potential for peacebuilding, including its ability to facilitate recognition of and adaptation to complexity.

The workshop ended up with a lively joint reflection on what might, thus, be the epistemological and methodological orientations that enable sustained engagement and/or viable, inclusive political community across significant difference and a wrap-up discussion of the main arguments and approaches. Finally, some core questions were identified:

Can “relational sensibility” be used in an instrumental way?

How does relational sensibility link with legitimacies and/or democracies?

Does a relational sensibility for peacebuilding implicate a different understanding of democracy between the actors?

Can this discourse make us better peacebuilders?
Organisers

The School of Political Science and International Studies at the University of Queensland, Australia, is consistently ranked among the world’s top 50 schools for studying political science and international relations and the premier School in Queensland (QS World University Rankings 2011 and 2012). The School presently offers courses across four specialist areas of study at undergraduate and postgraduate levels: Political Science, Governance and Public Policy, International Relations, and Peace and Conflict Studies. In addition, the School offers a Research Higher Degree program for advanced studies in these areas. The School also houses two active academic centres: the Rotary Centre for International Studies in Peace and Conflict Resolution, and the Asia-Pacific Centre for the Responsibility to Protect (APR2P).

Käte Hamburger Kolleg / Centre for Global Cooperation Research is an interdisciplinary research institute of the University of Duisburg-Essen. It is the youngest of ten Käte Hamburger Kolleg (International Research Collegia in the Humanities) supported by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research. The Centre provides a framework for internationally renowned scholars from different disciplines to pursue research on the opportunities and challenges of global cooperation amidst political-cultural difference in the world society. This question is the focus of four research units within the Centre: the (Im)Possibility of Cooperation (Unit 1), Global Conflicts of Culture and Transcultural Cooperation (Unit 2), Global Governance Revisited (Unit 3), and Paradoxes and Perspectives of Democratisation (Unit 4).