Research Summary

The right to self-determination is a key principle in the United Nations’ charter. This right holds even where political, social, or economic systems are marked by “inadequacy.” In principle, the UN is committed to local ownership in its peace operations in post-conflict states as well. By protecting the host country’s self-determination and minimizing the degree of external imposition, it believes that local ownership renders peacebuilding more legitimate and sustainable. If peace is imposed on local actors, the thought is that it will be perceived as illegitimate and will likely fail once the UN departs.

However, in practice, local ownership often takes a back seat to peacebuilding imposed from above and the delivery of concrete results in the short term. UN missions working on the ground find that local ownership can compete with the establishment of liberal, democratic political systems. UN officials express the belief that local ownership can also impede the disarmament and demobilization of combatants, elections, institution-building, and the reconstruction of key infrastructure. These beliefs are based upon two assumptions: first, that local actors do not have the skills and knowledge to take on the complex processes of post-conflict reconstruction and peacebuilding, and second that local actors will not act according to the broadly liberal principles of the UN, including democracy, free market economic policies, and human rights. These principles are not just valuable in their own right. They are perceived to be the surest form of protection against conflict recidivism.

When UN staff share peacebuilding efforts with local actors, they select partners based on one of two criteria: the groups’ values—the degree to which they support liberal principles—or their capacity to contribute to the efficient delivery of concrete outputs. Both approaches undercut the purported benefits of local ownership—legitimacy and sustainability—because they infringe upon self-determination and exacerbate the degree to which the UN imposes its preferences upon the host state. These restrictive practices of ownership stand in contrast to the UN’s
discourse of local ownership, which promotes the broad inclusion of local actors in peacebuilding. While restrictive practices are meant to protect the achievement of operational goals, they may do just the opposite.

Ultimately, the UN faces a choice: it may prioritize its normative objectives by embracing local ownership, but then must accept that outputs and liberalization may come about slowly. Alternately, it may prioritize its operational objectives, but then must accept the normative consequences of excluding local actors. Only if it makes such a choice can the UN close the gap between the rhetoric and the reality of local ownership in peacebuilding.

For Consideration:

1. Given the challenges of implementing local ownership, is the rhetorical focus on this by the UN still valuable? Do UN operations see value in this focus even if the practice is challenging?

2. What are the results of this disconnect between rhetoric and practice?

3. How can/should the UN reconcile this disconnect?

4. What are local views on local ownership?

5. When has local ownership proven counterproductive to mission goals and when has it worked in peacebuilding?

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