

## METHODOLOGIES IN PEACEBUILDING EVALUATIONS: CHALLENGES AND TESTING NEW APPROACHES

Thania Paffenholz

One of the biggest methodological challenges in peacebuilding evaluations is the evaluation of effectiveness. Peacebuilding evaluation guidelines put a lot of emphasis on the importance of assessing theories of change (Church and Rogers, 2006; Paffenholz and Reyhler, 2007; OECD/DAC, 2012). Yet, it is rare to come across projects, programmes and policies with well-developed baselines and theories of change embedded in a results-based framework. Hence, evaluating peacebuilding effectiveness remains a challenge.

In this short article, I discuss an innovative methodological approach to the evaluation of peacebuilding effectiveness. This approach entails drawing upon evidence-based comparative research on what worked and what did not work in similar peacebuilding interventions in order to analyse outcome plausibility. It has been tested in a global evaluation of civil society peacebuilding projects in eight countries, and proved extremely useful, especially in cases where there are no clear baselines or where theories of change are confused.

### Step 1: Reconstructing theories of change

In many peacebuilding evaluations, baselines and theories of change that provide the rationale for *how* and *why* peacebuilding projects are assumed to have an impact, are implicit rather than explicit. It is also quite common that the theories listed in project documents no longer reflect the intervention logic due to changes in project design or context. In such cases, the theory of change has to be reconstructed as part of an evaluation.

Data constraints pose a tricky problem in this regard. Bamberger, Rugh and Mabry (2004) suggest reconstructing baselines and theories of change with the help of secondary data from programmes/projects, national statistics like national household surveys and by interviewing the main evaluation stakeholders, including beneficiaries. Applying methods to compensate for missing data

involves a number of constraints, including the issue of stakeholder bias when it comes to recalling the past (*ibid.*). A further issue in complex conflict contexts is that national authorities are often dysfunctional, and reliable national statistics or surveys, and public perception studies are rarely available. As a consequence, more testing is required to acquire reliable approaches and methods.

In cases where an explicit theory of change is elaborated in project documents, the evaluator nevertheless needs to assess whether the theory remains valid.

### Step 2: Assessing theories of change

Evaluating the logical plausibility of a theory of change involves relating a project's activities and outcomes to its desired impacts or goals in order to establish whether such impacts might reasonably be achieved (Rossi, Lipsey and Freeman, 2004: 158–159). The evaluator can also assess whether a theory of change is relevant in a given context. Firstly, this can be done by analysing the causes and dynamics of conflicts over time, and secondly, by evaluating if the theory of change addresses these factors in a logical sequence in order to facilitate peacebuilding.

### Step 3: Assessing outcome plausibility

In the absence of detailed baseline data, an innovative way of assessing peacebuilding outcomes is analysing outcome plausibility by comparing the theory of change and the main activities conducted with existing comparative data on what has worked and what has not worked in similar peacebuilding interventions. However, such assessments are only possible if sound evidence from research or other evaluations exists. In my experience, even when such research results exist, they require adaptation to the purpose of evaluation, i.e., they need to be “translated”. A practical example of this approach is presented below.

I used such a “translation” approach as part of a global evaluation of support to civil society peacebuilding initiatives in eight countries (Paffenholz et al., 2011: 3–10), drawing on the results of a multi-year international research project on the role of civil society in peacebuilding (Paffenholz, 2010; IPTI, 2016). For the purposes of this research project, I co-developed a framework for the analysis of civil society in peacebuilding (Paffenholz and Spurk, 2010) which elaborates seven functions civil society can fulfil: protection, monitoring, advocacy, socialisation, social cohesion, facilitation, service delivery (see Figure 1). The effectiveness of the seven functions has then been assessed in 13 country case studies on the level of cumulative impact by function.

Figure 1: Seven civil society peacebuilding functions (Paffenholz and Spurk, 2006).

#### Seven civil society peacebuilding functions

1. **Protection** of citizens from violence from all parties;
2. **Monitoring** of human rights violations, the implementation of peace agreements, etc.;
3. **Advocacy** for peace and human rights;
4. **Socialisation** for democratic and peace values as well as for in-group identity of marginalised groups;
5. **Inter-group social cohesion**, bringing people together from adversary groups;
6. **Facilitation** on the local and national level between all types of actors;
7. **Service delivery** for creating entry points for peacebuilding, i.e. for the six above functions.

In order to make use of the research results for the evaluation in question, they were translated into effectiveness conditions against which the projects could be assessed. For example, with regard to function 5, “inter-group social

cohesion”, the research found that the relevance of activities which bring people from adversarial groups together depends largely on the context in which these activities take place (Paffenholz, 2010: 405–424).

More specifically, the research results showed that the following reasons limited the effectiveness of most dialogue projects (ibid: 427):

- Radicalisation within society hinders this type of peace work;
- The main focus of most initiatives is on the main conflict lines only;
- Most initiatives are of a scattered, short-term and fragmented nature;
- Most participants are English-speaking, elite-based representatives who are often already “converted” to the idea of positive images of the other group;
- People-to-people programmes do not reach society at large as they only focus on the individual level;
- The apolitical nature of most initiatives frame a deeply political problem as a relationship problem, something that can often be misleading, and result in limited acceptance and ownership within society;
- Many initiatives aim at changing attitudes, yet even over the long-term, this seems ineffective. Existing evidence from Bosnia, Cyprus and Israel/Palestine demonstrate that attitude change might not be necessary for behavioural change. Instead, work-related activities, which brought people from different groups together, proved to be more successful than peace-related work. Here people expressed positive experiences from working with

the other group, often producing concrete outcomes or common work initiatives.

These findings can then be translated into a checklist in order to establish whether the peacebuilding projects under evaluation have built these conditions into their theory of change and subsequent project implementation.

In a nutshell, the outcome plausibility evaluation approach is a viable alternative in the absence of baseline data. Nevertheless, in order to ensure more effective peacebuilding evaluations in the future, a lot more emphasis should be put both on improving the quality of project planning in peacebuilding and on creating a culture of monitoring and evaluation as an integrated part of project implementation.

## References

Bamberger, M., Rugh, J. and Mabry, L.S. (2006). *RealWorld Evaluation. Working under Budget, Time, Data and Political Constraints*. London and New Delhi, Sage Thousand Oaks.

Church, C. and Rogers, M. M. (2007). *Designing for Results: Integrating Monitoring and Evaluation in Conflict Transformation Programs*. Search for a Common Ground. Washington D.C.

Inclusive Peace and Transition Initiative (IPTI) (2016). *Civil Society at a Glance*. <http://www.inclusivepeace.org/content/civil-societys-inclusion-peace-processes-glance>.

OECD/DAC. (2012). *Evaluating Peacebuilding Activities in Settings of Conflict and Fragility*. Paris, OECD. [http://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/development/evaluating-donor-engagement-in-situations-of-conflict-and-fragility\\_9789264106802-en](http://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/development/evaluating-donor-engagement-in-situations-of-conflict-and-fragility_9789264106802-en) [accessed 22.03.2016].

Paffenholz, T. (2010) (ed.). *Civil Society and Peacebuilding. A Critical Assessment*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner.

Paffenholz, T. and Reyhler, L. (2007). *Aid for Peace. A Guide to Planning and Evaluation for Conflict Zones*, Nomos Baden Baden.

Paffenholz, T. and Spurk, C. (2006). “Civil Society, Civic Engagement and Peacebuilding”. Social Development Papers, Conflict Prevention and Reconstruction Paper No. 36. Washington, D.C.: World Bank.

Paffenholz, T. and Spurk, C. (2010). A Comprehensive Analytical Framework. In: T. Paffenholz (ed.) *Civil Society and Peacebuilding. A Critical Assessment*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 65–78.

Paffenholz, T. et al. (2011). “The German Civil Peace Service: Synthesis Report. Volume I: Main Report.” Unpublished evaluation report. Bonn: Bundesministerium für wirtschaftliche Zusammenarbeit und Entwicklung.

Rossi, P., Lipsey, M. W. and Freeman, H. E. (2004). *Evaluation: A Systematic Approach*. London and New Dehli, Thousand Oaks.