



POLICY BRIEF

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Decolonising peacebuilding: A policy perspective

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Introduction

The peacebuilding field is in crisis and there is a need to advance the interrogation and reformulation of the practice of building peace. Peacebuilding is being undertaken within the context of the historical legacy of slavery, colonisation, settler colonialism and slavery, which have generated lasting political, economic, social and environmental impacts. This policy brief will assess the case for decolonising peacebuilding and outline key recommendations for its practical implementation.

Eurocentric and state-centric peacebuilding

The mainstream approach of pursuing peacebuilding and state-building can be traced to the Eurocentric theoretical suppositions of the Westphalian nation-state¹ and notions of liberal thought drawn primarily from the academic centres of knowledge in the Global North, which subsequently became infused into the United Nations' (UN) 1992 *Agenda for Peace*.² In particular, the *Agenda for Peace* enumerates the processes of peacemaking, preventive diplomacy, peacekeeping and peacebuilding in an attempt to capture the complexity of stabilising societies and consolidating in-country peace and security. Over time, the boundaries between these processes have become increasingly blurred and diffuse, and their

implementation has been challenged by the complexity of the reality on the ground. The UN's key role in framing the discourse of liberal peacebuilding had the effect of imposing a statist imprint on the field. In addition, the dominance of neo-liberal economic ideology among the dominant members of the UN, notably the United States (US), United Kingdom (UK) and France (also known as the P3 countries) led to the further inculcation of these ideas into the statist peacebuilding doctrine that subsequently became all pervasive and integral to interventions across the world. An interrogation of the intellectual roots of statist liberal peacebuilding is necessary if strategies are to be developed to more effectively decolonise the forces located in Western metropolises which drive the global peacebuilding agenda.

The ideology of statist liberal peacebuilding is anchored in extensive military interventions which are directed at reinforcing the state and which are targeted at imposing a transitory ceasefire among belligerent groups. Subsequently, this was followed by a series of processes which are theoretically designed to lay the foundations for a peace agreement. This in turn frames the transition towards the restoration of constitutional order informed by liberal democratic principles and the convening of elections. This state-building model to peacebuilding has endured and still drives the agenda in a significant number of interventions across the world.

Decolonising peacebuilding is premised on challenging the uncritical adoption and widespread imposition of the ideology of statist liberal peacebuilding on societies across the world. This imposition perpetrates a form of theoretical violence in terms of its exclusion, rejection and out-right denial of alternate ideas of how peace processes could unfold within communities, and if the nation-state itself was in fact part of the problem and not in fact the *de facto* 'solution' to crisis situations around the world. This is specifically with reference to the African continent, where the Westphalian nation-state model was forcibly imposed by colonialism on societies, arbitrarily dividing ethnic groups that had a common heritage and history – in effect planted the seeds for division and tension, which we continue to witness today. Analysing the emergence of the nation-state across the African continent, in the early 1960s, Fanon was prophetic in his prediction when he surmised that 'the tribalizing of the central authority, it is certain, encourages regionalist ideas and separatism...all the decentralizing tendencies spring up again and triumph, and the nation falls to pieces, broken to bits'.³

At the heart of decolonial peacebuilding should be a commitment to justice and an acknowledgement of the equality of victims who have suffered human rights violations, in situations in which peace has imploded and levels of insecurity persist

More than sixty years after Fanon's prediction, the African continent is afflicted by almost twenty conflict situations which are at their core fuelled by the quest for power by the arbitrarily divided ethnic power blocks within countries, often with ties and links to their co-ethnic and co-religious kin in neighbouring countries. A statist liberal peacebuilding ideology that seeks to forcibly re-establish the state construct, which is in effect the cause of the crisis and tension to begin with, will not contribute towards any meaningful and sustainable interventions to building peace. As an illustration, the efforts to 'build peace' in Somalia over the last three decades is an illustration of the folly of continuing to administer the dose of statist medicine on a patient that is clearly resistant to such a prescription. The Eurocentric and colonial violence of statist liberal peacebuilding is in

effect manifest in the failure of the international system and its institutions to engage, accommodate, and accept alternative ideas of how positive peace can be pursued and achieved without the statist straight-jacket hampering and undermine such initiatives.

At the heart of decolonial peacebuilding should be a commitment to justice and an acknowledgement of the equality of victims who have suffered human rights violations, in situations in which peace has imploded and levels of insecurity persist. On this basis it is necessary to disrupt and dismantle the myopia of statist liberal peacebuilding theory and practice, with its focus on promoting inward-looking national processes without taking into account the wider regional and cross-border context in which crises are located. In this regard, an epistemically decolonised peacebuilding approach has to challenge, disrupt and dismantle this statist prism, with an emphasis on anchoring processes within the context of a cross-border regional peacebuilding framework.

A decolonial peacebuilding research agenda will necessarily have to venture into uncharted analytical terrain, in terms of illustrating the necessary link between regional peacebuilding and the sustainability of security in Africa. The issue of how regional peacebuilding processes can be driven at leadership, governmental and civil society levels are also issues that require additional theoretical and policy research.

Decolonising the Global North peacebuilding agenda

The peacebuilding field needs to decolonise 'decision-making methods, the voices, histories and interests that guide its approach'.⁴ The focus of the quest to decolonise peacebuilding is primarily within the Global North, or the centres of geo-political power, as it is from here that the impetus and dominance of statist liberal peacebuilding emanate. The Global South was the primary target and victim of colonialism and is now subject to the corrosive effects of neo-colonialism in the form of a state-centric liberal peacebuilding ideology, which is imposed and sustained by the in-country elites. As Memmi observes, 'oppression is the greatest calamity of humanity [...] it diverts and pollutes the [...] oppressed and oppressor alike [...] for if colonization destroys the colonized, it also *rots the colonizer*'.⁵ It is the 'rot of the colonizer' that is central to any efforts to decolonise peacebuilding. In particular, the West, embodied in the US and

Western European countries which were the main colonisers of the rest of the world, is not shy in promoting a narrative of how it is a paragon of virtue and protector of all that is 'good' in this world. The historic role of the West in perpetrating colonialism and imposing a neo-liberal hegemony on others reveals 'the rot of the colonizer', which continues to inform its proselytism and evangelical fervour in striving to mould, replicate and maintain the world in its own image.

The complicity of the West's academic theoreticians and policymakers in developing and advancing the ideas which informed Eurocentric liberal peacebuilding and perpetrated epistemic violence remains masked and unquestioned, and it needs to be identified and articulated primarily by themselves, as this is not the task of their counterparts in the Global South. There are some exceptions to the rule, but the notions of a decolonial approach to peacebuilding is by no means integrated into mainstream thinking, research, analysis and writing. The ideological disruption and dismantling of the ideology of statist liberal peacebuilding is the personal and collective responsibility of researchers and practitioners in the Western metropolises, and cannot be left to the Global South to promote and advance. The structural transformation of the institutions that continue to perpetrate statist liberal peacebuilding cannot be achieved without the attitudinal, mental and behavioral change within the dominant agents that continue to control and manipulate the system. In this regard, peacebuilding researchers in the West have to commit, at a personal and professional level, to the educational insights of decolonial peacebuilding practice. This is achieved through a significant amount of self-work and through a gradual process of introspection and commitment as academics, educators or policy-makers to apply a decolonial peacebuilding approach to their initiatives.

Decolonising the state and continental integration as a pathway to peacebuilding

Schirch highlights the importance of addressing the 'lingering colonialism and changing expectations of the state and governance'.⁶ However, she does not further elaborate how decolonial peacebuilding can address contemporary conflicts which have a tendency to spill across borders, affecting communities in more than one country, and how these disputes can be addressed particularly when they are also sourced through regional and global

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supply chains in terms of weapons and mercenaries.⁷ More specifically, the majority of intra-state conflicts have an interstate or regional dimension in the way that they are resourced and executed, as they include more than one state as either the primary or secondary actor. Specifically, 'transnational conflicts that form mutually reinforcing linkages with each other across state borders' suggest that these regional linkages are so strong and interdependent that a change in dynamics in one conflict often affects neighbouring ones.⁸ Networks of interdependence are evident in cross-border supply routes for illicit arms and human trafficking. In some instances, ethnically similar groups living in different countries serve as networks for the belligerents and can contribute towards fuelling and driving the persistence of conflicts. The African continent provides insights into the regionalisation of violent conflict, and how this can generate new disputes and inflame existing tensions. For instance, the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, often viewed in isolation, was a contributing and exacerbating factor in the persistence of conflicts and violence in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Similarly, the conflict system generated by the conflict between the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia and the Tigray Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF) also drew Eritrea into actively engaging in war-fighting and atrocities in the Tigray region. The 2011 Libya crisis, catalysed by the US, UK and France-led North Atlantic Treaty Organisation's (NATO) bombardment and eventual over-throw of the former dictator Muammar Gaddafi, has spawned a vortex of chaos fuelled by the incursion of ISIS and affiliate violent extremist groups in North Africa, which has now spread across the Sahel region of the continent, and is also spreading further southward to the coastal countries in West Africa. This phenomenon also replicates itself in other parts of the world, notably in the Northern Ireland conflict which drew in the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland; in the Balkans; in the Palestinian-Israeli crisis in the Middle East; in

the US-fuelled Iraq and Afghanistan invasions; and as well as in the recent Russian invasion of Ukraine, which has drawn in Belarus as a key actor. The fact that contemporary conflicts, atrocities and violations straddle state borders means that it is necessary to determine how peacebuilding can be operationalised across borders.

Decolonial peacebuilding should invoke the notion of regional reconciliation as the missing element in addressing elusive efforts to stabilise regions, countries and communities affected by violent conflict

A decolonial approach to peacebuilding has to strategically challenge reductionist understandings of traditional interstate and intra-state wars. The regional nature of conflicts means that the notion of 'civil war' is anachronistic, with a limited descriptive utility. Furthermore, regional conflict systems are notoriously difficult to stabilise, because state actors, infused with a statist mindset, have not adopted coordinated regional strategies to promote and consolidate peace. A decolonial approach to peacebuilding is anchored on an assessment of the extent to which intra-state conflicts, more often than not, have an inter-state and regional dimension in the way that they are resourced and executed. Consequently, decolonial peacebuilding necessarily adopts a regional prism and perspective through which to understand and intervene in crisis situations. Specifically, decolonial peacebuilding should invoke the notion of regional reconciliation as the missing element in addressing elusive efforts to stabilise regions, countries and communities affected by violent conflict. Along similar lines, Wallenstein argues that 'regional peacebuilding' should begin to inform our approach in advancing peace and security.⁹

Decolonising institutions of global governance and peacebuilding

An approach to peacebuilding that is predicated on social justice is an antidote to the dominance of Eurocentric state-centric liberal peacebuilding. More specifically, decolonial peacebuilding can also draw from the tenets of transitional justice in interrogating the institutions of global governance that are mandated and tasked with building peace in

war-affected societies. In particular, a transitional justice perspective provides us with a framework through which to assess the restructuring and transformation of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), based on the need to improve peacebuilding processes, as well as the need to redress the historical exclusion of the majority of the colonised peoples of the world from the design of the international system.

Transitional justice is required to enable societies that are emerging from a legacy of violent conflict or authoritarian rule to pursue redress and accountability for past violations in order to establish healthy communal relationships, which are vital ingredients for peaceful and resilient societies.¹⁰ Transitional justice processes are crucial for maintaining civic trust in the aftermath of political tension or suppression. Dealing with the past includes establishing processes of justice and redress as a means to promoting peacebuilding and reconciliation. Transitional justice strives to address challenges that emerge from historical violations and affect countries as they strive to transition from war or authoritarian rule to fair, inclusive and democratic societies. In applying transitional justice to the global society, the UN system is undemocratic in its current design, and more specifically, the Permanent Five members of the UN Security Council (the P5)¹¹ wield a disproportionate degree of illegitimate power, which undermines the peacebuilding of the rest of the world. The peacebuilding mandates which are designed and framed by the so-called 'pen-wielders' at the UN Security Council are essentially not designed by the target and referent countries, but in effect framed and imposed by a coterie of self-appointed 'over-seers' of the 'lesser darker peoples',¹² which in effect exposes the 'rot of the colonizer'. Consequently, as part of a decolonial peacebuilding agenda, it is necessary to apply a transitional justice prism to critique the undemocratic nature of the UN system. Transitional justice is about proactively addressing the exclusionary past in order to build an inclusive society. Transposing the national analogy to the global sphere, then, global transitional justice is about enabling global society to make the transition from the authoritarian rule of a small self-selected global elite such as the P5, towards a decolonised global democratic order.

In the early decades of the UN, there was an asymmetrical partnership between the body and the societies in the colonised countries in Africa, Asia, the Middle East and Latin America. Subsequently, post-colonial states remained beholden, at least

economically, to their former colonial powers. In addition, as a collective, former colonial countries were not in a position to influence policy at the UN. This remains the case to this day, for example when it relates to the work of the UN Security Council. As the institution empowered by the Charter to promote peace and security, the UN Security Council is the most powerful of these institutions and its primary responsibility is to create and establish the framework conditions for other branches and institutions of the UN system, as well as regional organisations, to contribute towards the peacebuilding and the maintenance of global order. Given the asymmetrical relationship that the UN had with the colonised peoples, particularly in the early years, a culture of paternalism developed between the organisation and the continent. Since then, post-colonial countries have been trying to challenge and dispense with paternalistic attitudes from, and within, the UN system, and more specifically within the UNSC.

As an illustration, the reality of negotiation processes in the UN Security Council perpetuates and reproduces this paternalistic exclusion of the African continent. More than 60 per cent of the issues discussed by the UN Security Council are focused on Africa, yet the continent does not have any representation among the P5. Given the fact that the P5 can veto all manner of decisions before the Council it is a travesty of justice at its most basic level that African countries can only participate in key deliberations and decision-making processes as individual non-permanent members of the Council. Furthermore, there is no guarantee that African non-permanent members of the Council will articulate and advance positions that are in the interests of African citizens and vulnerable communities in countries they represent. UN Security Council negotiation and decision-making processes further reveal the 'rot of the colonizer' and are in effect the highest manifestation of unfairness in international system. If achieving fairness in negotiations among states is the preferred route to achieving global legitimation, then a fundamental transformation of the UN Security Council and the elimination of the veto provision is a necessary pre-requisite action to advance a decolonial peacebuilding agenda. The P5 are among the beneficiaries of the *status quo* within the international system, reproducing in effect a form of diplomatic apartheid. From a transitional justice perspective, given the fact that the asymmetrical distribution of global political, economic and military power has remained relatively unchanged since the end of the

Cold War means that the potential beneficiaries of global democratic transformation would in effect be the societies in the former colonised regions of the world – Africa, Asia, the Middle East and Latin America.

Africa has tried to voice its concern about the need for a change within the existing UN system and the decolonisation of the institutions of global governance tasked with peacebuilding. Specifically, in March 2005, the AU issued a declaration known as *The Common African Position on the Proposed Reform of the United Nations: The Ezulwini Consensus*.¹³ The AU issued a position on UN reform and, in particular, on the reform of the Security Council by noting that 'in 1945, when the UN was formed, most of Africa was not represented and that in 1963, when the first reform took place, Africa was represented but was not in a particularly strong position'.¹⁴ The AU went on to state that 'Africa is now in a position to influence the proposed UN reforms by maintaining her unity of purpose';¹⁵ furthermore, it noted that 'Africa's goal is to be fully represented in all the decision-making organs of the UN, particularly in the Security Council'.¹⁶

As part of a decolonial peacebuilding agenda, it is necessary to apply a transitional justice prism to critique the undemocratic nature of the UN system

On 27 May 2010, the first-ever negotiating text on Security Council reform was issued by the Chair of Inter-Governmental Negotiations on Security Council Reform. In this document the AU position was explicit in stating that 'Africa seeks *the abolition of the veto*, but alternatively, so long as it continues to exist, its extension to all new permanent members in the Council as *a matter of common justice*'.¹⁷ As noted above, the virtual impossibility of eliminating the veto provision from P5 members (due to their combined coercive power to subvert any such initiative) in the short to medium-term demonstrates that there will be challenges in terms of efforts to decolonise the institutions of global governance which are mandated with promoting peacebuilding. Logically, it does not make sense for a combined total of more than five billion people not to have a

'permanent' representation on the UN Security Council, particularly when more than 80% of the Council's work relates to crisis situations in Africa, the Middle East and South East Asia.

The challenge is therefore how to build a coalition of the marginalised and dispossessed drawing from the norms of transitional justice and decolonial peacebuilding, in order to actively lead the campaign to transform the ageing and anachronistic UN system, particularly the Security Council, and replace it with new institutions. As a practical intervention, the Global South members of the General Assembly can invoke and issue a resolution based on Article 109 of the UN Charter¹⁸ to formally launch such a process. Article 109 of the UN Charter cannot be vetoed by the permanent members of the UN Security Council, who are the main beneficiaries of the global status quo and prime instigators of some of the chaos in parts of the world. Initiatives to revive multilateralism would require them to make a bold commitment to support the will of a two-thirds majority of the members of the General Assembly, rather than play a divisive and nefarious role behind the scenes which has been the common practice of the P5 for the history of the UN. Consequently, think tanks, civil society and academic actors need to actively identify, lobby and mobilise the support of 'champion' member states within the General Assembly, who can implement the decolonial peacebuilding agenda by building a coalition of countries that will take the leadership in charting a new course for humanity in convening a Review Conference of the UN Charter, and contribute towards transforming the global system in a way that asserts and affirms human equality.

Policy recommendations

International organisations, United Nations and African Union:

- Revise policy frameworks to incorporate a decolonial approach to peacebuilding
- Adopt policy frameworks that pursue positive peace without insisting on the restoration of the artificial states that were imposed by colonialism

Civil society and think tanks:

- Convene policy platforms to raise awareness about the importance of decolonising peacebuilding
- Undertake policy research and analysis to generate policy programmes that advance decolonised peacebuilding

International partners:

- Revise partnership strategies and frameworks to incorporate a decolonial approach to peacebuilding which challenges Eurocentric and state-centric approaches, policies and programmes to rebuilding societies
- Support initiatives to develop programmes and projects that will promote decolonial peacebuilding.

Conclusion

The pursuit of a decolonial peacebuilding is an urgent agenda given the failures and inability of state-centric liberal peacebuilding in achieving and consolidating peaceful societies across the world, notably in the post-colonial regions of the world. This policy brief has assessed why an interrogation of the Eurocentric roots of state-centric liberal peacebuilding is necessary if strategies are to be developed to more effectively decolonise the Global North, which drives the global peacebuilding agenda. This Policy Brief has also assessed the importance of adopting a decolonial approach to cross-border peacebuilding processes, which are anchored in problematising the imposition of the state and identifying strategies to promote and sustain transnational peacebuilding processes. It has highlighted the importance of decolonising the institutions for global governance which are mandated to promote peacebuilding, particularly given their tendency to exclude the voices and perspectives of the referent, predominantly post-colonial, communities to which peacebuilding interventions are targeted. Ultimately, adoption and mainstreaming of a decolonial peacebuilding agenda is a pre-requisite to the promotion of fair, inclusive and democratic societies at a communal, national and global level.

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