

# PEACEBUILDING: WHO NEEDS A MODEL?

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Over the past few decades, the field of peacebuilding has been in turmoil, at both the theoretical and the empirical levels. At the theoretical level, the concept of peacebuilding has faced a continuous and sustained critique, on various grounds, such as accusations of neglecting local actors' voice and agency, of advancing hegemonic interests and neo-colonial agendas, or of reproducing pre-existing hierarchies of power in post-conflict societies. In the face of these critiques, the meaning and practices of international peacebuilding, in particular UN-led peacebuilding, have somewhat evolved, notably as more attention is paid to local processes and actors (what has been called the 'local turn' in peacebuilding), and as the attempt is made to build synergies with local 'cultures of peace'.

But the truth is that even at the UN level, there is no consensual and fixed model or practice of peacebuilding. Peacebuilding is implemented by such an array of different actors with different modes of operation, budgets, objectives and interests, such as national and international agencies, national and international civil society organizations, security sector actors and private companies, to name a few, that it results in de facto bricolages rather than in

well-ordered choreographies. This multiplicity of actors means that multiple practices of peacebuilding coexist, with some mostly top-down and others bottom-up, some liberal and others more authoritarian, some mostly state-led and others mostly implemented by civil society organizations, with all possible combinations and mixes in between. And depending on the conflict setting, on 'local' needs, and on the willingness and capacity of other actors such as civil society organizations to intervene in the area concerned, the same international organizations and/or national states will implement different peacebuilding strategies.

Peacebuilding 'models' and practices are also heavily influenced by an array of contextual factors, such as the current pandemic and the accompanying economic and political crisis, the relative withdrawal of the US from multilateral and interstate frames, the crisis of multilateralism and of the international liberal order, the emergence and downfall of regional organizations and so on. This means that national and international peacebuilding strategies also change depending on the context and on political strategies and balances, sometimes leading to back-and-forth shifts in priorities.

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Blurred flags of some of the UN Member States waive behind the "Non-Violence" (or "Knotted Gun") sculpture by Swedish artist Carl Fredrik Reuterswärd on display at the UN Visitors' Plaza. Source: UN Photo



As a consequence, the idea that there are well-established and fixed national or regional peacebuilding models can be questioned. But this idea persists, for two main reasons. The first is that being able to advertise one's own peacebuilding brand is a formidable foreign policy tool, providing soft power and outreach, and allowing some states like Sweden to 'punch above their weight'. The second reason is that researchers themselves feed these representations, by coming up with typologies and classifications, and by trying to provide analytical order in a quite disordered field. The so-called and much celebrated 'Nordic model', for instance, traditionally relying on a close cooperation between Nordic governments, Nordic civil society organizations, and international organizations, has undergone major transformations over the past few decades, to the point that some question its continued specificity. The 'Nordic model' is notably a victim of its own popularity because some of its assumed priorities, such as the defence of human rights and the promotion of human security, have been adopted at the EU level and have become part of its normative and 'soft power' stance. But even as a historical construct, a consistent 'Nordic model' is an illusion born out of simplification. In Finland, for instance, the government has usually limited its peacebuilding activities to mediation support between conflict parties and has been funding Finnish civil society organizations for other types of peacebuilding interventions, without deciding on their agenda. By contrast, in Norway the government has taken a much more active role and has relied on civil society organizations to implement its peacebuilding objectives. As such, many Norwegian civil society organizations have tended to support the government's agenda, rather than the opposite.

Of course, nothing prevents state agencies from designing peacebuilding models that they would like to follow – and some do – but unless they can control all other national actors (including civil society organizations and private actors) intervening in the relevant conflict area, the end result is likely to be quite different from what was intended. Trying to make peacebuilding practices fit into well-ordered national or regional models is not only an almost impossible task: it might also have a negative impact on peacebuilding objectives themselves. Many of the critiques that address current peacebuilding practices indeed suggest that starting from a fixed model might not be the best

approach, as it is important to recognize the diversity of actors involved in peacebuilding, the diversity of their interests, and above all the diversity in local situations. Behind well-circumscribed models there always lies the danger of normativity and of a lack of flexibility, which risks dismissing some activities or actors as 'out of scope' even when they have proven effective, or of applying a one-size-fits-all approach to situations that might look similar but entail significant differences.

In Italy, peacebuilding suffers from the same woes as in many other countries, due to its vague meaning and the diversity of the relevant peacebuilding actors, and it therefore lacks visibility and clarity as a policy objective. But is this such a big problem? What should matter most is ensuring a positive impact in the concerned zones of conflict. If we take stock of past and ongoing empirical experiences, as well as of the multiple critiques that both the theories and practices of peacebuilding have attracted over recent decades, positive impact depends on multiple factors, some of which governments can directly influence and others less so. Promotion of flexibility and adaptability, attention to local agency and know-how, reflexivity regarding potential neocolonial practices, and the careful promotion of human rights and gender equality are all within the remit of states, at least as far as their own agencies are

concerned. Instead of trying to build a specific peacebuilding model, organizing cooperation and exchanges between the various actors involved in peacebuilding and reflecting on its objectives and practices seem much more promising. In this perspective, the turmoil the field of peacebuilding is currently facing could provide an opportunity for countries such as Italy to lead the way in foregrounding best practice and rethinking the way peacebuilding is designed and implemented. So, not quite a fixed model, but definitely a frame within which it is possible to design more reflexive, adaptive and respectful peacebuilding strategies.



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