Adaptive peacebuilding

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The premise of this special section of *International Affairs* is that international peacebuilding is experiencing a pragmatic turn. At the global systems level, a phase-shift is under way. The unipolar era, characterized by a liberal US-led global order, is waning.[1] It is still uncertain what may replace it, but the next stage in the transition seems to be a multipolar era, in which several states—the United States, China, Germany, India and Russia, to name a few—each have access to networks and forms of power sufficient to prevent any of the others from dominating the global order.[2] Another emerging characteristic of the transition is that several non-state actors, including some international and regional organizations, several large companies and some non-governmental agencies, can exert significant influence on the global system on selected issues where they have a substantial capacity or competency.[3]

These changes at the global systems level have implications for international peacebuilding. Here too a phase-shift is under way. The era of liberal idealism and interventionism is on the ebb and in its place we are witnessing a pragmatic turn in peacebuilding. The era in which peacebuilding was synonymous with pursuing a liberal peace end-state is coming to an end, and the next phase in the transition seems to be characterized by a more open-ended or goal-free approach towards peacebuilding, where the focus is on the means or process, and the end-state is open to context-specific interpretations of peace.[4]

This article identifies one such emerging approach, gives it a name—adaptive peacebuilding—and explores what it may be able to offer peacebuilding once it is more fully developed. I will start by introducing the context within which the pragmatic turn in peacebuilding has created the conditions enabling the adaptive peacebuilding approach to emerge. I then introduce the adaptive peacebuilding approach and examine it by analysing its foundation in complexity theory, its

[1] See the special issue of *International Affairs* on 'Ordering the world? Liberal internationalism in theory and practice', 94: 1, 2018.

[2] Jinghan Zeng and Shaun Breslin, 'China's "new type of Great Power relations": a G2 with Chinese characteristics?', *International Affairs* 92: 4, July 2016, pp. 773–94; Kristen Hopewell, 'The BRICS—merely a fable? Emerging power alliances in global trade governance', *International Affairs* 93: 6, Nov. 2017, pp. 1377–96.

[3] Ali Burak Güven, 'Defending supremacy: how the IMF and the World Bank navigate the challenge of rising power', *International Affairs* 93: 5, Sept. 2017, pp. 1149–66.

[4] Charles T. Call and Cedric de Coning, *Rising powers and peacebuilding: breaking the mold?* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), p. 262.

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interlinkage with the co-emerging concept of resilience and its relationship with the principle of local ownership. Along the way I consider its relevance for the emerging concept of *sustaining peace*.[5]

The pragmatic turn

The hypothesis of the dominant peacebuilding theory in the liberal peace era was that societies will achieve sustainable peace when their norms and institutions reflect and maintain multiparty democracy, a free-market economy, individual human rights and the rule of law.[6] The theory of change of the liberal peace doctrine holds that societies that have not yet reached this level of development can be assisted through peacebuilding and development interventions to adopt liberal norms and to build liberal institutions.[7] As Pritchett, Woolcock and Andrews explained, the logic of the period was that 'the fastest and most expedient route to development modernity is to adopt the "forms" of those countries further along this path'.[8]

Eriksen identified the liberal peace theory as a 'deterministic-design' model, that is, a causal model where the outcome is more or less guaranteed if the design is followed.[9] The peacebuilding community was confident in its ability to diagnose the problems affecting a society emerging from conflict, and to prescribe the steps such a society needed to take to achieve peace.[10] Ramalingam explains that the process was understood as a linear cause–effect problem-solving model where objective experts analysed a conflict to diagnose the problem by identifying the root causes. Subsequently, these were addressed through programmatic interventions undertaken by international actors such as the UN, regional organizations like the African Union (AU) or the European Union (EU), and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs).[11]

Where peace was not achieved, this was often attributed to shortcomings in the implementation of the design, and the solution offered was most commonly a redoubling of efforts to make the design work. Gelot and Söderbaum argue that most analysis of peacebuilding during this period aimed to explain what went well, or less well, with the aim of improving the instruments of intervention.[12]

While several researchers have been critical of the liberal peace approach to peacebuilding in recent decades, what triggered the pragmatic turn for the western

[5] Youssef Mahmoud and Anupah Makoond, *Sustaining peace: what does it mean in practice?*, issue brief (New York: International Peace Institute, April 2017).

[6] Timothy Donais, *Peacebuilding and local ownership: post-conflict consensus-building* (New York: Routledge, 2013), p. 5.

[7] Kristoffer Lidén, 'Building peace between global and local politics: the cosmopolitan ethics of liberal peacebuilding', in Kristoffer Lidén, Richard Mac Ginty and Oliver P. Richmond, eds, *Liberal peacekeeping reconstructed*, special issue, *International Peacekeeping* 16: 5, 2009, p. 617.

[8] Lant Pritchett, Michael Woolcock and Mark Andrews, *Capability traps? The mechanisms of persistent implementation failure*, working paper no. 234 (Washington DC: Center for Global Development, 2010), p. 5.

[9] Stein Eriksen, 'The liberal peace is neither: peacebuilding, statebuilding and the reproduction of conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo', in Lidén et al., eds, *Liberal peacekeeping reconstructed*, p. 662.

[10] World Bank, *World Development Report 2011: Conflict, security, and development* (Washington DC, 2011).

[11] Ben Ramalingam, *Aid on the edge of chaos: rethinking international cooperation in a complex world* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 11.

[12] Linnea Gelot and Frederik Söderbaum, 'Interveners and intervened upon: the missing link in building peace and avoiding conflict', in Hanne Fjelde and Kristine Höglund, eds, *Building peace, creating conflict? Conflictual dimensions of local and international peace-building* (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2011), p. 77.

donor and policy community was the US-led interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan.[13] Although these interventions followed a different and largely military logic, they influenced peacebuilding because they represented a concentrated effort to introduce neo-liberal values, backed by highly capable and technologically sophisticated forces and billions of dollars of development assistance. The same actors that supported these efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan, mostly western diplomatic, defence and development agencies, were also the leading donors and drivers behind peacebuilding in the rest of the world. The failures in Iraq and Afghanistan were too obvious to ignore, and in turn helped the peacebuilding community to recognize that peacebuilding interventions more broadly, including those in the Balkans, the Middle East and Africa's Great Lakes and Horn of Africa regions, have been largely ineffective.[14] Hundreds of thousands of lives have been saved when wars were prevented or stopped, but despite billions of dollars spent on humanitarian, development, peacekeeping and human rights efforts, liberal interventionism has been unable to resolve the underlying factors that drive the conflicts in these countries.[15] Richmond observes that it became increasingly less clear throughout the 2000s what types of problem, if any, could be resolved through international peacebuilding, and that there was also increasing disagreement among policy-makers with regard to how intrusive and prescriptive such interventions should be.[16]

A related development that also impelled the pragmatic turn was the shift from understanding peacebuilding as something that is essentially programmatic, to understanding it as something that is essentially political. In other words, the problems that peacebuilding attempts to solve are not technical, they are political. For instance, when designing a new defence force for Liberia, it is not enough to take into account technical considerations, such as the kind of external threats that Liberia faces, one also has to understand the political ramifications of the various options under consideration. Up to around 2012, there was an assumption that one of the benefits of a peacebuilding intervention was that it would result in more development resources flowing to the recipient countries. This resulted in a peacebuilding narrative that often reflected donor nomenclature, and reduced peacebuilding to a technical and programmatic phenomenon.[17] Since then, and as a result of the lessons learned from—and recognition of the failures of—the approaches to peacebuilding informed by the programmatic or technical

[13] See e.g. Mark Duffield, *Global governance and the new wars: the merging of development and security* (New York: Zed, 2001); Susanna P. Campbell, David Chandler and Meera Sabaratnam, *A liberal peace? The problems and practices of peacebuilding* (London: Zed, 2011); David Chandler, *Statebuilding and intervention: policies, practices and paradigms* (London: Routledge, 2009).

[14] See Dan Smith, *Towards a strategic framework for peacebuilding: the synthesis report of the joint Utstein study on peacebuilding* (Oslo: Peace Research Institute Oslo, 2004); Ann Wilkins, 'To say it as it is: Norway's evaluation of its part of the intervention', Afghanistan Analysis Network, 23 Aug. 2016, https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/to-say-it-like-it-is-norways-evaluation-of-its-part-in-the-international-intervention/. (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 17 Nov. 2017.)

[15] David Chandler, *Resilience: the governance of complexity* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

[16] Oliver P. Richmond, *After liberal peace: the changing concept of peace-building*, RSIS Commentary no. 272 (Singapore: S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, 2016).

[17] Cedric de Coning and Eli Stamnes, *UN peacebuilding architecture: the first ten years* (London: Routledge, 2016), p. 223.

approaches, this understanding of peacebuilding has gradually changed, and by 2017 the view that peacebuilding is essentially political and local had gained considerable ground.[18] Over this half-decade, then, what was understood as the essential added value of international peacebuilding interventions had shifted from resource mobilization to political accompaniment. Political accompaniment in the peacebuilding context refers to the international attention that is brought to bear on a specific country in transition—for instance by being on the agenda of the UN Peacebuilding Commission or by hosting a UN special political mission—and that generates structured processes and time-frames that assist the political actors to engage with each other in analysing their situation, designing strategies and determining priorities. These serve to maintain positive political momentum and help to prevent violent conflict.

In 2015, the UN undertook its decennial review of its peacebuilding architecture, and simultaneously also reviewed its peace operations. These reviews resulted in resolutions passed simultaneously in the General Assembly and Security Council in 2016 that introduced a new understanding of peacebuilding, namely that it is essentially about *sustaining peace*.[19] Oscar Fernandez-Taranco, the UN Assistant Secretary-General for peacebuilding, argues that the new sustaining peace concept acknowledges that peacebuilding is a political activity that must avoid templates, formulas and one-size-fits-all solutions.[20]

At the UN level, the adoption of the sustaining peace concept is a manifestation of the pragmatic turn in peacebuilding. It reflects a shift away from the preoccupation (associated with the liberal peace) with identifying and addressing conflict drivers to prevent imminent relapse into violent conflict. Instead, the focus is now on identifying and supporting the political and social capacities that sustain peace.[21]

Adaptive peacebuilding

The UN's new sustaining peace concept is, then, a pragmatic alternative that is emerging in response to the failures of the determined-design approach of the liberal peace doctrine. This new concept rejects the liberal peace theory of change—namely, that an external peacebuilding intervention can set in motion and control a causal sequence of events that will result in a sustainable peace outcome. In its place, it argues that the role of the UN is to assist countries to sustain their own peace processes by strengthening the resilience of local social institutions, and by investing in social cohesion.

In order to operationalize the sustaining peace concept, the UN will need to develop new approaches to peace operations and peacebuilding, where international peacebuilders, together with the communities and people affected by the

[18] UN, *The challenge of sustaining peace: report of the Advisory Group of Experts for the 2015 review of the United Nations peacebuilding architecture*, A/69/968-S/2015/490 (New York, 2015).
[19] UN Security Council Resolution 2282, 27 April 2016, UN Doc. S/RES/2282; General Assembly Resolution 70/262, 27 April 2016, UN Doc. A/RES/70/262.
[20] Oscar Fernandez-Taranco, 'Sustaining peace is a core activity of the UN', *Global Peace Operations Review*, 28 April 2016 (New York: New York University Center on International Cooperation).
[21] Mahmoud and Makoond, *Sustaining peace*.

conflict, actively engage in structured processes to prevent conflict and sustain peace. In this article, I propose one such approach: adaptive peacebuilding.

The adaptive peacebuilding approach is informed by concepts of complexity, resilience and local ownership. It has become commonplace to argue that peacebuilding is a complex undertaking, or that contemporary conflict scenarios are complex. Beyond this commonsense use of the term, there is a serious academic project under way, across multiple disciplines, to study and theorize complexity.[22] Complexity theory, applied to the social world, offers insights about social behaviour and relations that are relevant for peacebuilding.[23] All social systems are complex systems; and it is increasingly acknowledged that peacebuilding is about influencing the behaviour of social systems that have been affected by conflict. Insights from complexity theory about influencing the behaviour of complex systems, and how such systems respond to pressure, should thus be very instructive for peacebuilding.[24]

Complexity theory explains that a complex system is a particular type of holistic system that has the ability to adapt, and that demonstrates emergent properties, including self-organizing behaviour. Such systems emerge, and are maintained, as a result of the dynamic and non-linear interactions of their elements, based on the information available to them locally both as a result of their interaction with their environment and from the modulated feedback they receive from the other elements in the system.[25]

Complexity theory posits that social systems are highly dynamic, non-linear and emergent. One implication of this characterization is that we are not able to identify general laws or rules that will help us predict with certainty how these systems will behave in the future. How, then, can we develop sufficient knowledge to help societies to sustain peace?

Complex systems cope with challenges posed by changes in their environment through co-evolving together with their environment in a never-ending process of adaptation. This iterative adaptive process uses experimentation and feedback to generate knowledge about the system's environment. It is this process, inherent in the behaviour of all complex systems, that the adaptive peacebuilding approach seeks to replicate and modulate.

In the development field a similar approach, called adaptive management, or sometimes adaptive development, is finding increasing acceptance.[26] This approach consists of iterative cycles of learning, starting with analysis and assessment. On the basis of the analysis, multiple possible options for influencing a social system

[22] See e.g. Niklas Luhmann, 'The autopoiesis of social systems', in *Essays on self-reference* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990); Ilya Prigogine, *The end of certainty: time, chaos and the new laws of nature* (New York: Free Press, 1996); Melanie Mitchell, *Complexity: a guided tour* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

[23] Emery Brusset, Cedric de Coning and Bryn Hughes, *Complexity thinking for peacebuilding practice and evaluation* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

[24] Donella H. Meadows, *Leverage points: places to intervene in a system* (Hartland, VT: Sustainability Institute, 1999).

[25] Cedric de Coning, 'From peacebuilding to sustaining peace: implications of complexity for resilience and sustainability', *Resilience* 4: 3, 2016, pp. 168, building on Paul Cilliers, *Complexity and postmodernism: understanding complex systems* (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 3.

[26] Gregory Wilson, 'What is adaptive management?', USAID Learning Lab, 11 Nov. 2016, https://usaidlearninglab.org/lab-notes/what-adaptive-management.

are generated. For instance, a peacebuilding campaign, such as the UN stabilization plan for eastern Congo, may choose to undertake several interventions that have more or less the same broad aim, such as supporting the extension of state authority. When the selected options are developed into actual campaigns or programmes, their design must be explicit about the theory of change each will employ, so that their effects can be assessed. A theory of change should be clear about how it intends to achieve a change in the behaviour of the social system it intends to influence, that is, how a series of activities is expected to generate a particular outcome.[27] A selected number of these intervention options are then implemented and closely monitored, with a view to identifying the feedback generated by the system in response to each intervention. The feedback is then analysed, after which those responsible for the intervention, together with the communities affected and key stakeholders, decide which initiatives to discontinue, which to continue and, in addition, what adaptations to introduce for those that are continued. Those that have performed better may be expanded or replicated. The ineffectual ones, or those that have generated negative effects, need to be abandoned. Those that appear to have the desired effects should be continued and expanded, but in a variety of ways, so that there is a continuous process of experimentation with a range of options, coupled with a continuous process of selection and refinement.

This is essentially the way natural selection works in the evolution of complex systems. The two key factors are variation and selection.[28] There needs to be variation, that is, multiple parallel interventions; and there needs to be a selection process, through which effective interventions are replicated and multiplied, and those that do not have the desired effect are discontinued. The analysis–planning–implementation–evaluation–selection project cycle is already well established in the development and peacebuilding communities. However, these communities of practice are not good at generating sufficient variation. They are also notoriously bad at selection based on effect, and they are especially poor at identifying and abandoning underperforming initiatives.[29] To remedy these shortcomings, the adaptive peacebuilding approach suggests using a particular form of structured engagement that helps to generate institutional learning, and stimulates and facilitates adaptation.

An adaptive peacebuilding approach recognizes the role of entropy, i.e. an awareness that those interventions that appear to be effective today will not continue to be so indefinitely. Even successful programmes need to be monitored for signals that may indicate that an intervention is no longer having the desired effect, or is starting to generate negative side-effects. Jervis observes that we often intuitively expect linear relationships.[30] For example, if some foreign aid

[27] Craig Valters, Clare Cummings and Hamish Nixon, *Putting learning at the centre: adaptive development programming in practice* (London: Overseas Development Institute, 2016), p. 13.
[28] Owen Barber, 'Development, complexity and evolution', http://media.owen.org/Evolution/player.html.
[29] Frederik F. Rosén and Soren V. Haldrup, 'By design or by default: capacity development in fragile states and the limits of programming', *Stability: International Journal of Security and Development* 2: 2, 2013, pp. 1–8.
[30] Robert Jervis, *System effects: complexity in political and social life (*Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), p. 6.

slightly increases economic growth, it is expected that more aid should produce greater growth. However, complex systems often display behaviour that cannot be understood by extrapolating from the units or their relations, and many of the results of actions are unintended. Non-linearity, in this context, thus refers to behaviours in which the relationships between variables in a complex social system are dynamic and disproportionate.[31] Thus it is necessary to monitor not only for intended results, but also for unintended consequences; and to be ready to take steps to try to deal with the perverse effects that may come about as a result of an intervention.[32]

The adaptive peacebuilding approach is scalable to all levels: the same basic method can be applied to individual programmes, to projects, to regional or national-level campaigns, or to multiyear strategic frameworks or compacts. According to an adaptive peacebuilding approach, the feedback generated by various interventions at different levels should be shared and modulated as widely as possible throughout the system, so that as broad a spectrum of initiatives as possible can self-adjust and co-evolve on the basis of the information generated in the process.

In the adaptive peacebuilding approach, the core activity of a peacebuilding intervention is one of process facilitation. Peacebuilding in the sustaining peace context is about stimulating those processes in a society that enable self-organization and that will lead to strengthening the resilience of the social institutions that manage internal and external stressors and shocks. It is not possible to direct or control self-organization from the outside; it has to emerge from within. However, peacebuilding agents can assist a society by facilitating and stimulating the processes that enable self-organization to emerge.[33]

It is crucial, in the adaptive peacebuilding approach, that the societies and communities that are intended to benefit from a peacebuilding intervention are fully involved in all aspects of the peacebuilding initiative. External fixes will not stick if they have not been internalized, and it is thus the local adaptation process that is the critical element for sustainability.[34] The specific arrangements can differ from context to context, but the principle should be that no decisions are taken about a particular peacebuilding intervention without sufficient participation of the affected community or society, depending on the level and scope of the intervention. Sufficiency here implies that the community should be represented in such a way that the diversity and variety of their interests, needs and concerns inform every step of the adaptation cycle. In other words, the affected community should be sufficiently represented in the processes that determine the aims and objectives of the initiative, as well as in all choices related to the processes of analysis, assessment, planning, monitoring of effects, evaluation and selection.

[31] Douglas Kiel, 'Chaos theory and disaster response management: lessons for managing periods of extreme instability', in Gus A. Koehler, ed., *What disaster response management can learn from chaos theory?* (Sacramento, CA: California Research Bureau, 1995).

[32] Chiyuki Aoi, Cedric de Coning and Ramesh Thakur, *The unintended consequences of peacekeeping* (Tokyo: United Nations University Press, 2007).

[33] De Coning, 'From peacebuilding to sustaining peace', p. 175.

[34] De Coning, 'From peacebuilding to sustaining peace', p. 176.

The adaptive peacebuilding approach thus requires a commitment to engage in a structured learning process together with the society or community that has been affected by conflict. This commitment comes at a cost, in terms of investing in the capabilities necessary to enable and facilitate such a collective learning process, in taking the time to engage with communities and other stakeholders, and in making the effort to develop new and innovative systems for learning together with communities as the process unfolds. Andrews, Pritchett and Woolcock point out, however, that experimental iterations 'are not necessarily slow or slow to produce results'. In fact, they argue that 'the iterations need to be rapid and aggressive to build momentum and team spirit and to ensure continued and expanded authorization'.[35]

Along the same lines, the UN's sustaining peace concept also builds on a logic of upstreaming, meaning that the approach of investing upstream costs in sustaining peace and preventing future violent conflict is envisioned to be significantly less expensive than the downstream costs of managing an outbreak of violent conflict. The Institute for Economics and Peace estimates that, on average, for every US$1 invested in prevention, the future cost of conflict could be reduced by US$16.[36]

Adaptive peacebuilding will also require a change in organizational culture and attitude. Experience with the UN Civilian Capacity reform initiative has shown how challenging it is to bring about change in the organizational culture of so multifaceted and dispersed an institution as the UN.[37] Salafsky, Margoluis and Redford suggest several principles that institutions will need to cultivate if they are to become more adaptive: 'promoting institutional curiosity and innovation; valuing failures and learning from mistakes; expecting surprises and capitalizing on crises; and encouraging personal and organizational growth by hiring people who are committed to learning'.[38]

While the sustaining peace concept and adaptive peacebuilding approach will have implications for the expenditure of time and resources and for organizational culture, these do not necessarily mean significantly more effort and expenditure overall. The difference is that more will need to be invested in prevention, rather than in the management of conflict. Currently, the UN Secretariat spends approximately US$7.5 billion a year on peacekeeping, and less than US$1 billion on prevention, mediation and peacebuilding.[39] The new UN Secretary-General has been making this argument energetically; but only time will tell whether UN member states are willing to take the leap of faith and shift more of their expenditure from management to prevention.[40]

[35] Matt Andrews, Lant Pritchett and Michael Woolcock, *Doing iterative and adaptive work*, CID working paper no. 313 (Cambridge, MA: Center for International Development, Harvard University, 2016), p. 25.

[36] José Luengo-Cabrera and Tessa Butler, 'Reaping the benefits of cost-effective peacebuilding', *Global Observatory*, 31 July 2017, https://theglobalobservatory.org/2017/07/peacebuilding-expenditure-united-nations-sustaining-peace/.

[37] UN, *Civilian capacity in the aftermath of conflict: independent report of the Senior Advisory Group*, UN Doc. A/65/747–S/2011/85 (New York, 22 Feb. 2011).

[38] Nick Salafsky, Richard Margoluis and Kent Redford, *Adaptive management: a tool for conservation practitioners* (Washington DC: Biodiversity Support Program, 2001), pp. 67–80.

[39] Arthur Boutellis, 'The threat of US cuts: helping peacekeeping help itself?', *Global Observatory*, 30 March 2017, https://theglobalobservatory.org/2017/03/peacekeeping-funding-united-states-trump-security-council/.

[40] UN Security Council, 'Secretary-General, in first address to Security Council since taking office, sets restoring

I have explained how adaptive peacebuilding is an approach to sustaining peace that is informed by complexity theory. In the following sections I will highlight three elements of complexity theory that are important for further developing the adaptive peacebuilding approach: namely, adapting to uncertainty, a shift in focus from ends to means, and working with, not against, change. In the process, the interlinkages with resilience and local ownership will also be further developed.

Adapting to uncertainty

Adaptive peacebuilding recognizes that uncertainty is an intrinsic quality of complex systems, not a result of imperfect knowledge or inadequate planning or implementation.[41] One of the core elements of an adaptive peacebuilding approach that is informed by complexity theory is a recognition that our ability to fully know complex systems is inherently limited.[42] For peacebuilders this implies a recognition that tools such as conflict analysis or needs assessments, while necessary and important, can never generate a fully accurate understanding of a conflict-affected social system.[43] The planning and programming that are done on the basis of such analyses and assessments thus need to take into account that the available knowledge is at best provisional. The unfortunate series of events in December 2013 that saw the new nation of South Sudan lapse into violent conflict; the degree to which the conflicts in Syria and Yemen have resulted in the collapse and fragmentation of these two societies; and the man-made humanitarian crisis in Rakhine State of Myanmar sparked by the actions of the security forces against the Rohingya people—all these episodes demonstrate how the dynamic, non-linear and emergent behaviour of complex social systems can, at times rapidly, evolve in unpredictable ways, especially when they are under conflict-affected pressure.[44] Adaptive peacebuilding thus suggests that instruments such as conflict analysis and needs assessments be approached not as predefined steps in a determined-design programme cycle, but rather as continuously iterative processes.

Recognizing uncertainty as a starting-point is what Michael Barnett refers to as cultivating 'a spirit of epistemological uncertainty'.[45] Bryn Hughes specifically applies the point to the peacebuilding context and argues that 'an explicit, reflexive awareness of the incompleteness of our understanding is … vital so that decisions are taken with a large degree of caution (and humility) while at the same time demanding that we think through the possible ramifications'.[46]

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trust, preventing crises as United Nations priorities', press release, 10 Jan. 2017, https://www.un.org/press/en/2017/sc12673.doc.htm.

[41] Damian Popolo, *A new science of international relations: modernity, complexity and the Kosovo conflict* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), p. 209.

[42] Frauke de Weijer, *A systems perspective on institutional change, with an eye on Afghanistan* (Boston: Harvard Kennedy School, 2011).

[43] Valters et al., *Putting learning at the centre*, p. 5.

[44] Hilde F. Johnson, *South Sudan: the untold story from independence to civil war* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2016).

[45] Quoted in Thorsten Benner, Stephan Mergenthaler and Philipp Rotmann, *The new world of UN peace operations: learning to build peace?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 225.

[46] Bryn Hughes, 'Peace operations and the political: a pacific reminder of what really matters', *Journal of International Peace Operations* 16: 1–2, 2012, p. 116.

Recognizing uncertainty does not mean that we cannot engage with complex social systems in a meaningful way, but it should remind policy-makers, planners and practitioners of the pitfalls of determined-design assumptions and linear planning methods when dealing with complex systems. Not all situations peacebuilders have to deal with are complex. Every programme or intervention requires administrative, financial and logistical planning aimed at generating human resources, equipment and funding. This part of peacebuilding planning does indeed require linear, deterministic planning. The challenge, however, is that many planners and policy-makers seem unable to make the distinction between complicated and complex phenomena. Organizing the logistical aspects of a national dialogue process in Malawi or Nepal is likely to be complicated; but facilitating the actual dialogue, with a view to generating an agreed outcome document such as a national peace accord, will be complex. Complicated systems can potentially be fully understood, and predicted, provided sufficient information is available. Complex systems, in contrast, are characterized by processes of emergence and self-regulation in which non-linearity and dynamism play critical roles.[47] Hughes points out that many 'continue to plan, implement and evaluate peacebuilding initiatives as though they were complicated problems—somehow afforded with well-defined stopping points, solutions that could be "objectively" arrived at and evaluated, and existing in stable and thus predictable environments'.[48]

How then, in practice, can policy-makers plan peacebuilding interventions that aim to influence complex social systems? The alternative to a deductive, determined-design approach to engaging with social systems affected by conflict is to follow an inductive methodology of participatory exploration, experimentation and adaptation. As outlined above, the adaptive peacebuilding approach consists of simultaneously exploring multiple options by undertaking several parallel initiatives. In practical terms, this could mean that several different initiatives are undertaken simultaneously to support the extension of state authority in, for instance, the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, northern Mali or the southern Philippines. These could include building police stations, courts and civil administration facilities, and recruiting, training and (re-)deploying police officers and justice officials from other parts of the country to staff these new service centres. Such initiatives are likely to be accompanied by new approaches, such as community policing, and to be informed by best practices from transitional justice programmes applied elsewhere. What would distinguish an adaptive peacebuilding approach is that it would purposefully generate a variety of initiatives, in close cooperation with national and local communities; that it would put in place the capacities necessary to monitor what effects these initiatives are having; and that it would invest in collaborative mechanisms to select which of these initiatives to discontinue, expand or adjust, in an iterative process of structured adaptation.

The adaptive peacebuilding approach is thus at its core a continuous process of exploration and adaptation that generates an emergent understanding of the

[47] Cilliers, *Complexity and postmodernism*, p. 3.
[48] Hughes, 'Peace operations and the political', p. 110.

system as it evolves. Andrews, Pritchett and Woolcock describe it as a process of iterative incrementalism, 'where each step leads to some learning about what works and what does not, which informs a next (and potentially different) step to see if an adjusted action works better'.[49] An adaptive peacebuilding approach to knowledge generation recognizes that because the overall environment, and the particular social system, are constantly changing, our understanding of the social system has to co-evolve with it. Even in situations where we may have agreement among a broad range of stakeholders about what a peacebuilding intervention should aim to achieve, we cannot know at the outset how to achieve it.[50] Murray and Marmorek argue that an adaptive approach allows 'activities to proceed despite uncertainty regarding how best to achieve desired outcomes … in fact, it specifically targets such uncertainty … and provides a science-based learning process characterized by using outcomes for evaluation and adjustment'.[51]

One of the recommendations of the UN High-level Independent Panel on Peace Operations (HIPPO) that undertook a review of UN peacekeeping in 2015 reflects this approach.[52] The HIPPO was critical of how the UN Security Council currently authorizes UN peace operations from the outset with a detailed set of mandate requirements and a budget envelope. It argued that the assumptions on which such mandates are given are almost always flawed, but once the Security Council has set an operation on its path it is extremely difficult and politically costly to make any significant changes to its mandate. It suggested instead a two-stage or sequenced mandating process, whereby the Security Council as a first step sets out the broad vision and parameters for the mission, and then requires the UN Secretary-General to come back to the Council in, for instance, six months, with recommendations for a more detailed mandate, once the mission has been deployed on the ground, and has had the benefit of obtaining some information for itself.[53] This recommendation recognizes the danger of committing to a certain approach based only on a pre-mandate conflict analysis and needs assessment. The HIPPO recommends instead a mechanism for adapting or refining the peacekeeping mandate when more information is available. This recommendation is a good first step in moving UN peace operations away from the current determined-design approach to planning, but more will need to be done to transform the UN's planning and management culture—and related processes—before it is possible to claim that the UN has embraced an adaptive approach to the planning of peace operations.

Another key feature of the adaptive peacebuilding approach is the recognition of the inherently political nature of peacebuilding. Choices regarding who gets to make decisions about which opportunities to explore, which programmes to

[49] Andrews et al., *Doing iterative and adaptive work*, p. 4.
[50] Valters et al., *Putting learning at the centre*, p. 5.
[51] Carol Murray and David R. Marmorek, 'Adaptive management: a science-based approach to managing ecosystems in the face of uncertainty', paper prepared for fifth international conference on science and management of protected areas, 'Making ecosystem based management work', Victoria, British Columbia, 11–16 May 2003.
[52] UN, *Uniting our strengths for peace: politics, partnership and people*, report of the UN High-level Independent Panel on UN Peace Operations (New York: UN, June 2015; hereafter HIPPO Report), p. 47.
[53] HIPPO Report, p. 58; Adam Day, *To build consent in peace operations, turn mandates upside down* (Tokyo: United Nations University, 2017).

replicate or expand, and what criteria will be used in the process, all have political dimensions and political effects.[54] Decisions regarding which policy options to pursue are rarely technical. They are influenced by political judgements about who may lose or gain, and as a result it is rare that the technical aspects of a particular initiative will override what is seen as politically feasible in a given context. This also implies that a decision to pursue a particular initiative may face pushback from those who may view it as harmful to their interests, or who were excluded from the process.[55] An approach informed by complexity theory recognizes that forward momentum is not inevitable. This is why Kleinfeld recommends that we plan for sailing boats, not trains:

> Progress looks less like a freight train barrelling down a track, whose forward motion can be measured at regular increments, and more like a sailboat, sometimes catching a burst of wind and surging forward, sometimes becalmed, and often having to move in counter-intuitive directions to get to its destination.[56]

The recognition in the adaptive peacebuilding approach of the fact that there is no external privileged knowledge or predetermined model, and that the design and decisions should emerge from the process itself, creates meaningful opportunities for all stakeholders, and especially for local societies and communities, to co-own and co-manage the process. The adaptive peacebuilding approach may also help to clarify the different political interests at stake or reveal spoilers, because of its focus on proactive monitoring and feedback. The iterative nature of the adaptive process also creates many opportunities for engagement of key stakeholders in decision-making processes.

A shift in focus from ends to means

There is no stopping point or end-state in complex systems. In the context of a social system whose emergence has been influenced by violent conflict, when can peacebuilders/practitioners claim to have achieved sustained peace? History cautions us that there is a high likelihood of relapse into violence for countries emerging out of conflict. Paul Collier and his colleagues found that approximately 50 per cent of all peace processes fail within ten years.[57] The emerging political crisis in South Africa, which has reached a new tipping point 22 years after the end of apartheid, the increasingly high levels of urban violence in Latin America, decades after several violent conflicts in that region ended, and the emergence of violent extremism within Europe among second-generation immigrants all serve to remind us that no society ever reaches a point where it no longer needs to invest in social cohesion. Rob Ricigliano argues that thinking in terms of 'success' and 'failure' is nonsensical and even self-defeating in complex peacebuilding contexts.

[54] Hughes, 'Peace operations and the political', p. 110.
[55] Rachel Kleinfeld, *Improving development aid design and evaluation* (Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for Peace, 2015), p. 4.
[56] Kleinfeld, *Improving development aid*, p. 4.
[57] Paul Collier, V. L. Elliot, Håvard Hegre, Anke Hoeffler, Marta Reynal Querol and Nicholas Sambanis, *Breaking the conflict trap: civil war and development policy* (New York: Oxford University Press and World Bank, 2003).

He suggests that we instead think of sustaining peace as an infinite game, rather than as something at which we can succeed or fail.[58] He argues that you never win in peacebuilding in the sense that you can declare victory and stop investing in sustaining peace. You can achieve and celebrate milestones along the way, but we need to recognize that these are always potentially reversible. Moving away from focusing on 'problems' and 'solutions' enables peacebuilders to focus on the quality and sustainability of the engagement with the communities and stakeholders necessary to sustain the peace.

This shift of focus also helps to reframe peace approaches away from interventions guided by short-term risk assessments to longer-term and earlier preventive interventions aimed at stimulating and supporting the development of resilient social institutions that can better manage future shocks and setbacks. This is also the essence of the difference between a post-conflict or conflict-management approach to peacebuilding, which is focused on responding to identified risks, and the sustaining peace concept of peacebuilding, which is aimed at investing in the capacity of societies to manage future tensions themselves.

A society that is emerging from recent violent conflict may reach a point where the likelihood of an imminent relapse into violent conflict is low. However, that does not imply that it can stop investing in sustaining peace. What does change over time is the kind of engagement necessary to sustain peace. For instance, in 2018 Liberia may reach a point at which it is no longer necessary to have a UN peacekeeping operation as an external guarantor to consolidate its peace process. However, Liberians will still have to further increase their internal efforts to improve social cohesion, and to address the inequalities in their society that have been among the main underlying causes of their vulnerability to violent conflict.

Insights from complexity theory also imply that there cannot be *one* best or optimal solution. Innes and Booher argue that, because 'causality cannot be definitively established and because the system is constantly subject to unanticipated change, the idea of a best solution is a mirage'.[59] It is not possible to find a single correct solution to a complex problem such as a conflict between two or more communities. One should, therefore, not attempt to solve such problems with determined-design methodologies aimed at definitively diagnosing a problem and prescribing a solution.[60] The alternative presented by the adaptive peacebuilding approach is to work with the affected communities to collaboratively develop self-awareness of the causes and drivers of conflict in the system, through a structured, collaborative process of experimentation, selection and adaptation, to ultimately support the emergence of local resilient social institutions that can self-manage future tensions.

[58] Rob Ricigliano, 'Dump the terms "success" and "failure"', presentation at 2015 Sustaining Peace conference hosted by Advanced Consortium on Conflict, Cooperation and Complexity, Columbia University, New York, 16 June 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9UgyelNq6xI&feature=youtu.be&list=PLF_C_Rsjuya DXfTACfyzqB9pMmrm4-IID.

[59] Judith E. Innes and David E. Booher, *Planning with complexity: an introduction to collaborative rationality for public policy* (New York: Routledge, 2010), p. 10.

[60] Cedric de Coning, 'Implications of complexity for peacebuilding policies and practices', in Brusset et al., *Complexity thinking*, p. 34.

This also implies that peacebuilders have to be cautious about how they use the notions of 'best practices' and 'lessons learned'. It is important to assess the effects interventions have generated, and to learn from our experiences. However, that does not mean that something once learned in one context will work in another. As Jervis has pointed out, a particular initiative may work well in one situation, but is unlikely to have the same effect when scaled up or applied in another context.[61] Even worse, it may generate negative side-effects; or spoilers may have learned some lessons of their own, and react differently the next time a so-called best practice is employed.

The adaptive peacebuilding approach is based on learning, but also on continuous adaptation, and 'learning-informed' knowledge should thus always be understood as provisional. Peter Coleman notes that the main contribution of a complex-systems approach is 'that it shifts our understanding away from static, simplified views of conflict' and helps us to appreciate the 'complex, multilevel, dynamic, and cyclical nature of these phenomena'.[62] In this context, best practices and lessons learned should be understood as inputs into decision-making processes, not as standing operating procedures.

Finally, a shift in focus from ends to means may also entail an investment in a network approach, because networks are more robust and resilient than hierarchical structures when dealing with shocks, setbacks and dynamic change.[63] Such a network approach has already become manifest in the international peacebuilding system in the growing number and variety of actors. On the one hand this has created significant coherence challenges, but on the other hand it has enabled the international system to deal with a much larger and more diverse set of situations than would have been the case if it relied exclusively on, for instance, the UN Secretariat. Despite these challenges, the complex network of international, regional, non-governmental and local actors—and the total cumulative effect their combined efforts are able to generate, for instance in places like Mali, northern Nigeria and Somalia today—are indicative of the shape future international interventions are increasingly likely to take: namely, a networked pattern of multistakeholder cooperation and partnerships.[64]

Investing in resilience: working with change, not against conflict

Liberal peace theory tends to perceive conflict as a problem that needs to be fixed, and peacebuilding as one of the tools through which the international system is maintained by correcting the behaviour of errant states and returning them to their orderly place in a stable international system.[65] Adaptive peacebuilding recognizes that conflict is a normal and necessary element of change. Its focus is

[61] Jervis, *System effects*, p. 6.
[62] Quoted in Hughes, 'Peace operations and the political', p. 108.
[63] Paul Cilliers, 'Boundaries, hierarchies and networks in complex systems', *International Journal of Innovation Management* 5: 2, June 2001, pp. 135–47.
[64] HIPPO Report, p. 13.
[65] Ashraf Ghani and Clare Lockhart, *Fixing failed states: a framework for rebuilding a fractured world* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

on supporting the ability of communities to cope with and manage this process of change in such a way that they can avoid violent conflict.

Commonsense understanding of non-linearity is often associated with concepts such as disorder, chaos and randomness, because we typically explain non-linearity as the opposite of the linear, the logical and the orderly. It is thus important to emphasize that in the context of complexity theory, non-linearity is recognized as an essential ingredient in the processes of emergence and self-organization that generate order in complex systems. Non-linearity is the element that distinguishes a complex system from a linear, deterministic, mechanical or complicated system. The latter is fully knowable, predictable and, therefore, in principle controllable. It is therefore also unable to do anything that is not pre-programmed or designed (if it is a human-made system) or new, in the sense that we could not predict it in advance, provided we had enough information (if it is a natural system). In contrast, the non-linearity in complex systems is what makes it possible for these systems to adapt and to evolve, that is, to create something new that goes beyond what is pre-programmed in the parts that make up the system. This is what is known as emergence in complexity theory. Non-linearity is thus an essential part of—in fact, a precondition for—emergence, self-regulation and adaptation in complex systems.[66]

When we say that an adaptive peacebuilding approach recognizes that conflict is a necessary element of change, a distinction needs to be drawn between violent conflict, which is undesirable, and constructive conflict, or what Morin calls the antagonism of the network.[67] Constructive conflict refers to the competition among people pursuing different, often incompatible, interests: this is normal, desirable and indeed necessary for any society to be vibrant, adaptive and innovative. Adaptive peacebuilding recognizes that complex systems, including social systems, need to be under stress to innovate, adapt and evolve.[68] Adaptation in response to stress perpetuates the system and helps it to evolve and survive.[69]

Many conflicts come about as a result of inequality, exclusion, or the marginalization of one or more identity groups in a society. At some point, these groups organize themselves and gain the ability to protest against their exclusion. Societies are, however, unlikely to change their patterns of power and privilege unless forced to do so. Social systems usually start to adapt only when the cost of maintaining the current system becomes too high. The disadvantaged group typically draws attention to its plight by increasing the costs of its exclusion, for instance via public protest. If those in power continue to ignore the protests, or step up the suppression of the excluded group, some elements in this group often turn to violence as a means of increasing the pressure on those in power. Eventually a

[66] Cilliers, *Complexity and postmodernism*, p. 120.

[67] Edgar Morin, 'Restricted complexity, general complexity', paper presented at colloquium 'Intelligence de la complexité: épistémologie et pragmatique', Cerisy-la-Salle, France, 26 June 2005, trans. Carlos Gershenson; repr. in Carlos Gershenson, Diedrik Aerts and Bruce Edmonds, *Worldviews, science and us* (Liverpool: University of Liverpool Press, 2005), p. 9.

[68] Nicholas Taleb, *The black swan: the impact of the highly improbable* (London: Penguin, 2010), p. 316.

[69] Mareile Kaufmann, 'Emergent self-organisation in emergencies: resilience rationales in interconnected societies', *Resilience* 1: 0, 2013, pp. 53–68 at p. 65.

tipping point is reached where the costs of exclusion exceed the benefits; a point at which society typically starts to adapt by creating new and more inclusive patterns of organization and representation. Many conflicts and struggles have followed this pattern, including for example the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa, the anti-slavery movement in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and the struggle for the rights of women to vote and run for office in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in Europe and the United States.

An important characteristic of the adaptive peacebuilding approach is that it works with change, not against conflict. It does so by making use of the natural dynamic and non-linear processes that characterize complex social systems to stimulate feedback, and facilitate the natural ability of complex systems to self-organize. If a society is fragile, it means that the social institutions that govern its politics, security, justice and economy lack resilience. Resilience refers here to the ability of the social institutions to absorb and adapt to the internal and external shocks and setbacks they are likely to face. If a society is fragile, there is a risk that it may not be able to manage these tensions, pressures, disputes, crises and shocks without relapsing into violent conflict. This risk is gradually reduced as the social institutions develop the resilience necessary to cope with the type of threats to which they are exposed.[70]

McCandless and Simpson explain this focus on resilience as a shift 'from the aspiration to prevent conflict by controlling change, to the capacities of systems to cope with, adapt to, and shape change'.[71] It implies channelling change, facilitating the flow of information, and generating processes that can stimulate and support the self-organization necessary to manage complex social systems.

The adaptive peacebuilding approach is aimed at helping societies to develop the resilience and robustness they need to cope with and adapt to change by helping them to develop greater levels of complexity in their social institutions.[72] McCandless and Simpson point out that 'the resilience lens offers peacebuilding a perspective on the endogenous strengths in systems, structures and people within conflict-affected societies, rather than the more conventional focus on the obstacles to peace'.[73] The adaptive peacebuilding approach thus aims to work with the constructive attributes of change by investing in the resilience of social institutions and thereby helping them to cope with and channel change positively, and to manage conflict in such a way that it does not become violent. It does so by proposing to involve local societies and communities in all decisions related to the peacebuilding process, on a scale not attempted to date.

Conclusion

International peacebuilding is experiencing a pragmatic turn. Over the past decade setbacks in several places, including Burundi, Libya, South Sudan and Yemen, to

[70] De Coning, 'From peacebuilding to sustaining peace', p. 173.
[71] Erin McCandless and Graeme Simpson, *Assessing resilience for peacebuilding* (New York: Interpeace, 2015), p. 6.
[72] De Coning, 'From peacebuilding to sustaining peace', p. 173.
[73] McCandless and Simpson, *Assessing resilience for peacebuilding*, p. 5.

name a few, have significantly eroded the confidence that peacebuilding formerly enjoyed in the international system. These failures have begun to take peacebuilding in qualitatively different directions.

In 2015, the UN undertook strategic reviews of its peacebuilding architecture and its peace operations; these reviews introduced the new 'sustaining peace' concept, which acknowledges that peacebuilding is a political activity that must avoid templates, formulas and one-size-fits-all solutions.

These developments created fertile ground for the emergence of new approaches to peacebuilding. This article makes the case for one such approach, namely adaptive peacebuilding, and argues that it can assist in operationalizing the new sustaining peace concept. It is an approach in which peacebuilders, together with the communities and people affected by the conflict, actively engage in a structured effort to sustain peace by employing an iterative process of learning and adaptation.

The adaptive peacebuilding approach is aimed at helping societies to develop the resilience and robustness they need to cope with and adapt to change, by helping them to develop greater levels of complexity in their social institutions.

The adaptive peacebuilding approach is indicative of the pragmatic turn in peacebuilding in that it embraces uncertainty, focuses on process not end-states, and opts to invest in the resilience of local and national institutions and thereby their ability to promote change.

This is a significant departure from the liberal peacebuilding commitment to a liberal end-state and the deductive, deterministic design methodology it employed to arrive at such a predefined end-state. The article argues that the adaptive peacebuilding approach is well placed to facilitate the shift in peacebuilding towards a long-term investment in preventing conflict and sustaining peace, with a focus on strengthening the resilience of social institutions, and investing in social cohesion and related capacities that assist societies to self-sustain their peace processes.