Chapter Review: Everyday Political Economies of Peacebuilding

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Chapter Review by Naysan Adlparvar

Lai's argument

In *Everyday Political Economies of Peacebuilding* – a contribution to the 2024 *Routledge Handbook of Peacebuilding* edited by Roger Mac Ginty – Daniela Lai challenges the assumption that economic activities automatically contribute to peace in post-conflict settings. Lai argues that adopting a more nuanced understanding of political economies in post-conflict societies will lead to improved peacebuilding outcomes.

Lai opens her chapter by reminding us that conflict involves not only violence but also socioeconomic injustices and. As such, pathways towards more inclusive and resilient states and societies need to include socioeconomic peacebuilding, or, as she puts it, 'a set of processes supporting post-conflict transformation through interventions aiming to impact the socioeconomic conditions of the population' (p. 355). The problem, she claims – taking aim at the liberal peacebuilding agenda – is the assumption that, in post-conflict settings, investments in the economy (e.g., in livelihoods, trade, and financing) will automatically contribute to stability and peace. Working with this assumption, Lai argues, has led to the development of macroeconomic interventions that do not consider local context, their effects on the everyday lives of local populations, or the ways they may undermine peacebuilding objectives.

Lai tells us that a body of literature has emerged to critique such shortsighted policies. This literature recognises the complex relationship between peacebuilding and economic activity, and challenges the idea that economic interventions in post-conflict settings are apolitical.

What does Lai mean by this? She offers three examples by way of illustration;

First, Lai explores large scale foreign investment in land acquisition often promoted in peacebuilding practice, purportedly to drive economic growth whilst also generating employment for local communities. From her perspective, such investment is misguided. Failing to consider the land-related drivers of conflict, land acquisition in Colombia, for example, helped to further inflame tensions. In Sierra Leone, clashes emerged between local communities and the international company investing in land because of a lack of understanding regarding customary land rights, the local use and value of land, and political missteps in the provision of jobs to youth. These cases show not only that economic

projects of this sort can actively undermine peace, but that a failure to understand the broader cultural and social – and not just economic – value of land is detrimental to peacebuilding.

Second, looking at financial programmes, such as microcredit initiatives, and their relationship to peacebuilding, Lai shows that such schemes operate within an informal economy of debt. Drawing on an example from Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), she illustrates how these kinds of initiatives emphasise individual agency at the expense of the development of needed social networks of support. The contributions such efforts have made to peacebuilding have remained limited because they have failed to understand the wider social issues that local communities face,

Third, Lai examines economic peacebuilding interventions that seek to bring members of previously oppositional groups together and develop interdependence and trust through economic ventures. The effect of such interventions (including examples of cross-border tourism, trade, and shared management of environmental resources in settings ranging from Kashmir to Kosovo) on peacebuilding is mixed. Pointing to grassroots initiatives, Lai argues that mobilisation based on local traditions (e.g. *tara bandu*, or a customary law system in Timor-Leste) or on socioeconomic and political issues (e.g. questions of citizenship and opposition in an unaccountable political system in BiH) – initiatives that communities care about and that organically leverage an understanding of everyday political economies – can strongly contribute to peace.

Through her chapter, Lai reminds us that, in post-conflict settings, economic initiatives are complex and contested – and often members of local communities perceive them as negative. Investing in economic activities is therefore not necessarily good for peace. Building on this, she also argues that a rethinking of 'economic' analysis is required. Economic analysis alone cannot capture the social dynamics that successful peacebuilding initiatives must respond to.

My take on the argument

What do I take away from Lai's chapter?

As a peacebuilding practitioner with an academic background, and as an advocate of Thinking and Working Politically, I find Lai's argument compelling. I imagine many members of the TWP CoP would feel the same. I also welcome her proposition that a clearer understanding of political economy (one which explores how political, social and economic issues interact and manifest in everyday contexts) will inform better designed and, potentially, more effective peacebuilding programming. Indeed, many of the examples that Lai draws from conveniently illustrate cases where little to no understanding of political economy has resulted in peacebuilding projects with significant shortcomings.

But while Lai's emphasis on the socioeconomic nuances of microcredit programmes and the limitations of economic peacebuilding initiatives resonate with my experience analysing such

peacebuilding initiatives, including in Afghanistan and Jordan (which suffered from some of the challenges Lai highlights), my research also suggests that practitioners are often highly aware of the socioeconomic underpinnings of their interventions. This partial and largely tacit knowledge of everyday political economies can, at times, contribute to better programming and associated improvements in peacebuilding. Of course, this is not guaranteed. In many cases, where it exists, this ability to think politically and appreciate the context does not necessarily translate into working in more politically aware ways or designing and implementing more effective programmes. The challenge before us, therefore, is not only that some peacebuilding practitioners need to better understand political economy in the contexts they work, but that we need organisational systems and processes that support translating such analysis into operational practice. More often than not, due in part to the internal political economy of our own organisations, concrete linkages to practice are difficult to action.

So, while I agree with Lai's argument, I am left harbouring a number of practical and methodological questions. How can the insights shared by Lai be leveraged to positively influence peacebuilding practitioners? If we are not dealing with a binary of do/don't understand everyday political economies, how can practitioner knowledge be deepened and translated into improved programming? Which tools most effectively structure analysis and help to crystalise practical insights? What kinds of organisational systems and processes may be more conducive to their uptake, and how can these be nurtured in light of the different pressures and priorities that different organisations face? Answering these pragmatic questions is, of course, not the goal of Lai's chapter. Yet, as with any good analysis reflecting on the relationship between political economy and practice, it has prompted me to think about how I and others could think and work in more politically informed ways.

About the Author

Naysan Adlparvar is the Core Government Functions and Research Advisor at UNDP's Governance, Rule of Law and Peacebuilding Hub. In this role, he manages partnerships, develops policy and provides technical accompaniment and knowledge exchange on governance and peacebuilding issues. Naysan also manages UNDP's workstream on Thinking and Working Politically. He holds a PhD in Development Studies from the Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex and held two postdoctoral appointments at Yale University, where he currently delivers a Global Affairs Senior Capstone project.

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