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VERTICAL INTEGRATION: A DYNAMIC PRACTICE PROMOTING TRANSFORMATIVE PEACEBUILDING

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Introduction

Scholarship and practice in areas of both peacebuilding and development have long been concerned with the question of how to maximise efforts at different levels and use resources effectively towards producing coherent results that spawn society-wide impacts and benefits. The notion of 'vertical integration' – at the most basic level, a strategy to link actors, ideas and efforts vertically for peacebuilding and development impact – is increasingly being used to capture and develop knowledge, experience and practice in this area. This special issue of the *Journal of Peacebuilding & Development* (JPD) brings together a host of authors from around the world who share their grounded insights on this topic.

The evolution of vertical integration can be identified through numerous scholarly, policy and practice trends over the last decade or more. References to vertical integration can be found amongst peacebuilding scholar-practitioners, notably John Paul Lederach (theorising this issue as early as 1997, and using this term in 2005).¹ The foundations of the concept can also be traced back to the earlier work of eminent peace scholars such as Adam Curle (1971) and Johan Galtung (1976), who wrote passionately about system and structural change, making the case for both vertical and horizontal efforts intent on transforming conflict-generating structures.

Contemporary scholars are further conceptualising the topic in the burgeoning literature on 'the local turn' in peacebuilding. More theoretical than policy-oriented (at least to date), this literature posits the importance of local-level dynamics in the success or failure of national-level peacebuilding efforts. The literature emerging from practice on infrastructures for peace (I4P) is also highly relevant, drawing attention to the need for dynamic networks of structures, mechanisms and resources at different levels to be developed, comprising an architecture through which a sustained peace can be built (see JPD special issue volume 7: 3).²

Interacting with each of these trends, contemporary scholarship is moving critical reflection forward on vertical integration. Critical peacebuilding – with its emphasis on the underlying structures and interests sustaining the peacebuilding project – has turned its reflexive gaze to the issue of discursive power. Discourses and meanings of peace and peacebuilding are constantly being negotiated both within and between levels along the vertical 'axis'. In highly asymmetric local-to-global contexts, the comparative and relational power of actors has often been deployed both vertically and horizontally in ways that favour the production of narrow and self-serving agendas (e.g. Pugh et al. 2008;

Abitbol 2012). A growing trend, as reflected in the nascent literature on vertical integration, is a concern for the production of peace and peace processes at the intersection of the interests, priorities and power of different social, political and economic actors at multiple levels. Ultimately, just as vertical linkages between the local, national and international drive conflict and fragility, they offer crucial entry points for thinking and practice around building and sustaining peace.

Increased attention to vertical integration also highlights a number of important and interrelated trends in policy and practice. First, the growing disenchantment with state-centric approaches to peacebuilding, statebuilding and development has generated increased attention to sub-national and local-level dynamics as essential foundations for both making and sustaining peace. This is illustrated by the shift, related to peace agreements and political settlements at the highest level (i.e. in UN-mediated peace processes), towards greater inclusivity in elite- and national-level processes.³

The push to reconceptualise statebuilding and development over the last decade – from a concept focused narrowly on the formal dimensions of state-level institution-building to one emphasising the wider set of relationships linking state and society⁴ – is also illustrative of increased attentiveness to vertical dynamics. This has come alongside a growing awareness that effectiveness and accountability cannot (and therefore should not) be willed or engineered by outsiders. These must emerge iteratively through the commitments and interactions between institutions and the wider society, and only secondarily with the support and engagement of the international community. The revival of the notion of the social contract is also reflective of this turn, and viewed increasingly as a key strategic approach to building more peaceful states.

A third and related trend associated with the growing interest in this topic relates to the changing nature of violence in our contemporary world, characterised by a breadth and diversity of sub-national actors with access to weapons and motivated by complex configurations of greed and grievance. Peacebuilding scholarship over the last 20 years has increasingly focused on examining the roles played by such actors in contemporary conflict, cognisant that it is not possible to exclude them from the wider peacebuilding project.⁵ This affects the nature of peacemaking and the roll-out of peace operations, as well as the types of social contracts that might emerge when there are myriad, competing collectivities of actors claiming legitimacy – all of which lie at the heart of discussions around the political culture of contemporary states.⁶

Fourth, greater concern and focus on sub-national and local-level dynamics is linked to the broader crisis of liberal peacebuilding. With a dramatically uneven empirical track record, the liberal peacebuilding project (and related development industry) has been criticised for being excessively top-down and template-driven. It has proven itself insufficiently responsive to contextual matters and to the sub-national realities and dynamics that surely need to be leveraged in building societally owned – and thus more likely sustainable – peace.

As the above trends suggest, there are critical reasons why this topic is gaining conceptual attention and political momentum. Yet there are important areas requiring concerted attention for vertical integration as a practice to be employed with desirable and meaningful peacebuilding and development results. Discussed in more detail below, these include:

- Conceptually, empirically and strategically, our knowledge remains limited about relational dynamics of and between the ‘top-down’ and ‘bottom-up’, and what

forms of interaction between them are likely to produce constructive results. What methods would assist us?

- Clearly, peacebuilding involves both strengthening relationships between state and society (the vertical axis) and repairing relations among conflicting social groups (the horizontal axis). While much depends on context, it remains that scholars and practitioners alike do not sufficiently understand the complex relationships between vertical and horizontal integration.
- There remains little consensus around what constitutes 'bottom-up', and who is 'local' in any context. There is also growing recognition of the complex challenges and dilemmas faced by peacebuilding and development actors (from local to international) engaged in supporting different streams of grassroots and sub-national level integration. It is not at all clear how 'bottom-up' processes actually move upwards, influencing top-level processes.
- How might the critical factor of power, and the inevitable presence of power asymmetries in peacebuilding and development contexts be addressed? In hybrid political systems this can be particularly challenging, as different actors, networks and systems may have high though variable degrees of legitimacy amongst different populations. Efforts to forge agreement about integration within and across such powerful divisions are likely to confront serious conflicts of interest and of vision.
- Underpinning each of these areas is the question of whether, how and under what conditions vertical integration can be 'operationalised' effectively. Moving in this direction demands more from peacebuilders and policy-makers in terms of understanding and engaging with the complexities of domestic and international political dynamics, thinking more in terms of facilitation rather than engineering, and approaching peacebuilding and concomitant problems in a more integrated, holistic and also critical manner. At present, real questions persist about whether peacebuilding and development actors at all levels and in diverse sectors have the will and capacity to embrace such challenges.

This goal of this special issue is to tease out important dimensions of the vertical integration *problématique* meriting attention and further research. In so doing, we hope to engage propositionally, advancing thinking and practice around vertical integration, rooted in empirical, research-based insights from the authors in this issue.

Key Issues and Trends in Vertical Integration Thinking and Practice

The cases examined in this issue variously underscore and extend what scholars and practitioners of vertical integration have argued to date. They also collectively reaffirm the importance of vertical integration for the larger practice of peacebuilding. The case for vertical integration ultimately rests on twin realisations: first, peacebuilding processes emphasising elite-level pact-making are, in most cases, too narrow to decisively shift societies from war to peace; and second, grassroots-focused peacebuilding efforts that are disconnected from wider political dynamics are likely to be more palliative than transformative. Indeed, the growing emphases on state–society relations and on reconstructing social contracts both involve an implicit recognition of the centrality of vertical relationships in war-to-peace transitions. In other words, peacebuilding is about building effective, accountable state institutions *and* restoring social relationships, *as well*

as about linking both sets of processes – and the efforts of particular actors – in mutually supportive and complementary ways.

Conceptualising trends

Authors in this issue reaffirm the merits of viewing vertical integration as an intentional strategy and practice. Drawing on Lederach's work, *Timothy Donais* writes that vertically integrated peacebuilding may be understood as a 'strategy for seeking change within a divided system or society that explicitly engenders and supports processes that link individuals, networks, organizations, and social spaces' (Lederach 2005, 183), particularly along a vertical axis connecting the grassroots to national-level leaders and institutions. *Valarie Vat Kamatsiko* similarly suggests it is a mode of peacebuilding in which actors operating at multiple levels 'work collaboratively in a coherent manner in order to maximise their collective contributions to peacebuilding goals'. She spotlights the work of Caritas Internationalis in this area, and the useful accompanying concept of 'vertical capacity' which refers to 'relationship building across levels of leadership, authority, and responsibility within a society or system, from the grassroots to the highest leaders' (Caritas Internationalis 2002, 155 & 177).

Kamatsiko provides a useful review of the literature on vertical integration, including gaps and weaknesses. In particular, she highlights that issues of power are not sufficiently addressed (a matter discussed below) and that vertical dimensions existing *within* the local are inadequately recognised and considered. She argues that the complexities and challenges of grassroots and sub-national level integration have been underemphasised, despite the fact that issues of power, discourse and legitimacy also play out at these levels. Her article contributes to deepening the concept – by turning attention to its local content through an examination of a grassroots peace infrastructure in Northern Uganda.

For their part, *Michael J. Brown and Marie-Joëlle Zahar's* discussion of social cohesion in Central African Republic (CAR) highlights the need to avoid static and stylised conceptions of vertical integration by pointing to the complex ways in which vertical and horizontal relationships are intertwined. Within any given context, conflict may exacerbate multiple cleavages, whether across class and ethnic lines or between rural and urban populations. A narrow focus on vertical linkages between state and society may in fact draw attention away from the equally pressing need to repair intra-societal relationships (which may or may not be mediated by or through the state). This points to the need to think more holistically and more strategically about which linkages – across which axes – are especially critical for peacebuilding.

The work of CDA's Reflecting on Peace Practice (RPP) programme over the years has significantly contributed to evidence-based findings that support the vertical integration concept, largely through a close analysis of the linkages between 'peace writ little' (pwl – local-level or grassroots peace efforts) and 'Peace Writ Large' (PWL – efforts focused on the national or society-wide 'bigger picture'). In their briefing, *Anita Ernstorfer, Diana Chigas and Hannah Vaughan-Lee* reflect on lessons from over a decade of CDA work. Observing that not all pwl interventions are equally consequential for the purposes of PWL, they conclude that closer (vertical) integration of local-level and national-level peace efforts (and the ideas in which they are rooted) requires that interveners develop better analytical tools to understand and respond, where appropriate, to local–national interactions. Constructive linkages across levels, as they suggest, don't emerge organically but must be 'consciously planned'. Furthermore, effective vertical integration entails the development of relationships of trust and support with 'Key People', i.e. those

who can act as bridges or connectors across different levels, constituencies and even discourses within the larger conflict.

The issue of power

As many of the contributions in this special issue suggest, no discussion of vertical integration in the context of peacebuilding can avoid grappling with larger issues of power. Vertical relationships are by definition hierarchical, and as such are marked by asymmetries of power, with actors higher up the political system (especially state-level actors) enjoying considerable advantages in both bureaucratic and coercive power over community-based ones. This reality is compellingly illustrated by *Chanrith Ngin and Willemijn Verkoren*, who use stakeholder analysis in Cambodia to demonstrate how elite interests often prevail over community-driven ones, even if community-level actors are not entirely powerless to resist. In this sense, relationships along a vertical axis rarely unfold on a level playing field, and actors at lower levels face real risks of being coerced or co-opted (including, as Kamatsiko notes, by their more 'powerful' international benefactors).

At the same time, if peacebuilding is increasingly conceptualised in terms of rebuilding a social contract and strengthening state–society relations, larger structural questions concerning how power is exercised, allocated and controlled cannot be divorced *from*, and indeed become central *to*, wider peacebuilding challenges. The intentional transformation of such relational orders has been theorised as levelling the playing field (Galtung 2004) by strengthening relatively weaker actors (Curle 1971) or weakening the strong (Moscovici 1980; 1985; Zeitoun 2008). Vertical integration can make critical contributions to, and in fact may be understood as, the ongoing process of intentionally rebalancing power, by strategically leveraging and/or limiting the power of higher-level actors, facilitating inclusivity and/or working iteratively towards these purposes. In this sense, vertical integration is an inherently political project.

On this point, the articles in this special issue of JPD all point to the need for deeper thinking about the role of international actors who insert themselves into evolving state–society relations in peacebuilding and development contexts. They raise important questions on this matter. Should outsiders defer to state authorities as a means of maintaining good relations (and out of respect for the principle of national ownership), notably in cases where the state, governments and even the rule of law are contested from within? Should outsiders stand up for local actors (and against state-level actors or constellations of elite interests) in the interest of levelling the playing field, even if only modestly? Above all, perhaps, given the erosion of the liberal peacebuilding consensus, which principles should guide such determinations?

Within this wider context, the emergence of the New Deal – aimed at recasting the terms of international engagement in fragile and conflict-affected states – is undoubtedly creating space for serious conversations about the roles of and relationships among national and international actors in peacebuilding, statebuilding and development. While g7+ governments (a self-described network of fragile and conflict-affected states) maintain a strong focus on what might be surmised as the power relationships around aid decision-making between themselves and Northern donors, civil societies in these countries tend to have different perspectives on power sharing and decision-making around peacebuilding and development priorities. In her briefing, *Thania Paffenholz* tackles crucial questions of inclusion and participation in the context of the New Deal, reflecting on lessons from a wider study of inclusion in political settlements.

Undoubtedly, critical discussions and innovations are occurring at the global policy level that have important ramifications for addressing power asymmetries within society and creating space for vertical integration efforts. In her briefing on gender and peacebuilding, *Sarah Douglas* argues that specific global funding targets and political mechanisms, where pursued coherently, can make substantial contributions to the transformation of violent societies. She suggests that such political and funding-related targeting produces a global ‘accountability regime’ that operates at local, national and international levels. Similarly, the inclusion of ‘Goal 16’ (on ‘peaceful and inclusive’ societies) in the *universal* post-2015 Development Framework will also establish accountability measures against which all countries, regardless of their political and economic power, in principle can be held to account. As discussed by *Andrew Tomlinson* in his briefing on movements around Goal 16, while the proposed framework does not go far enough in important areas – such as addressing the impact of the economic and security policies of the major powers – it does chart important new territory that will undoubtedly have significant impacts on the ways in which future peacebuilding efforts are prioritised, financed, and measured.

Mindful of the power of international actors and global processes, the authors in this special issue shed light on the reality that efforts to ensure vertical integration in peacebuilding processes – through, for example, bringing top-down and bottom-up dynamics into constructive conversation with one other – may generate as much conflict as they purport to resolve, at least in the short term. This points to the value of coming back to one of the fundamental lessons of the conflict sensitivity and Peace and Conflict Impact Assessment (PCIA) traditions: context matters (Bush 1998).

As stated earlier, international peace actors often fail to appreciate the power of local and national obstacles to unified, vertically integrated, notably top-down peacebuilding. As explained by Ernstorfer, Chigas and Vaughan-Lee in this issue, ‘in many contexts power dynamics play a decisive role in determining the types of interactions that are possible between local and national level efforts; these need to be understood in a context specific way.’ Ngin and Verkoren similarly highlight the complexities of contextualisation with respect to *hybrid* political systems, where postmodern ‘network’ forms of governance are pursued (as in the case of contemporary Cambodia). In such contexts, it is not so unusual to find multiple, asymmetrically powerful, vertically integrated networks operating in parallel and in competition with one another.

Perhaps conversely, local approaches to peacebuilding may not adequately recognise or account for the structural impediments to the wider catalysis of local peace processes. As Donais explains in his article on Haiti, ‘no amount of community-level peacebuilding can make a sustainable difference in the absence of broader, structural-level change in the relationship between the state and society’. At the same time, Donais (citing Belloni 2012, 32) has noted that for all the critiques of state-centric peacebuilding in recent years, the state itself remains indispensable as an instrument for enabling the political agency of citizens. What is needed are state institutions that better serve the populations they claim to represent.

Some governments may block vertical integration, maintaining national narratives that leave little space for political engagement around diverse peacebuilding concepts and discourses. This is illustrated by *Margunn Indreboe Alshaikh and Yumiko Shinya* with respect to the Sudanese case where the government has narratively sought to disassociate local-level development-related conflicts across the country from national political peace and development processes, leaving little space for meaningful linkages to be made.

A key question several authors grapple with is, what constitutes *meaningful* integration? As Paffenholz suggests, the timing, practices and politics of vertical integration are all factors that will shape results – facilitating meaningful inclusion or stifling diversity. At its worst, vertical integration may be deployed as a narrow mechanism to legitimise processes that lack widespread societal buy-in and acceptance (see also Campbell 2011). At the same time, as explained by Ngin and Verkoren, vertical integration becomes the terrain through which contested ‘regimes of truth’ will be critiqued and resisted, where ‘alternative’ peacebuilding approaches, pathways, mechanisms and discourses will be developed and deployed.

Operationalising vertical integration

The challenges and dangers of vertical integration are many, as are the benefits. Under what conditions and how then actors engaged in peacebuilding promote, support and ultimately operationalise vertical integration in reflective, informed ways? Minimum conditions for vertical integration efforts to gain traction clearly include the existence of political space and the willingness by the governments of fragile and conflict-affected states to engage. Authoritarian governments, by definition, are unlikely to offer much space or opportunity, and other methods and strategies for change may be needed.

Beyond such minimum, albeit dynamic, conditions other priorities for putting vertical integration into practice include:

- Ensuring context and conflict sensitivity is the starting point for vertically integrating peacebuilding, and rejecting the imposition of models or approaches (especially those divorced from a robust analysis of socio-economic, security, and wider political dynamics);
- Broadening and deepening the strategic lens with an eye towards more holistic engagement, bearing in mind the need for commitments and support that acknowledge the long-term nature of structural, normative, and relationship transformation;
- Engaging with stakeholders representing diverse communities at all levels, especially those capable of facilitating broad national ownership of vertical integration processes, and supporting the development of inclusive participation processes and accountability structures to maintain this;
- Developing strategy and programming rooted in clear and compelling theories of change, and links with wider peacebuilding and development strategic analyses and frameworks – national and international – to support and build linkages, both vertically and horizontally, across sectors, constituencies and efforts;
- Identifying and addressing power asymmetries and abuses that undermine transformative peacebuilding;
- Reflecting critically on appropriate roles for different actors, with particular emphasis on the ways in which international actors can move away from social engineering and towards facilitating and ‘accompanying’ roles.

As this list makes evident, taking vertical integration seriously requires commitments to engage in analytically demanding and politically sensitive practice.

In the hopes of prompting further critical reflection and action, we conclude by reiterating the merits of viewing vertical integration as a set of dynamic processes and practices

rather than as an end state. It is an inherently political project, intent on enabling the structural transformation of destructive state–society relations, while creating conditions for more inclusive and sustained peacebuilding and development.

Endnotes

¹ Lederach (1997) writes about the need to build peace from the bottom-up, top-down and middle-out, presenting his famous ‘pyramid of peacebuilding actors’ which underlies the importance of linking action at top, middle and grassroots – with the middle playing a key bridging role. In *The Moral Imagination* (2005) he writes about vertical and horizontal integration, departing from the period’s strong emphasis on formal, top-down processes of statebuilding.

² As proposed by Lederach (1997, xvi), effective peacebuilding requires establishing an infrastructure across different levels of society that empowers capacities for peace within that society and maximises external contributions. This idea has been taken up by a host of scholars and practitioners globally, and major institutions such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) are actively working to operationalise the concept.

³ As illustrated in the report by the United Nations Secretary-General on enhancing mediation and its support activities (United Nations 2009).

⁴ The OECD-DAC led this movement at the policy level. See for example, OECD-DAC (2008, 1).

⁵ Writing about the Democratic Republic of the Congo, for example, Severine Autesserre (2009) has explored how local agendas sustain national-level conflict, and how international intervention seemed either unable or unwilling to engage constructively with ‘the local’, in large part because the discursive frames used by outsiders privileged national-level actors and dynamics.

⁶ The development of ‘Second Generation DDR’ approaches reflects this (see McCandless 2009), as do discussions around non-state and competing sources of legitimacy (e.g. McCandless 2014).

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