Review - Peacebuilding Through Community-Based NGOs

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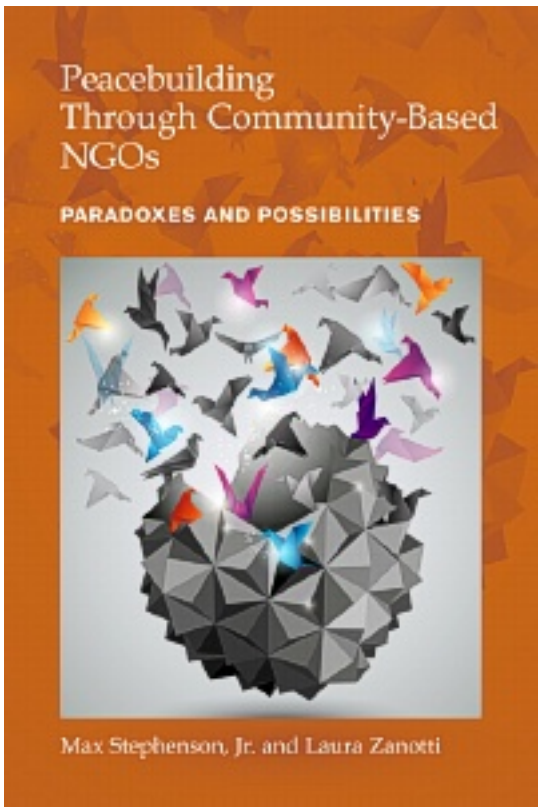
Peacebuilding Through Community-Based NGOs: Paradoxes and Possibilities
By: Max Stephenson Jr. and Laura Zanotti
Sterling, Virginia: Kumarian Press, 2012



Peacebuilding Through Community-Based NGOs: Paradoxes and Possibilities by Max Stephenson Jr. and Laura Zanotti is a slim and accessible work that discusses the contribution that NGOs, and civil society more generally, can make to peacebuilding. It has a brief introduction, three case study chapters (on organizations in Haiti, Serbia and Northern Ireland), and a brief conclusion. Versions of two of the case study chapters have been published elsewhere.

The book is explicit in accepting the existence of a 'neoliberal peacebuilding consensus' and as a result is hostage to an orthodox worldview. The extent and depth of the 'liberal peace consensus' (page 2 and 19) is not discussed. Just how consensual is this consensus? Is there an element of coercion involved? Are there any sites of resistance and discussion in which actors dispute the legitimacy of the liberal peace 'consensus'? Without addressing these questions, the book rests on a rather narrow view of NGOs and civil society in which their role is to support the

dominant form of peacemaking in the society. Civil society becomes reduced to being a handmaiden of an orthodox peace and risks being stripped of its agency and possibility of producing alternatives.

This discursive narrowness is something of a disappointment since the book does contain useful insights, thought-provoking questions, and is based on fieldwork. The chapter on Haiti examines the problem whereby well-funded INGOs and NGOs risk undermining government capacity. By being able to pay higher salaries, INGOs and NGOs can attract the best staff and often contribute to a leaching of talent away from government. Moreover, donors often regard states as being inefficient, incapable and corrupt and so bypass state mechanisms in order to provide services. The result is a hollowing out of the state, denuding its capacity to provide services and its legitimacy in the eyes of the population. The Haitian case study concentrates on Partners in Health (PiH), an INGO that provides impressive health and social services to the population of Haiti's Plateau Centrale. The chapter promises to explain how PiH manages to both provide services and support (rather than undercut) the state. While PiH collaborates with the Haitian state on some issues, the chapter does not make clear in enough detail just how it is reinforcing rather than undercutting the state. This is especially the case given that the funding, and much of the direction of PiH, comes from beyond Haiti.

The chapter on the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland (CFNI) examines how the organization, originally established by the British State as a quasi-independent community-funder, has managed to acquire some financial and policy autonomy. The issue is important for at least two reasons. Firstly, donor-driven peacebuilding often reflects the ambitions of donors rather than of the communities experiencing the journey away from violent conflict. Secondly, given that Northern Ireland is a deeply divided society and continues to have religious-political fissures, the source of funding for community groups is important. Observers may be quick to point to the apparently partisan sources of funding and build a grievance on perceptions of not getting a 'fair share' of donor largess. While CFNI has sought to diversify its funding sources, and thus achieve autonomy of direction, funding realities place a limit on diversification. CFNI was a major recipient of European Union peace-support funding. The book does not delve as deeply as it could into the conditionalities and ideological assumptions that underpinned EU money. The chapter outlines, in an uncritical way, how the director of CFNI adopted a Foucauldian approach to peacebuilding that did not seek to be prescriptive, and sought to give communities space to investigate their own aspirations and self-identities. This deserves a more thorough unpacking, especially in the light of the above-mentioned donor-imposed conditionalities, and the legal frameworks that inform civil society in Northern Ireland. All peacebuilding, and community agency, occurs within boundaries and frames. CFNI has a remit that reflects certain assumptions and ideological biases (even if Foucault is invoked). Where these frames interact and conflict with community worldviews and policies maybe a site of tension, coalescence or hybridized forms of peace and politics.

The chapter on Women in Black – Serbia (WIB) posits that it is a 'peace organization' that 'has embraced a liberal-cosmopolitan conceptualization of peace that resonates with the security discourses that have emerged at the United Nations in recent years' (page 34). Yet the organization is also described as 'radically feminist' which seems to sit uneasily with the apparent alignment of security discourses. The main argument of the chapter is that as WIB tend to highlight Serb atrocities, they have the unintended consequence of feeding into Serb nationalist discourses that portray Serbs as the undeserving victims of international opprobrium.

While there are interesting insights in the book, the central arguments struggle to come through with clarity and consistency.

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