

Strategic Peacebuilding: State of the Field

Lisa Schirch

Abstract

What is peacebuilding? Is it post-war economic development, relationship building, or any project aimed at social change? Terminological confusion negatively impacts how the field is understood and funded. It makes it hard for funders or policymakers to know what they are supporting. It makes it difficult for practitioners to collaborate on peacebuilding projects when people bring different expectations about what the scope of peacebuilding includes. “Mission creep” may occur as groups with imprecise definitions of peacebuilding move from one task to another without conscious choice. Achieving clarity on the different definitions – and the implications of those definitions – of peacebuilding is a first step in preventing these problems.

Author Profile

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Introduction

What does peacebuilding look like? Is it high-level diplomats working out a regional plan for addressing the conflict in Iraq? Is it civil society organizations bringing religious leaders together to dialogue in Nigeria? Or women's groups working together across the lines of conflict in Israel and Palestine to deliver humanitarian aid to families in Gaza? Peacebuilding is all of this, and much more.

The questions related to peacebuilding are debated among policymakers in many places around the world, and they relate to a more general set of questions. Is conflict something to be managed, mitigated, negotiated, mediated, resolved, prevented or transformed? Is peace something to be kept, made or built? The creation and evolution of a language to talk about conflict, violence and peace is not unlike the struggle in any other field or discipline. As one scholar put it, the term peacebuilding is in its "etymological adolescence" - it is "gangly and undefined."¹ In the early stages of the exploration of an idea, scholars and practitioners in separate locations develop different ways of talking about the same thing. As the field grows, they begin to bump into each other, identify similarities and differences in their approaches, and hopefully, a consensus of terms begins to emerge.

This paper explores the terminological challenges in the broad field of peacebuilding, the term that is emerging as the umbrella term for all the other approaches to address conflict, violence and peace.² The field of peacebuilding did not originate out of a central place. Rather, the work of peacebuilding took root in different cultures around the world. It is not surprising then, that peacebuilding practitioners have developed different terminology. Some use the term "peacebuilding" to refer to post-conflict work. Others use it as an umbrella term for all work geared toward social change at all levels of society and in all stages of conflict. There is an increasing sense of confusion about the terminology or language in the field of peacebuilding, and these challenges impact coordination efforts.

Peacebuilding Terminology

Peacebuilding is most often used as an "umbrella term" or "meta-term" to encompass other terms such as conflict resolution, management, mitigation, prevention, or

¹ Robert Miller, "Governance and Peacebuilding: Second Annual Peacebuilding Consultations", *Foreign Affairs Canada* (September 30, 2004)

http://www.humansecurity.gc.ca/canadiens_consultations_secondannual_governance-en.asp

² In choosing the title of this paper, I am also revealing my own preferences based on my own practice and scholarship. In researching the topic of terminology, I refrained from using any terms when possible. At some point, it becomes impossible to even have the conversation of terminology if we do not take a stand to describe what terminology we are describing!

transformation.³ It is preferred by those who want a focus on the larger goals of peace and security rather than on the problem of conflict. Conflict-related terms focus on the negative and they label whole regions by their experience of conflict rather than their capacity for peace. There is also confusion about how to spell peacebuilding: is it peace building, peace-building, or peacebuilding?

The term “conflict resolution” is useful when communicating to the general public, and to funders who generally understand this term. Yet there are a variety of problems with the term “conflict resolution.” First, many believe it implies too much finality. Conflicts rarely end neatly. Is the conflict in Serbia over? Or has it transformed, changed in the way that it is expressed?

A second, related concern is that the term de-legitimizes nonviolent forms of resistance and struggle, making the problem “conflict” and not violence, thus inherently supporting status quo structures of power. Many equate the term “conflict resolution” with Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) and think of local, community applications in schools, divorce, and business settings. These connotations may limit the utility of the term “conflict resolution” to also communicate about more complex, multi-level efforts in violent contexts.

The term “conflict transformation” on the other hand communicates that conflict is indeed transformed rather than managed or resolved. Yet it is unclear exactly which way transformation is happening and what is being transformed. The conflict between Sunnis and Shias in Iraq has transformed over the last five years, but many would say that transformation has not been a positive trend. The term “conflict mitigation” is used by some government agencies. Some critique this term as referring to efforts that make conflict less painful, rather than address its root causes.

The term “conflict prevention” refers to efforts to build peace proactively, to prevent violent conflict. Since the field of peacebuilding teaches that conflict is normal and can be a positive opportunity for bringing about needed changes, if handled constructively, some note that it is violence, not conflict that should be prevented. A US war with Iran should be prevented. Conflict between Tibet and China, however, may bring about the transformation of a relationship that is burdened with injustice.

Some groups prefer to use the term “coexistence” or “reconciliation” for a fresher approach with clearer connotations of peacebuilding efforts to improve inter-group relations. Yet even these terms have been subverted by several governments who have used them to accompany superficial efforts that do not address crucial judicial or economic dimensions of conflict. In some areas of the world, the terms “reconciliation”

³ Peacebuilding is also used interchangeably by groups that use terms such as peace practice; collaborative decision-making; dispute resolution system design; Track Two, Multi-Track or Unofficial Diplomacy; community cultural development; conflict intervention; mediation; negotiation; or psycho-political dialogue.

and “coexistence” are losing credibility. In Fiji, for example, the government’s reconciliation programs all but justify the continued exclusion of the non-indigenous half of the population from participating fully in the Fijian government.

The Multiple Meanings of Peacebuilding

To add to the terminological confusion, not only do similar terms refer to similar if not identical processes, but the word peacebuilding is defined and used in different ways. The chart below and the pages that follow explain a range of differences in meanings of the term “peacebuilding.”⁴ However, many of the different uses of this term also equally apply to other terms that are used as “umbrella terminology” such as conflict resolution, management or prevention.

← Spectrums of Meaning in Peacebuilding Terminology →	
Focus on post-conflict time span	Focus on all stages of conflict
Narrow focus on specific kinds of activities	Wide focus on a range of activities including peacekeeping, human rights monitoring, mediation, development, education, governance, etc.
Immediate focus on ending direct violence	Long-term focus on addressing root causes of violence, including structural injustices
Outcome-oriented focus on solutions	Process-oriented focus on transformation
Focus on the role of outside experts “intervening” in local conflicts	Focus on the role of insiders and increasing their capacity for building peace
Focus on high level national and international interventions	Focus on all levels of interventions, from the community, regional, and national levels
Focus on military peace operations	Focus on non-military approaches to building peace and security

What Focus?

A third and related challenge is whether the term peacebuilding refers to ending direct violence or whether it addresses structural violence. The debate continues on whether the mission of peacebuilding becomes too large, too difficult to evaluate, and too unrealistic if it aims at the latter. The United Nations, given its own limited resources, mandates and power, has been hesitant to use the term peacebuilding to refer to efforts to address structural violence. Governments also worry about “mission creep” or the

⁴ For two other conceptual frameworks for categorizing peacebuilding terminology, see Charles T. Call and Susan E. Cook “On Democratization and Peacebuilding” in *Global Governance* 9.2 (April-June 2003), pp. 233-246, and Bronwyn Evans-Kent, “Reconstruction over Transformation: The Structural Appropriation of Peacebuilding” at www.isanet.org/noarchive/evanskent.html.

evolution of objectives that happens in places like Iraq, where the U.S. military has shifted its stated mission several times, from removing Saddam Hussein to eliminating weapons of mass destruction, to developing an Iraqi constitution, to holding democratic elections, to reconciling religious groups in Iraq. When the U.N. or governments do not have a concrete goal, such as achieving a signed peace agreement, it becomes difficult to assess when they can appropriately leave the context and transfer authority to local leaders.

Others insist that the term peacebuilding must also include efforts to address the root causes of violent conflict. The Carnegie Endowment's Commission on the Prevention of Deadly Conflict defined peacebuilding as "structural prevention" which consists of the strategies to address the root causes of deadly conflict.⁵ Likewise, the Joint Utstein study of peacebuilding concludes that "peacebuilding attempts to encourage the development of the structural conditions, attitudes, and modes of political behavior that may permit peaceful, stable and ultimately prosperous social and economic development." It states that there are four main headings related to peacebuilding: to provide security, to establish the socioeconomic foundations of long-term peace, to establish the political framework of long-term peace, and to generate reconciliation, a healing of the wounds of war and justice.⁶

The Institute for Multi-Track Diplomacy argues that there are three broad types of peacebuilding:

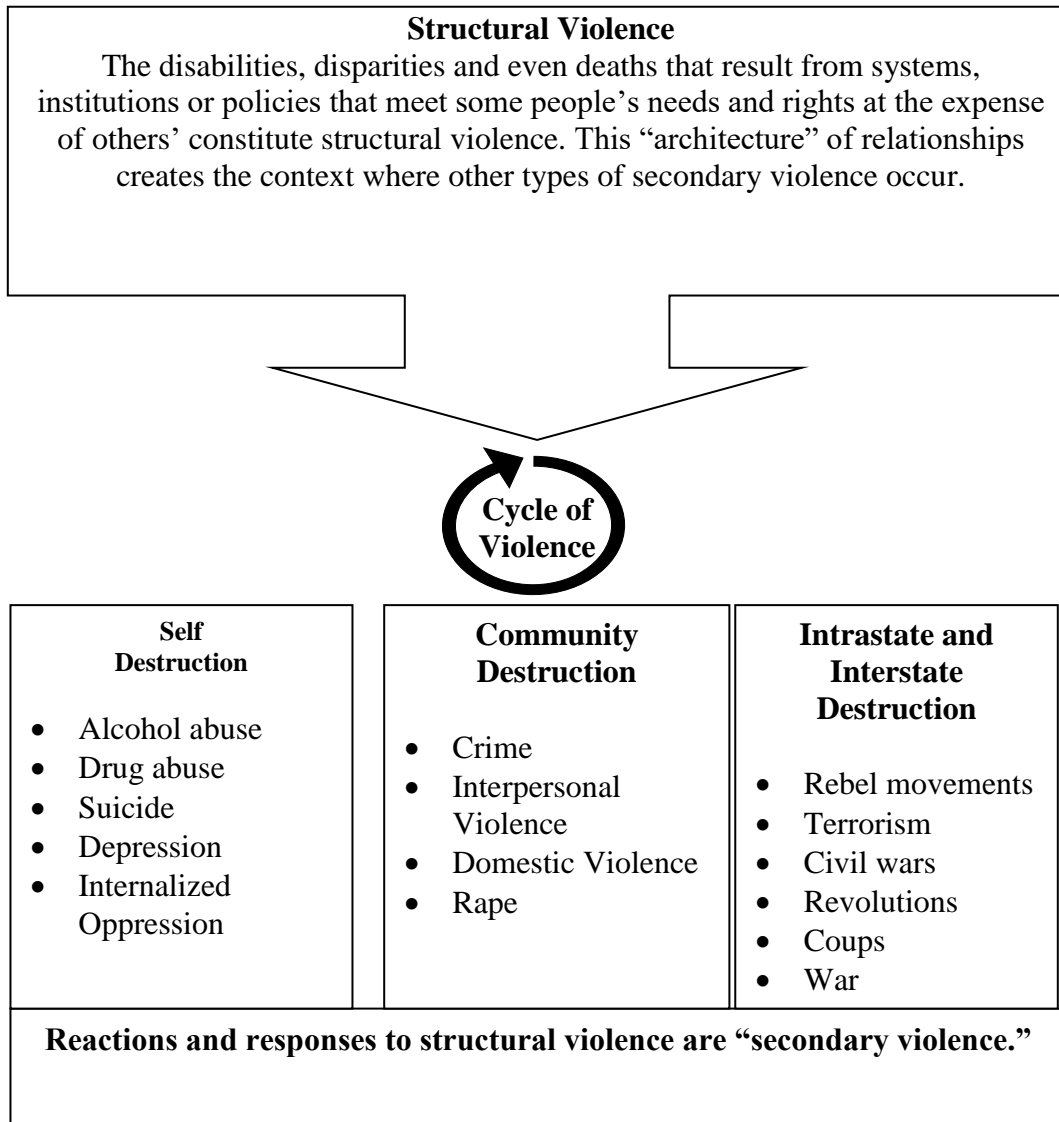
- a. *Political peacebuilding* is about agreement and legal issues, and includes formal negotiations, diplomacy, etc.
- b. *Structural peacebuilding* is about infrastructures and includes building economic, military, social and cultural systems that support a culture of peace through activities such as voter education, disarming warring parties, police training, building schools, and good governance.
- c. *Social peacebuilding* is about relationships and includes dealing with feelings, attitudes, opinions, beliefs, and values through dialogue processes, community-building activities and training.⁷

⁵ The Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict, *Preventing Deadly Conflict* (Washington, DC: The Commission, 1997)

⁶ Dan Smith, *Getting Their Act Together: Towards a Strategic Framework for Peacebuilding* (Oslo: International Peace Research Institute, April 2003)

⁷ John McDonald, *Institute for Multi-Track Diplomacy*, <http://imtd.org/cgi-bin/imtd.cgi>

Figure 1



Likewise, Australian scholar Kevin Clements argues that peacebuilding is “as much about unmasking the powerful, and equalizing unequal relationships as it is about solving present problems... it puts the emphasis on justice and fairness rather than on preserving harmony and political order.”⁸

Peacebuilding seeks to prevent, reduce, transform, and help people recover from violence in all forms, even structural violence that has not yet led to massive civil unrest. Latin American civil society analysts distinguish structural violence from secondary violence. They looked at rebel movements across the South American

⁸ Kevin Clements, “Towards Conflict Transformation and a Just Peace”, *Berghof Handbook for Conflict Transformation* (Berlin: Berghof Research Center for Constructive Conflict Management, 2004) www.berghof-handbook.net

continent as responses to the oppressive dictatorships in many countries in the 1970s, '80s, and '90s. While Western governments such as the US saw rebel movements as "terrorists," democratic movements in many Latin American countries instead viewed their own dictatorial governments as the root of the violence.

Structural and secondary forms of violence are cyclical. Structural violence refers to the disabilities, disparities, and even deaths that result when systems, institutions, or policies meet some people's needs and rights at the expense of others'. Structures that foster disparity and satisfy the needs of people from one ethnic, religious, class, age, language, or gender group at the expense of others propagate violence. Many states are unable to provide an environment where people can meet their basic needs. Societies that permit or encourage economic and social disparity, exclude some groups from full participation in decision-making and public life, or direct harm toward some people, suffer more from all forms of violence, both public and private.

Different forms of violence spread like a virus. When public structures are violent, they infect entire cultures. Disparities in income and wealth between the rich and the poor are the most powerful predictors of homicide rates in any city, state, or country. Structural violence is statistically linked to higher levels of secondary violence, which includes civil wars, terrorism, crime, domestic violence, substance abuse, and suicide.⁹ The diagram above illustrates the cyclical connection between structural violence and the three main forms of secondary violence that result from it.

What types of programs?

A second debate revolves around what types of activities peacebuilding includes. As noted above, for some scholars, peacebuilding is routinely used to refer to specific activities such as democratization efforts, reconstruction of infrastructure, and reintegration of soldiers in the post-war context.¹⁰ Others use the term peacebuilding without a specific timeframe, yet with a limited scope in a way that closely links it to development work. Whaley and Piazza-Georgi, for example, define it this way: "Peacebuilding, although it is not synonymous with development, is in practice very closely identifiable with development" using the same critical elements, such as "building up local capacities, strengthening civil society, restoring essential infrastructure and commercial relations."¹¹

Some use peacebuilding interchangeably with conflict prevention, conflict mitigation, conflict resolution, or conflict transformation. Some use peacebuilding to refer to community-level or "Track Two" relationship-building processes such as negotiation, mediation, dialogue, or to describe the emotional or psychological dimensions of work

⁹ James Gilligan, *Preventing Violence* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2001), p. 39.

¹⁰ For analyses of U.N. peacebuilding efforts, see Elizabeth Cousens and Chetan Kumar, *Peacebuilding as Politics* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2000)

¹¹ J. David Whaley and Barbara Piazza-Georgi, "The Link between Peacekeeping and Peacebuilding", *Conflict Management, Peacekeeping and Peacebuilding: Monograph No. 10* (South Africa: United Nations Development Program, April 1997)

with people in conflict. In an early version of the definition of peacebuilding posted on the website www.beyondintractability.org, peacebuilding is defined as “the process of restoring normal relations between people. It requires the reconciliation of differences, the apology and forgiveness of past harm, and the establishment of a cooperative relationship between groups, replacing the adversarial or competitive relationship that used to exist.”¹² This definition built on several experts’ focus on the relational dimensions of peacebuilding.

Many groups now use peacebuilding as an umbrella term for many different activities that nonviolently prevent, limit, resolve, or transform conflict, and create peaceful and just societies. It centers on relationship-building processes, but is not limited by them. It includes diverse activities that may intensify conflict in the short-term through the use of activism, and may separate the groups in conflict through the use of peacekeeping.

Strategic peacebuilding recognizes the complexity of the tasks required to build peace. Peacebuilding is strategic when resources, actors, and approaches are coordinated to accomplish multiple goals and address multiple issues for the long-term. A strategic peacebuilding approach in Sri Lanka, for example, would include international actors playing mediating roles and monitoring human rights; local religious leaders, media, and academics engaging in dialogue across the lines of conflict; humanitarian workers integrating reconciliation into their community development programs; and school teachers integrating peace education into school curriculum.

Peacebuilding requires a range of approaches. While many actors engage in multiple categories of peacebuilding, the map (Figure 2) highlights the unique goals of different approaches to or categories of peacebuilding. Peacebuilding is a process of building relationships and institutions that support the peaceful transformation of conflict.

Advocating for Change: Advocates and activists seek to gain support for change by increasing a group’s power to address issues, and ripen the conditions needed to transform relationships.

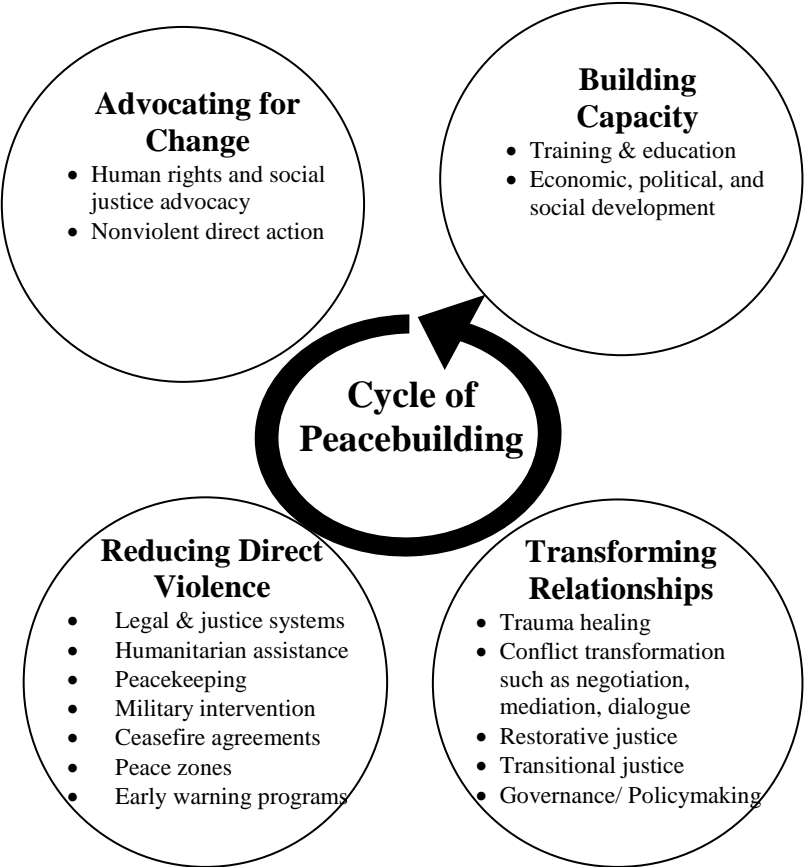
Reducing Direct Violence: Intervenors seek to reduce direct violence by restraining perpetrators of violence, relieving the immediate suffering of victims of violence, and creating a safe space for peacebuilding activities in other categories that address the root causes of the violence.

Transforming Relationships: Intervenors aim to transform destructive relationships with an array of processes that address trauma, transform conflict and restore a sense of justice. These processes give people opportunities to create long-term, sustainable solutions to address their needs.

¹² International Online Training Program on Intractable Conflict, “Glossary”, *Conflict Research Consortium* (Boulder: University of Colorado, October 1, 2004) www.colorado.edu/conflict/peace/glossary.htm

Capacity Building: Longer-term peacebuilding efforts enhance existing capacities to meet needs and rights and prevent violence. These activities aim to build just structures that support a sustainable culture of peace.

Figure 2



Intention and Outcome

The international development organization CARE conducted its own study of peacebuilding terminology. Author Colleen Malone argues that peacebuilding activities must be done with *intention*. In other words, distributing seed packs to villagers can help create economic stability and contribute to peace. But seed packs are considered part of peacebuilding only when those development agencies involved clearly intend for the activity to contribute to peace.

Peacebuilding activities must be planned strategically, implemented by a skilled staff, and held to standards of monitoring and evaluation.¹³ There is an important difference between programs whose principal objective is to facilitate peacebuilding, and programs which may indirectly produce similar results. Other organizations argue that peacebuilding activities are defined by their outcome, whether or not they contribute in some measurable way to building peace. Identifying achievable indicators for measuring the outcomes of peacebuilding processes is essential in determining whether the gap between “intent” and “impact” is large or small.

What Time Frame?

Post Conflict vs. All Stages of Conflict

When former UN Secretary General Boutros Boutros Ghali defined peacebuilding in his well-known *Agenda for Peace*, he put the term alongside “preventive diplomacy,” “peacekeeping,” and “peacemaking,” and relegated peacebuilding to the post-conflict phase of UN activities.¹⁴ Yet within the NGO world in the 1990s, peacebuilding began to be used as an umbrella term to cover the wide range of activities at all stages of a conflict.

In the post-conflict perspective, peacebuilding is what happens after peace agreements are signed in a particular conflict; after the fighting stops. It includes reconstruction, nation-building, demobilization and other activities. It is part of a spectrum of peace activities, starting with conflict prevention or preventive diplomacy, moving to peacemaking and peacekeeping aimed at ending direct violence, and then moving to post-conflict peacebuilding. Boutros Ghali’s definition was reinforced in the Brahimi Report which identified peacebuilding as the term for activities “on the far side of conflict to reassemble the foundations for peace.”¹⁵ While a significant number of authors and scholars still use peacebuilding in this post-conflict sense,¹⁶ there has been a strong movement toward using the term in a wider sense. Many other scholars and

¹³ Colleen Malone, “Peacebuilding Terminology and its Use within CARE”, *Consultancy Report* (London: CARE International, 2004), p.13.

¹⁴ Boutros Boutros Ghali, *An Agenda for Peace* (New York: United Nations, 1992)

¹⁵ Lakhdar Brahimi. *The Brahimi Report: Report of the Panel on United Nations Peace Operations*. New York: United Nations, 2000.

¹⁶ See Krishna Kumar (Ed.) *Rebuilding Societies after Civil War* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Press, 1997); Elizabeth Cousens and Chetan Kumar, *Peacebuilding as Politics* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rinner, 2000); Stephen John Stedman, Donald Rothchild, and Elizabeth M. Cousens, *Ending Civil Wars: The Implementation of Peace Agreements* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2002)

practitioners reflecting on nongovernmental efforts to address violent conflict and build peace, use the term peacebuilding without specific reference to a conflict's lifecycle or timeframe.¹⁷

In preparation for my own book on peacebuilding, I eventually settled on the following definition. "Peacebuilding seeks to prevent, reduce, transform, and help people recover from violence in all forms, even structural violence that has not yet led to massive civil unrest. At the same time it empowers people to foster relationships that sustain people and their environment."¹⁸ This wider definition draws on the working definitions of many of the major development organizations who now label some of their work as peacebuilding.

Peacebuilding in Iraq, for example, would include conflict prevention efforts in villages and regions of the country not yet experiencing severe violence to build relationships with Sunni, Shia and Kurdish leaders across the lines of conflict. Peacebuilding might also include international or regional peacekeepers taking over from US forces, regional diplomacy, humanitarian work, employment generation projects and other reconstruction activities, and a wider range of other activities.

The Aid Worker's Network, for example, defines peacebuilding this way: "Peacebuilding covers actions which support political, economic, social and military measures and structures aiming to strengthen and solidify political settlements in order to redress the causes of a conflict. This includes mechanisms to identify and support structures which tend to consolidate peace, advance a sense of confidence and well-being and support economic reconstruction."¹⁹ Likewise, International Alert defines peacebuilding, its preferred umbrella term for all of its work, as "measures designed to consolidate peaceful relations and strengthen viable political, socioeconomic and cultural institutions capable of mediating conflict, and to strengthen other mechanisms that will either create or support the necessary conditions for sustained peace."²⁰

The UN Security Council decided in February 2001 to no longer limit the concept of peacebuilding to the post-war context. They defined peacebuilding as "aimed at preventing the outbreak, the recurrence or continuation of armed conflict."²¹ NATO also defines peacebuilding in this wider sense as "a peace support operation employing complementary diplomatic, civil and - when necessary - military means to address the underlying causes of conflict and the longer-term needs of the people. It requires a

¹⁷ See John Paul Lederach, *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Institute of Peace, 1995); Luc Reyhler and Thania Paffenholz, *Peacebuilding: A Field Guide* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2001)

¹⁸ Lisa Schirch, *The Little Book of Strategic Peacebuilding* (Intercourse, Pennsylvania: Good Books, 2005)

¹⁹ "PSO Terminology", Aid Workers Network, <http://www.aidworkers.net/>

²⁰ *Resource Pack for Conflict Transformation*, (London: International Alert, March 2003), Section 2:3.

²¹ S/PRST/2001/5 of 20 February 2001 (New York: United Nations)

commitment to a long-term process and may run concurrently with other types of peace support operations.”²²

Outcomes/Solutions vs. Process/Transformation

Some groups use “relationship-centric” terminology that identifies their work primarily as the process of building and transforming relationships across the lines of conflict. Other groups are more “outcome-centric” seeing the achievement of a peace settlement or the decrease in violence as the focus of a peacebuilding process.

Some groups use “solution” language to talk about how they help their clients. They see conflict as a problem to be solved, creatively and collaboratively. Others are not so optimistic. They see conflict as an intractable problem defying solutions. “Conflict management” language is used to emphasize the need for what some would see as a realistic view of conflict as never-ending. Management language also is a “hook” into metaphorical language from other business or government settings. Those who prefer transformation language also emphasize that conflict is never-ending. Transformation language suggests the movement from destructive forms of conflict to the constructive expression of conflict.

Who is Involved?

Outsiders vs. Insiders

Some emphasize the need for impartial, expert outsiders. Others emphasize identifying and building the capacity of culturally-sensitive insiders. John Paul Lederach’s books promote the use of local culture as a resource rather than an obstacle to peacebuilding.²³ The Collaborative for Development Action’s Local Capacities for Peace project, for example, seeks to encourage peacebuilding methodologies that draw on and empower local actors to use their own existing peace practices to address conflicts and promote effective outsider/insider partnerships in peacebuilding.²⁴

In places experiencing severe conflict, like Kenya, Colombia, and Myanmar, for example, strategic partnerships are needed between outside influential experts like former Secretary General Kofi Annan or former US President Jimmy Carter, and local leaders of civil society and government.

High Level vs. All Levels

For U.N. scholars and many government representatives, peacebuilding is still a high-level process engaging elites in formal capacity-building, negotiations, and other

²² NATO Glossary of Terms and Definitions (AAP-6, 2006)

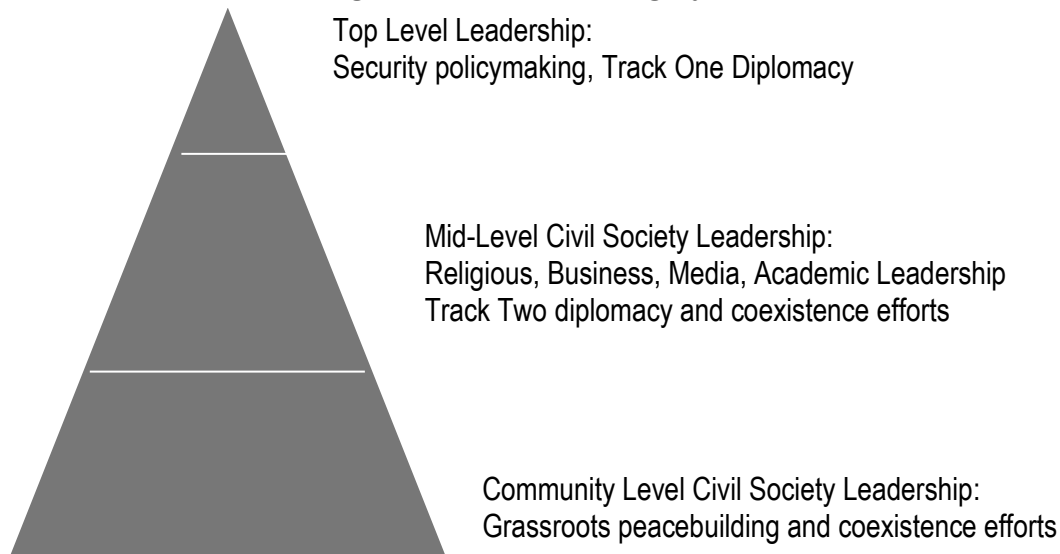
<http://www.fas.org/irp/doddir/other/nato2006.pdf>

²³ John Paul Lederach, *Preparing for Peace: Conflict Transformation across Cultures* (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1995)

²⁴ Collaborative for Development Action, *Partnerships among Outsider and Insider Peace Practitioners*
http://www.cdainc.com/rpp/partnerships_among_outsider_and_insider_peace_practitioners.php

programs. For many in the NGO world, peacebuilding is a more complex undertaking, requiring multiple processes at all levels of society and including grassroots, mid-level, and elite-level actors. John Paul Lederach's well-known pyramid model, for example, emphasizes the need to reach all levels of society through peacebuilding processes.²⁵

Figure 3: Peacebuilding Pyramid



Adapted from John Paul Lederach

Military Involvement vs. Cautions Regarding Military Involvement

Some who use the term peacebuilding see the military as an essential component of many peacebuilding missions. NATO defines peacebuilding, for example, as “a peace support operation employing complementary diplomatic, civil and – when necessary – military means to address the underlying causes of conflict and the longer-term needs of the people. It requires a commitment to a long-term process and may run concurrently with other types of peace support operations.”²⁶

Others are more cautious. Some oppose any use of the military in peacebuilding. NGOs in countries where the military has played an exclusively negative role in escalating violent conflict warn of the involvement of military actors in peacebuilding processes. Many militaries operate primarily on the basis of national interest. Since national interests are often not the same as human rights values that guide peacebuilding, military personnel often get caught trying to fulfill multiple, contradictory goals (e.g. secure democracy in Iraq while also securing access to oil and contracts for rebuilding

²⁵ John Paul Lederach, *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies* (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace, 1997)

²⁶ NATO *Glossary of Terms and Definitions* (AAP-6, 2006)
<http://www.fas.org/irp/doddir/other/nato2006.pdf>

Iraq). Militaries require training in peace operations and conversion to civilian control that enhances their capacity for legitimately contributing to peace.

In places like Darfur, the issue is complex. While the solution to the conflict in Darfur requires robust diplomacy between Sudan and its international supporters and detractors, immediate peacekeeping is needed to protect refugee communities from further attacks. Yet peacekeepers themselves do not have a good track record of respecting human rights in some regions; and there is extensive evidence that, rather than protecting refugees, peacekeepers have committed further sexual violence on women in places like Sierra Leone.

Terminological Challenges

Everyone working in the field of peacebuilding has a story to tell about terminological confusion. For some, the story begins with a funder's request for a proposal for "conflict mitigation" work. Others sigh with exasperation at going to conferences where different groups are using the same terms in different ways. Still others refer to the challenges of explaining our work to strangers or relatives who know little or nothing about peace work.

While the need for a discussion on terminology is widely recognized, some are hesitant to open the conversation. In response to a survey on this topic with members of the US-based Alliance for Peacebuilding, respected members of the field of peacebuilding responded with the following statements. "There are accepted definitions of all these terms already... let's stick with them."²⁷ "Our organization stays away from the terminology discussion- it doesn't lead anywhere."²⁸ "Every group seems to want their own term to be the umbrella."²⁹

Terminology in the field of peacebuilding requires attention for a variety of reasons. First, there are so many different terms relating to peacebuilding that people tend to become overly verbose as they "stack" different terms together as a catch-all. Members of the field come out of diverse academic backgrounds, diverse work experiences, and diverse geographical and sectoral areas. It is not surprising then, that we have developed different ways of talking about our work.

Some organizations have trademarked their approach and their organizations with their own terms, claiming "conflict transformation," "sustained dialogue," "coexistence" or "principled negotiation" as their brand. People use different terms for different audiences - choosing the term that will sell best to different audiences such as government, funders, our clients in conflict, or the public.

Language is also a factor. Peacebuilding is an English word. It translates more

²⁷ Respondent #4, *Terminological Survey* (Alliance for Peacebuilding, January 2005)

²⁸ Respondent #9, *Terminological Survey* (Alliance for Peacebuilding, January 2005)

²⁹ Respondent #1, *Terminological Survey* (Alliance for Peacebuilding, January 2005)

effectively in some cultures and languages than in others. Language changes over time as the field itself matures. The proliferation of terms contributes to our inability to be accurate and comprehensible in describing our work to others. Outsiders are confused about the subtle differences in terminology. Even the experts within the field have a difficult time pinpointing differences in terminology and differences in approach. The authors of the website www.beyondintractability.org, which hosts the most comprehensive glossary of peacebuilding terminology available on the web, regularly update their definitions as terms evolve in their usage and meaning.³⁰

Secondly, people use the term “peacebuilding” in widely different ways. One group’s expectations of what a peacebuilding intervention will include (e.g. economic development) can be entirely different than another group who defines peacebuilding in a radically different way (e.g. sustained dialogue between ethnic groups).

Terminological confusion contributes to a sense of “mission creep” where people lose track of their goals. In a post-war setting such as Afghanistan, some experts used the term peacebuilding to mean demobilizing and reintegrating soldiers. Others may have an expectation that post-war peacebuilding includes broad community-level diplomatic efforts and capacity-building development that can take generations. Peacebuilding planners, then, may shift missions as the terminology itself is understood so differently.

Third, there is growing confusion as governments and militaries begin to use the term peacebuilding. As NGO peacebuilding concepts make their way into government and military discourse, some question whether government-led peacebuilding projects that talk about addressing “root causes” and achieving “sustainable peace” have integrity. Terminological agreement within and between the U.N., regional organizations, governments and international and local NGO communities would increase the ability for all groups to monitor and evaluate peacebuilding efforts. For example, if conflict prevention is widely recognized as involving structural changes that promote open, democratic discussions, it is more likely that efforts by government or non-governmental groups in places like Liberia will be well-coordinated and effective.

Fourth, unclear terminology weakens the ability to promote peacebuilding programs to others. Outsiders often find peacebuilding terminology sloppy and irritating. Outsiders ask, “Is there really a difference between what conflict management, mitigation, resolution, and transformation look like on the ground or does it only matter to the academics?” It makes it challenging for us to communicate with funders, who often have their own terms to talk about the work that we do. It poses obstacles to collaboration with each other, as we may not recognize or feel comfortable with each other’s language. Projects and institutions become “outdated” as the field’s terminology changes. Many survey respondents recognized that while the discussion would be challenging, it is important to our ability to work together, to develop proposals to funders together, and to communicate our work in a coherent and coordinated way.

³⁰ Interview with Heidi and Guy Burgess, hosts of the website www.intractableconflict.org (January 2005)

Strategies for Terminological Clarity

Scholars often note that the field of peacebuilding is in its adolescence. As with other fields, we will no doubt mature and decide more clearly on which terms we will use and what specifically these terms will mean. In the meantime, there are a number of strategies we can employ to increase conceptual clarity and reduce terminological confusion.

Respondents to the Alliance for Peacebuilding survey proposed a number of steps. Some said, "Let's agree on a set of definitions and post them on our websites."³¹ One respondent suggested choosing an organization to be the "arbiter" of terms so that people in the field speak with similar and non-competing voices.³² Others insisted, "We need to harp on and hang onto specific, already agreed upon meanings."³³ Still others suggested, "Let's understand the differences, but not press for conformity in terminology. Clarity of communication is important but it should not take precedence over the richness that comes from diversity."³⁴

Respondents also suggested a series of processes. One asked whether the Alliance for Peacebuilding could address the issue of terminology by facilitating discussion on "turf" issues between organizations that use different terminology.³⁵ Another respondent asked for a facilitated discussion on the different theories of change that are implicit in different terms and suggested that there could be dialogue with each other on our philosophical differences.³⁶ A third respondent suggested surveying the general public to see which terms they thought best described our work and resonated with their experience.³⁷

Acknowledging the terminological challenges is essential in the pursuit of more effective and more coordinated peacebuilding. When we understand that there are multiple ways of defining peacebuilding, or referring to the field that we work in, we can begin to take responsibility for clarifying what we intend to communicate. While all of the suggested steps may be important, in the immediate future, we can all take one positive step: we need to define our terms when we use them.

³¹ Respondent #3, *Terminology Survey* (Alliance for Peacebuilding, January 2005)

³² Respondent #19, *Terminology Survey* (Alliance for Peacebuilding, January 2005)

³³ Respondent #22, *Terminology Survey* (Alliance for Peacebuilding, January 2005)

³⁴ Respondent #13, *Terminology Survey* (Alliance for Peacebuilding, January 2005)

³⁵ Respondent #18, *Terminology Survey* (Alliance for Peacebuilding, January 2005)

³⁶ Respondent #14, *Terminology Survey* (Alliance for Peacebuilding, January 2005)

³⁷ Respondent #5, *Terminology Survey* (Alliance for Peacebuilding, January 2005)