

Redefining the 'Local' in Security and Development

American General Chris Cavoli once said about projects in Afghanistan, “you can drill a well in a day, and build a school in a month...but it takes a long, long time to build a road. When you start a road, you send a message that it’s for the long haul”. It was an early reference, a signal, of the paradigm shift within contemporary conflict and peacebuilding work.

Whereas the nation state long served as the modern unit of analysis in security discourse, the ‘local’ was traditionally perceived as static, often rural, and waiting to be developed. But interstate wars once fought on distant battlefields have evolved into (predominately) intrastate conflicts waged in city streets and rural villages. In a world where time and distance are increasingly compressed, interpretations of peacebuilding and development as processes marked by a clear divide between the ‘international’ and the ‘local’ prove limiting.

Failures in Iraq and Afghanistan demand a new lens that appreciates the complexity of modern conflict and emphasizes human security, social forces and non-state actors in analysis. In addition to needing to develop longer-term partnerships within civil society, security practitioners are challenged to implement initiatives that are grounded in context and appreciate the political, mutually constitutive relationship between space and place. Where space is a physical entity, place is its relational layer, predicated on experience and thus transcending territory. One of the greatest difficulties, it follows, is determining how-and-what it means to secure a shifting locale. Approaches to de-territorialized conflict and peacebuilding are not found in security’s traditional playbook.

As an urban planner, my approach to ‘peacebuilding’ is equal parts conceptual and literal. I practice at the intersection of security and urbanization, working to develop and orient the building blocks of a safe and resilient community. Adopting a system-view, a networked understanding of ‘local’ conflict is central to my work, and I continue to reflect on how redefining ‘security’ parallels the expansion of questions and considerations in broader development work. Addressing how societies repair and reimagine themselves is invariably complex and spans competing scales and timelines. The aggregate layers of reward and grievance that propel conflict equally complicate its wake. In planning, the task becomes designing a built environment that positively reshapes dynamics of power in place; to create spaces that help undermine mechanisms of violence and facilitate community resilience.

It’s a lofty task, and it’s admittedly idealistic to position a well-designed built environment as the keystone to safe communities. To be clear, there are no ‘silver bullets’ in peacebuilding and development work. That said, the process of interrogating place, of closely examining *how* power maps in a community, can yield meaningful *and actionable* insights.

For example, let’s consider why rates of urbanization might correlate with community violence in the Global South. In many developing cities, the service-strain of rapid urbanization was compounded by Modernist planning principles – the once popular pursuit of an ‘efficient’ city form that prescribed separating uses (ex. developing a productive urban core and residential suburban). The spatial segregation intrinsic to these planning principles precipitated intracity inequalities and structures of

violence as spatial segregation begets political, social, and economic segregation. Coupled, at best, with the Neoliberalist rollback of state services and, at worst, the targeted underservicing of specific populations, these isolated enclaves presented vacuums of power readily filled and governed by illiberal actors operating as employers and goods and service providers.

In response, planning initiatives that increased urban mobility, reconnecting and securing 'local' capital flows, have proven remarkably successful. For example, Medellín, Colombia, once the 'murder capital of the world', now offers a cable car system that connects the previously (more) dangerous hillside settlements with the city center. Complemented by peer-based infrastructures (ride-sharing platforms etc.), the improvements to Medellín's transportation network expanded residents' access to social and economic opportunities and subverted those mechanisms of oppression and violence that relied on spatial isolation.

When approaching networked conflict in a shifting locale, the lesson for both security and development discourse is this: de-territorializing the 'local' is an important but beginning step; valuable insight lies another step beyond. Understanding conflict and approaching peace, reconstruction, and reconciliation requires critical observation of *how* activity relates to space – not simply that it *does*. As 'territory' is redefined, so too are communities redefining themselves relative to it, and thinking of the 'local' as a location encourages thinking in static terms. Rather, the 'local' is a verb and requires re-conception as relationships, activity, and networks. Good interventions should heighten connection over time and transcend traps of scale to navigate aggregate histories and their incentive systems. And it's that pursuit of building a road, or sometimes a cable car, that really brings peacebuilding into four dimensions.