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Introduction: reframing narratives of peace-building and state-building in Africa

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ABSTRACT

This paper introduces the Special Issue that grew out of a research project at the African Leadership Centre, which was supported by the Canadian International Centre for Development Research (IDRC). Like the underpinning research, the papers in this volume engage with two aspects of the state-building and peace-building debate and foreground the theory of “conversation” as a useful lens through which to advance the pursuit of sustainable peace in Africa. First, we challenge the dominant approach that constructs liberal state-building as an essential condition for durable peace in societies emerging from armed conflict. Second, we examine the extent to which various forms of political settlements are able to deliver sustainable peace and as a result, more peaceful and viable states. The concept of “conversation” is the thread that connects the two elements of the research. The notion of conversation reverses the conventional view of the relationship between peacebuilding and state-building while re-centring a particular dimension of political settlement. We argue that peacebuilding should be conceived as part of the *conversations* occurring along the state-building continuum in the affected societies. This shifts the traditional approach of privileging the technical over the political, power over agency, and the international over the national and local. This paper introduces the articles in this volume, which include conceptual and empirical case-studies and it discusses implications for policy and practice.

KEYWORDS

Conversation; peace-building; state-building; political settlement; Africa

Introduction

This special issue addresses two crucial elements in the debate surrounding state-building and peace-building in Africa, which were at the core of a research project undertaken at the African Leadership Centre between 2013 and 2017 supported by a grant from the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), Canada. The first element relates to the underlying narrative that surrounds the relationship between peacebuilding and state-building in Africa. Current approaches to peace and state building rely on dominant narratives that construct state-building as a prerequisite to peace. Underpinning this is the assumption that a certain type of state would produce peace. As such, interventions in societies affected by armed conflict focus on the transfer of a model of state-building that is expected to lead to peace and stability. In this research project, we noted that peace in the form construed by current interventions is not an end in itself. Rather, peacebuilding

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should be conceived as part of the *conversations* occurring in the continuum of state-building in the affected societies. Many situations of armed conflict in post-independence and post-Cold War Africa are the result of state-building conversations taking place in the specific national contexts. Those conversations might require a distinctly different solution, process, or time frame from the models offered in response by interveners.

The second element of the research project was concerned with the extent to which various forms of political settlements are able to deliver sustainable peace and by extension more peaceful and viable states. The interest in political settlements stemmed from the assumption that the way in which a war or armed conflict terminates is likely to determine the extent to which the affected post-conflict society can achieve stable peace. In this regard, the research examined two distinct contexts of armed conflict. The first consists of those situations of armed conflict where violence ended with tactical victory on the battlefield and/or the post-conflict agenda was pursued locally without massive external participation. Case studies undertaken include Ethiopia, Rwanda, and Somaliland. The second includes situations where the end of violence as well as post-conflict agenda was negotiated and facilitated by external interveners with Cote d'Ivoire, Sierra Leone, South Sudan, and Somalia serving as case studies. We envisaged that an examination of these settings might enable us to make better sense of the impact of internally and externally generated and driven peace processes, and the extent to which each helps to set the basis for long-term peace.

The notion of 'conversation' is the thread that connects the two elements of the research. We argue that much of the conflict in Africa is the result of 'conversations' about state-building, occurring in the various national contexts. The vast majority of African states are the product of many complex conversations initially between colonial elites and African peoples and societies; and in the post-independence period, between governing elites and their people. As such, when conflict escalates in the course of these state-building conversations, peace-building interventions would do well to return to the conversations that led to violence in the first place. In addition, in interrogating approaches to peace in the form of peace settlements, whether they are internally or externally negotiated or are the product of tactical victory on the battlefield, we examined the extent to which each type of settlement returned to those conversations that escalated into armed conflict and the degree to which these settlements therefore generated conversations about durable peace.

The idea of *conversation* advanced in this research is not restricted to structured, overt, and delineated verbal dialogues, discussions, or exchanges that occur between a variety of actors within society. Rather, we are particularly interested in the wider-ranging interactions among groups in society – however unstructured, unseen, inexplicit, and violent the conversations are – and their resulting signifiers. Borrowed from the conversation discourse in Europe's long eighteenth century¹ but adapted for the post-colonial African context, conversation is given the following meaning in this volume: conversation 'involves individuals, groups and entities engaging in "talking" and "talking back" about a thing or an issue, through a range of actions and inactions. Producing a recognisable or distinct narrative'.² Talking and talking back in conflict-affected societies could take forms such as music, artefacts, theatre, protests, and even violence and silence. A conversation is about peace and state-building when it overtly deals with terms on which people in a polity would live together and/or when it is about

‘institutional’ and ‘normative’ structures of peace and the state.³ These conversations can be multi-layered and inclusive of inter-elite, elite-society, and elite-outsiders. This variety of conversational forms suggests that while some conversations are more favourable for durable peace, others are less so.

Methods

The research project employed a four-part methodological approach punctuated by methodology, validation workshops, and peer review exercises. Each case study began with an initial baseline study that established existing knowledge, understanding, and interpretation of peace-building and state-building in focus countries. In the second stage, researchers prepared substantial state-of-the-art research papers surveying that which is already known about the research questions in each of the countries under study, including Cote d’Ivoire, Ethiopia, Kenya, Sierra Leone, Rwanda, South Sudan, and Somalia/Somaliland. Research conducted in this phase was library and internet-based research using written sources, supplemented if, or as, necessary, by semi-structured interviews with informed sources, or practitioners, country and regional experts, in which the conclusions drawn from the research papers were supplemented and refined to create a set of propositions regarding peace-building and state-building, and the role of political settlements. At the end of this phase, the draft baseline studies were reviewed and evaluated by the project team and peer reviewers. The refined baseline reports across the case study countries advanced propositions, which were subsequently tested in the field.

The third stage of the research was to test the propositions developed in parts one and two, through focus group research as well as in-depth interviews carried out among both elites and publics in the target countries. Each method (focus group and in-depth interview) was employed as required for the target audience. The focus group method permitted both the exploration of some of the themes and propositions emerging from the first stages of the project and, crucially, also served as a means of testing salient opinions. These were complemented in many instances by in-depth interviews, which also helped validate information obtained from various sources. All field research plans were reviewed and approved by the ALC Research Ethics Committee prior to the field studies.

The fourth stage of research saw the integration of the country’s findings with those of the focus groups and in-depth interviews to produce comparable, empirical analysis of peace-building and state-building as well as the impact of political settlements and any other factors that might emerge reflexively in the course of the research. In addition, the discussion workshops by the Working Group on Leadership and Peacebuilding included the presence of policymakers and practitioners, thus producing research that is meaningful to policy and thereby enhancing research uptake.

Contribution to scholarship

The concept of conversation adopted in this Special Issue reverses the conventional view of the relationship between peacebuilding and state-building while also re-centring a particular dimension of political settlement. By understanding peacebuilding as an integral part of the conversation occurring along the state-building

continuum, this shifts the traditional approach of ‘privileging the technical over the political, power over agency, and the international over the national and local’.⁴ Thus, it is not automatic that the starting point of state-building that ushers in durable peace will be institutions of the state from which a reordering of life occurs. Rather, it is the nature of the state-building conversation that a society has had, which explains the presence or absence of institution or their varied degrees of development. It therefore becomes vitally important to re-centre narratives, contestation, collusion, and negotiations that are occurring in a society rather than simply superimpose particular ensembles of institutions if and when those conversations become violent. As such, a key element of these conversations is the nature of the political settlement a society has. The nature of the political settlement is both determined by previous state-building conversations and at the same time, the political settlement mediates subsequent processes of state-building conversations. The need to recognise this complexity and bring in important nuances to the peace- and state-building discourse is an important contribution to this volume.

This special issue thus reveals two insightful perspectives on the role of political settlements. First, the narratives on the trajectory of state-building that emerged from contexts of armed conflict vis-à-vis normative peace and state-building intervention strategies indicate that they are disconnected. Second, an analysis of case study findings indicates that there is a degree of variation in state-building trajectories between contexts where peace-building processes involved a heavy intervention by external actors compared to those where peace-building processes have been shaped or largely led from within. The case studies present new insights on how state-building and the African state itself should be understood from a normative perspective, particularly on the evolution of the state in question and a reflection on the ways in which internal and externally driven conversations have shaped the identity of the state.

The articles

The articles in this volume include three of the country's case studies and two thematic papers that resulted from the ALC research described earlier. Each case study paper presents and discusses the evolution of the state in question and reflects on the ways in which state-building conversations around key issues have shaped that evolution. The first article, which frames the Special Issue, provides a critique of Western, template-style peace-building interventions and short-termist peace settlements, which tend to focus on power-sharing among warring elite rather than on dealing with the sources of prior conflicts. Olonisakin, Ababu Kifle, and Muteru review the state of peace-building and state-building discourse in Africa, and they introduce the notion of ‘conversation’ as a novel and meaningful mechanism to conceptualise the sometimes violent, negotiation of power that has occurred – and continues to occur – in African states (and beyond).⁵ They argue that ‘conversation’ as a concept rejects the notion that pre-intervention institutions and power structures are inherently legitimate or contain the solution to contemporary conflicts but that they must be engaged with critically in order to prevent reoccurrence of violence. The conceptual contribution of ‘conversation’ covers both sides of the formal/informal institutional setup, as well as the elite/local, emphasising the differences in conversations held, sometimes on the same issue (for example ethnicity/identity) depending on the space in which it occurs.

The second article is an analysis of post-independence Sierra Leone. Ikpe, Alao, and Kamau discuss the extent to which peace-building has returned Sierra Leonean society to earlier post-independence state-building conversations and how this has in turn shaped post-settlement state-building conversation.⁶ The authors analyse findings from field research and conclude that while addressing some of the pre-conflict issues, the focus on liberal institution-building in the post-conflict context was not sufficiently attentive to past conversations about exclusionary state-building. Some of the issues that remain at the core of state-building conversation in Sierra Leone include 'how ethnicity continues to colour the state-building project, the significance of intergroup dynamics across intergenerational exchanges and gender and the challenges of socio-economic exclusion'.

The third article on Ethiopia provides interesting insights on the evolving state-building conversations in Ethiopia and the extent to which political settlement produced a pathway for durable peace.⁷ Tadesse, Ababu-Kifle, and Desta outline the fragmented state-building conversations that led to civil war in the 1970s and 1980s and argue that the TPLF/EPRDF victory on the battlefield and defeat for other parties, side lined other conversations and competing narratives about the Ethiopian state, including its history and the place of various groups therein. The political settlement was not only exclusionary at the outset but also continued to be more so in subsequent periods. The authors argue that the post-1991 political powers partially addressed the major causes of conflict in the country but the state- and peace-building conversations remained short of what is needed for durable peace and a stable state. Subsequently, a violent and state-building conversation undermined the post-1991 political settlement and the transition towards a peace and stability. The outbreak of war in Ethiopia in November 2020 is a factor in the continuing violent and exclusionary conversation about the future direction of the Ethiopian state.

The fourth paper on Rwanda explores an overlooked perspective from Rwanda's state-building trajectory by focusing on a particular class of actors – women – whose voices also contributed to inter-elite and elite-society state-building conversations from pre-colonial times.⁸ Mwambari, Walsh, and Olonisakin examine how and why *conversible spaces* have been created in post-genocide Rwanda that are locally conceived yet given form by Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF) elites. They argue that these spaces are progressions of a long history of state-building conversations in Rwanda that predate colonialism. The paper foregrounds women's agency and contributions to state-building in Rwanda over time. It shows that while there is evidence that women's agency has evolved from covert to overt spaces, limitations to women's influence of peace-building and state-building conversations still exist particularly for those whose visions of society diverge from that of the ruling party Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF).

The fifth and final article focuses on the gendered identities and related conversations in two of the case study countries – Kenya and Rwanda. Okech uses the events that served as turning points in both countries' historical trajectories – 1994 genocide and 2007/8 post-election crisis – as the basis for a discussion on the meaning of gendered labour in post-conflict settlements and state-building.⁹ The article examines the function of discourses in the production of gendered states and how this manifests itself in particular forms of state and societal narratives. Okech argues that in paying attention to speech acts, how they travel and the institutions that validate them, we are able to trace the ways in which discourses make their way into policy positions and therefore reinscribe gender norms rather than advance from the disruption created by conflict.

Conclusion: implications for policy and practice

Despite the huge investments in liberal peacebuilding, there has been limited success in achieving durable peace in conflict-affected states in Africa. Discourses on peacebuilding that focus on policy tend to be prescriptive, focus on concepts rather than contexts, and are normatively loaded. As such, peacebuilding agendas and strategies are driven by what ought to be rather than by the contextual realities.

Two sets of conclusions from this study provide potential contribution to policy and practice. First, the underpinning research and the analysis of findings from different country case studies show that none of the models of political settlements in African conflicts offers a guarantee of durable peace. Careful interrogation of the negotiated settlements and the victory-based settlements indicate that neither is a panacea for peace and stability. As such, the critique of liberal peace-building does not necessarily suggest that a victory-based model offers a surer pathway towards peace. To be clear, future direction points towards an alternative analytical lens as well as a shift in approach to intervening in conflict-affected societies.

Second, this study proposes, at least in part, one way to alter the existing analytical lens. By viewing peacebuilding as part of the conversation occurring along the state-building continuum rather than as a separate and disconnected activity, it argues for a clear focus on both the historical and contemporary state-building conversations taking place in particular societal contexts rather than *ad hoc* technocratic peace-building products and generic models and pre-determined templates of state-building. Those intervening in conflict are well advised to examine the potential impact of state-building conversations over time in the target societies on proposed peace settlements; and how the settlements might in turn mediate those conversations. Therefore, the extent to which the society is able to collectively revisit issues at the heart of its state-building conversation might offer the potential to pursue durable peace. There is a compelling case for interveners to move beyond generic and faulty state-building models and focus on the commitment of a society to a particular collective vision of the future state.

Notes

1. Halsey and Slinn, *The concept and practice of conversation*.
2. Olonisakin et al, 'Shifting ideas of sustainable peace', 9.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Olonisakin et al, 'Shifting Ideas of Sustainable Peace.'
6. Ikpe et al., 'Beyond liberal institution (re)building.'
7. Tadesse et al., 'Evolving State Building conversations and political settlement in Ethiopia.'
8. Mwambari et al., 'Women's overlooked contribution to Rwanda's state-building conversations.'
9. Okech, 'Gender and state-building conversations.'

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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