Abstract: Recent scholarship on civil war has identified that conflict is waged on multiple levels: what if we thought about building peace in a similar, multi-level way? This article reviews three recent additions to the literature on peacebuilding and argues that in distinguishing between local and national conflict dynamics they mark a useful departure from the dominant treatment of the local in relation to 'top-down' peacebuilding. Particular attention is paid to Odendaal's thoughtful work on local peace committees and Anderson and Wallace's compelling survey of communities that chose to 'opt out' of war. By exploring situations of disjuncture, in which there is consensus for peace on either the local or national level but not both, these authors emphasise the importance of creating cross-level linkages. They also underscore the distinctive capability for peacebuilding, yet also violence and instability, that resides in the local level.

Key Words: Local peacebuilding, peace committees, micro-level analysis, NGOs

<p style="text-align:center">The New Local:
Reappraising Peacebuilding from the Grassroots</p>

Review by Kate Roll
University of Oxford

A Crucial Link: Local Peace Committees and National Peacebuilding. By Andries Odendaal. Washington DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2013. 192 pp., $16.00 paperback (ISBN-13: 978-1601271815).

Opting Out of War: Strategies to Prevent Violent Conflict*.* By Mary B. Anderson and Marshall Wallace. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2013. 193 pp., $18.95 paperback (ISBN-13: 978-1588268778).

Peacebuilding through Community Based NGOs: Paradoxes and Possibilities. By Max Stephenson Jr. and Laura Zanotti. Sterling, VA: Kumarian Press, 2012. 98 pp., $19.95 paperback (ISBN: 978-1565494268).

Over the last decade, considerable attention has been paid to the limitations of top-down approaches to post-conflict reconstruction. Top-down efforts have been identified as dis-embedded – even supercilious – and ultimately ineffectual, resulting in processes with limited support or relevance outside the accommodating halls of power (see Chopra 2000). As a result, institutions including the World Bank and OECD now call for 'local ownership' of peace processes and post-conflict state-building efforts. Indeed, appeals to the local have now become such a fixture of the peacebuilding discourse to attract critical attention. For example, Richmond has identified the problem of romanticising the local and the engagement of civil society to validate prescribed models and bypass state institutions (2009, 2011; see also Donais 2009). There has also been the rise of 'Astroturf,' poorly embedded NGOs that meet the growing demand for 'grassroots' partners. However, despite these caveats and complications, scholars continue to emphasise that for peacebuilding to work, local matters.

So why then do we need more studies of local approaches to peacebuilding? What can these three slim volumes add? Thankfully for readers, the answer is much. Charting new ground, Odendaal's *A Crucial Link* and Anderson and Wallace's *Opting Out of War* arrive at the importance of the local not through an inquiry into how to make top-down peacebuilding stick or critiques of liberal peacebuilding (although the authors would likely agree), but, instead, from an organic, grounded understanding of conflict as existing across both national and local levels. Odendaal focuses on local peace committees (LPCs), identifying their potentially pivotal role as open forums in building linkages between local actors as well connecting to national level processes and resources. *Opting Out* introduces a compelling set of cases describing communities that disengaged from conflict, raising fascinating questions regarding local capacities for peace as well as the drivers of mobilisation. *Peacebuilding through Community-Based NGOs* takes on the important subject of local NGOs' roles in peacebuilding, examining three organisations in detail.

Outside of the peacebuilding literature, the recognition that conflict is not uniform and that local conflicts may diverge from national cleavages has been articulated most clearly by Autesserre (2009, 2014) and Kalyvas (2003, 2006). In taking a micro-level

approach to conflict analysis, these authors reject the notion that the divisions characterising supranational conflicts are simply reproduced in local conflicts. Rather, civil wars are "imperfect, multilayered, and fluid" (Kalyvas 2006:371) and mobilisation relies on alliances between local and supra-local levels. A focus on national conflicts and cleavages may obscure analysis of local power struggles or factionalization tied to local histories and political economies. It thus follows that conflict resolution at the supra-local or national level cannot be assumed to create peace at the local level – and vice verso. Illustrating the utility of distinguishing between levels for understanding peacebuilding, Odendaal provides a two-by-two table illustrating four scenarios in which local and national actors either accept or reject peace settlements. His volume focuses on the scenario in which a national agreement exists yet local actors do not accept the agreement and cease hostilities. In these cases, micro-level politics, local antagonisms, internal rifts within parties, and other conditions prevent the immediate realisation of national agreements at the grassroots. How can these rifts be resolved?

In his focused and candid volume, which is rooted in the author's experience as a practitioner, Odendaal argues that LPCs have a key role to play in consolidating peace at the local level. His goal is to explore the theory behind the LPC model as well as to outline a pragmatic set of best practices, taking into consideration questions such as who should be involved (*all affected parties*) and who should chair the LPC (*not a politician*). The book begins with a useful overview of the concepts behind LPCs and the challenges of local level peacebuilding and then moves on to consider LPCs' relations to peace infrastructures, how they function, relationships to supra-local processes, as well as their roles in social reconstruction and violence prevention. These issues are explored with striking examples from his own work in South Africa, as well as from LPCs in Northern Ireland, Nepal, Kenya, Nicaragua, and Ghana, among others.

Odendaal's definition of a LPC as an "inclusive forum operating at the subnational level…that provides a platform for the collective local leadership to accept joint responsibility for building peace in that community" (p. 6) underscores the volume's overall emphasis on LPCs as spaces for dialogue. By facilitating coordination, information sharing, and conflict resolution, they can de-escalate potential conflicts. Turning assumptions about the impotence of LPCs on their head, Odendaal finds LPCs' "lack of teeth" or coercive powers as a benefit, preventing these forums from becoming the sites of high-stakes political battles. As he cogently observes, "[w]hat these critics do not answer is where the teeth should come from and who should be fitted with then to do the biting" (p. 47). It thus becomes an advantage of LPCs that their work relies on consensus building; building social cohesion is thus the objective and the method. Emphasising the idea of linkages indicated in the title, the power of LPCs is to create horizontal, cross-constituent and vertical, local-to-national links rather than to exercise coercive force. This model recalls important scholarship on conflict structures and mobilisation, including both Kalyvas's (2006) work on vertical alliances and Stewart's (2000) focus on local horizontal inequalities.

A Crucial Link is at its best in well-crafted descriptions of successful interventions. Odendaal's example of interactions between untrusting publics and the police in Northern Ireland and South Africa were particularly powerful. In these contexts, the police "were no longer available as a mechanism to assert authority in matters that had political meaning…The mere sight of the police was often the trigger for violent behaviour" (p. 49). Odendaal illustrates how through dialogue and coordination, LPCs were able to help building trust between communities and the police. Creating these vertical linkages, LPCs in Northern Ireland made strides in 'restoring the confidence of a community in the legitimacy of the state and its institutions' (p. 4). In

these situations, LPCs become important sites of bottom-up peacebuilding. This view of peace- and state building is dynamic and grounded, and looks at the micro-foundations of state legitimacy, authority, and the social contract. This view of state-building is remote from top-down perspectives that focus on institutional reach and coercive power. The relevance of these examples, which encouragingly point to how relationships between the state and citizens can be rebuilt, is not lost in light of recent conflagrations over police shootings and problems of systemic racism in the United States.

Returning to Odendaal's two-by-two table delinking local and national acceptance of peace agreements, Anderson and Wallace's engaging and approachable volume addresses the fascinating, complementary scenario in which there is a lack of a national peace agreement, yet local actors seek their own peace. *Opting Out of War* takes a case-driven, micro-level perspective to study communities that have successfully resisted entering civil wars, thereby highlighting the non-uniform nature of conflict and conflict resolution. The volume is divided into two parts, with the first examining the key strategies used by non-war communities to resist entry into the conflict, and the second part composed of five chapters devoted to cases, namely communities in Afghanistan, Bosnia, Colombia, Mozambique, and Rwanda. Reflecting Anderson's work with the Listening Project and grounded evaluations of international interventions, the volume lets the cases largely speak for themselves; the authors describe similarities across cases but deliberately resist identifying a singular model or formula.

A striking conclusion of their analysis is that these exceptional communities have few, *prima facie*, exceptional characteristics. Their leaders are not particularly charismatic or ideological; these communities are not particularly 'under the radar' or geographically isolated; their governance structures are autochthonous and, in most cases, operate independently of international organisations. Instead, Anderson and Wallace argue that a dual realisation, early in the conflict, differentiates these communities: *war is coming, we do not have to fight*. The pivotal nature of these realisations, and their painful rarity, also serves as a reminder that fear, disbelief, and head-in-the-sand thinking is the norm amongst civilians at the onset of conflict. Non-war communities work deliberately to stay out of conflict through a largely pragmatic commitment to maintaining normal life. In contrast to international calls for human rights training, international support, power-sharing arrangements, and community transformation to prevent conflict, these non-war approaches come across as radical in their conservatism. Indeed, many communities turned inward and sought stability in established practices and identities in the face of immense disruption and violence.

Opting Out of War presents six 'characteristics' of a non-war community. These include the deliberate decision to opt out of war, the adoption of a recognised non-war identity, the effort to maintain normal life, effective internal dispute resolution, engagement with conflict actors, and the continuation of community life through celebrations and sporting events. The adoption of an identity that supersedes conflict cleavages is particularly interesting. As one informant described regarding the Muslim community's non-participation in the Rwandan genocide: "it was not our war" (p. 167). These, however, may more accurately be considered strategies. They describe *how* a community established a non-war stance, but not necessarily *why* they were able to. For example, to state that a community did not opt out of war because members failed to decide to do so sheds little light on the conditions that make such consensus or decisions possible. A set of hypotheses regarding the emergence or non-emergence of these communities remains beyond the reach of the volume.

As with Odendaal's focus on the role of LPCs to build horizontal and vertical linkages, Anderson and Wallace also address the topic of linkages between supra-local and local levels. These linkages are important not only for understanding mobilisation but also for appraising the spill over effects of these local non-war efforts on national or supra-local peacebuilding; indeed, if local communities are able to 'opt out of war' can they hold promise for creating peace at the national level? Unfortunately, however, Anderson and Wallace find few linkages between non-war communities and national processes, with the Rwandan case as an exception (p. 171). This finding is consistent with the overall story of these communities as inward focused and pragmatic rather than overtly political. The characteristics that make these communities able to resist entering the conflict may also make them less influential on the national stage. This observation is consistent with Anderson's extensive work on local peacebuilding and the relationship of "peace writ small" to 'peace writ large' (for summary see Ernstorfer et al. 2015).

Overall, the significance of Anderson and Wallace's case analysis may be found in how it surfaces questions about the nature of conflict and mobilisation. Indeed, it addresses the consummate question of conflict studies – why do people fight? – through a novel route: what does it take for people *not* to fight? In shifting focus to areas of resistance within conflict, the authors encourage consideration of all types of non-war communities and what scope exists for 'opting out' – can norms around the non-participation of women and children in conflict be approached in similar terms? Less convincingly, the authors lean heavily on the claims that open the book regarding mobilisation: most people want to avoid war and it comes at a high cost (p. 2). The forces that drive conflict, including conflict entrepreneurs and conflict actors, are portrayed as primarily external to or above local communities. Yet as Kalyvas emphasises, civil wars requiring alliances between local and supra-local actors. More consideration of incentives for local actors and conflict entrepreneurs to engage in civil conflicts and mobilise local networks, and how these were addressed, would have added to this analysis. Anderson and Wallace acknowledge that many questions regarding non-mobilisation remain unresolved, noting that the "economic and reputational reasons cited regularly by many people in the non-war communities do not tell the entire story" (p. 23).

The final volume of this group is Stephenson and Zanotti's *Peacebuilding Through Community-based NGOs*, which draws attention to the role of NGOs in peacebuilding processes. The book sets out to explore "whether, how and in what circumstances" NGOs "shape the possibilities for social and political change" (p. 1). The first chapter discusses the roles of NGOs in liberal peacebuilding, particularly the rise of NGOs as an alternative to the state (p. 11). This is then followed by three case studies: Partners in Health (USA/Haiti), Women in Black (Serbia), and the Community Foundation (Northern Ireland). The authors argue that successful NGOs are embedded in the local context, financially independent, self-reflexive, and focus on local ideas of peace. In describing these characteristics, the authors seek to push back against homogenising "critical dismissals of NGOs as carriers of imperial agendas as well as romantic appraisals of their work" (p. 2). This focus on legitimacy and local ownership are in line with the both Odendaal's and Anderson and Wallace's attention to the need for sub-national understandings of conflict and horizontal, grassroots engagement.

While these characteristics of effective NGOs appear reasonable – again, what international organisation or development actor does not now at least pay lip service to grassroots peacebuilding? – the case selection inhibits the effective presentation of evidence. The examples are diverse, which makes drawing clear comparisons between the cases more difficult. Indeed, the case criteria appear mutable; while the

putative focus of the volume is on community-based NGOs, Partners in Health (PiH) is an international organisation. The analysis can also be inconsistent. For example, the authors critically explore the adoption of international, feminist ideas by Women in Black, and describe the resultant discord with local understandings. However, the same treatment is not given of PiH, which, presumably, also carries with it ideas of wellness rooted in the Northern biomedical model. Inadvertently, the authors illustrate the anti-politics of such development interventions; is it reasonable to approach PiH as less political than Women in Black? As a result, the cases may be best read discretely, as they do engage important, yet diverse issues. Topics touched upon by the cases, and meriting fuller consideration, range from international norm entrepreneurship to how NGOs coordinate with state actors.

In raising questions about the engagement of NGOs in peacebuilding processes and concerns with how ties to international donors, for example, affect their perceived legitimacy, Stephenson and Zanotti usefully complicate prescriptions for international involvement. The other two volumes share this concern. Taken together, these works note that top down approaches to peacebuilding fail to recognise the importance of the local actors, local conflicts, and native capacities. Going further, they each also raise concerns that the very involvement of international actors may hinder local conflict-resolution efforts. As Odendaal describes, international actors "determine local processes through the imposition of their agendas, ideas, and, most crucially, their funding. In so doing, they undermine, albeit unwittingly, local ownership – the one indispensible condition for successful local peacebuilding" (p. 78). Recognising the importance of the local, each volume touches on this essential paradox: how can practitioners strengthen local community capacity if international interventions can endanger the legitimacy of these processes?

A starting place for addressing this issue is renewed attention to micro-level analysis and "a decolonisation of knowledge about peace making" (Mac Ginty and Richmond 2013:765). Views of communities as powerless and conflict as uniform reinforce framings of conflict areas as devastated (institutionally, politically, economically, culturally). These communities become blank slates upon which to inscribe new institutions or to peddle new tools, norms, or social businesses. By contrast, a focus on local level dynamics as distinct from supra-local conflict brings local actors and their agency into focus. In localising conflict and peace dynamics, emphasis is placed on local capacity to opt out and, concomitantly, to opt in. An immediate consequence of focusing on local-level dynamics may be to recognise the limitations of international involvement, an unfamiliar conclusion in literature so often focused on how international actors can best solve the problems of post-conflict states.

International actors are currently aware of the need for local partners in peacebuilding for legitimising their programmes and improving their impact. The language is of local partnerships and grassroots coordination; it is of participation. And scholarship on local peacebuilding has circled these waters for the last decade, repeatedly contrasting bottom-up and top-down approaches to the amorphous yet pre-defined goal of peace or peacebuilding. It is high time to think of the local in a new way, and these volumes refreshingly come to the local by looking at how conflict *works* – an approach that may serve both practitioners and critical scholars alike. The new local is is not just about ownership of a peace process, but rather authorship of both security and violence. Local conflict dynamics are heterogeneous and both linked to and, equally importantly, at times independent of, national-level conflicts; so too should be peacebuilding.

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