Evaluation in Violently Divided Societies: Politics, Ethics and Methods

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Those who work in support of peacebuilding and development initiatives are acutely aware that conflict-affected environments are volatile, unpredictable and fast-changing. In light of this reality, evaluation and research in the service of peacebuilding and development is a complex enterprise. Theories of change and assumptions about how peace and development work are often unarticulated or untested. While much work continues to be done on the theories, methodologies and praxis of peacebuilding, we suggest that the international aid community, researchers and practitioners need to think more deeply and systematically about the role of evaluation in increasing the efficacy of projects and programmes in violently divided societies (VDS).

Core questions that underpin and motivate the articles contained in this special issue of the journal include:

- How does the particular context of conflict affect our approaches to, and conduct of, research and evaluation?
- Specifically, how do politics — be they local, national, international, geopolitical — interact with evaluation practice in ways that enhance or inhibit prospects for peace and sustainable development?
- What can we learn from current research and evaluation practice in the global North and South about their impacts in violently divided societies?
- Which tools are most effective and appropriate for assessing the role of context? Should there be generic or global assessment frameworks, criteria and indicators to guide evaluation in violently divided societies, and, if so, what do they look like? Or does the fluidity and heterogeneity of different conflict zones inhibit such developments?
- How can evaluation, in its own right, catalyse positive political and societal change? What theories of peacebuilding and social change should best guide evaluation research and practice in ways that promote peace and sustainable development?

The inspiration for this special issue is rooted in a four-year collaborative research project between the Evaluation Unit of the International Development Research Centre of Canada and the International Conflict Research Institute (INCORE) of the University of Ulster. That project highlighted and explored an important but neglected area of research and practice: the evaluation of the impact of research on, and in, violently divided societies. The current issue expands its focus beyond research to include the evaluation of different types of interventions in conflict contexts (broadly defined).

The Journal of Peacebuilding & Development, based at the Joan B. Kroc School of Peace Studies, is a natural partner and host for an exploration of the questions posed above.
Since its inception, the journal has been casting a critical eye on the intersections of the politics, methods and ethics of peacebuilding and development. The journal seeks to honour its mission to nurture and disseminate empirically based and contextually rich studies, and to actively seek out, encourage and publish authors from the Global South — in particular, from violently divided societies. The journal publishes a great deal on issues of design, monitoring and evaluation (DM&E) of peacebuilding and development. This emphasis is premised on the belief that good DM&E is the sine qua non of good practice, which, in turn should inform decision-making, and generate better policy. Less appreciated is the fact that robust DM&E shares an iterative relationship with good theorising, both normative and evidence-based — particularly from a bottom-up and/or grounded theory perspective. The achievement of better results in peacebuilding and development demands an ongoing and critical assessment of what works (or not) and why it works (or not). Only then will we be able to generate the empirically grounded, theoretically informed, knowledge required as the foundation for good scholarship, policy practice and activism.

When examining the implications of conflict context for theory and practice, we are considering both (1) the influence of violence or conflict on the environment — physical, historical, social, cultural, political, organisational — within which evaluation practice occurs, and (2) the ways in which the very existence of violence (its presence, legacy or potentiality) may influence how stakeholders engage (or not) with projects, programmes, research or evaluations. This includes the consideration of how context affects prospects for communication, uptake and actual use of evaluations for social change. Our contention is that in settings affected by significant levels of militarised or non-militarised violence, context is much more than a landscape or backdrop. It is a factor that permeates and affects all aspects of an intervention. Further, within such conditions, even apparently insignificant actions may serve to ignite a powder keg of latent conflict or violence. It is the very existence of violence and the particular conditions that it spawns and superimposes upon the context which raise acute challenges for development workers, peacebuilders, researchers and evaluators.

Important progress has been made in the areas of peace and conflict impact assessment (PCIA), conflict-sensitive development methods, and peacebuilding evaluation. After years of research, testing and reflection the OECD DAC\(^2\) in November 2012 released its guidance on ‘Evaluating Peacebuilding Activities in Settings of Conflict and Fragility’. It urges donors and partners to base their work on a clear understanding of conflict context and to develop clear, evidence-based theories of change. New initiatives of consortia\(^3\) have been formed to document, systematise and advance the field of ‘peacebuilding evaluation’ towards a more professional and systematic area of research and practice. These include a portal of peacebuilding evaluation that offers over 60 different peacebuilding evaluations for researchers and practitioners to examine, alongside a meta-evaluation study outlining lessons across the field. As well, the Peacebuilding and Evaluation Consortium (PEC) was launched in 2013; it aims to build capacity in the field through various means: developing a network for practitioners and academicians to provide further support to evaluators, the development of guidance and manuals on how to carry out systematic evaluation, and sharing of case studies to publicise lessons learned from various cases of actual evaluation.

At the policy level, the International Dialogue on Peacebuilding and Statebuilding, with its drivers — the g7+, the International Network on Conflict and Fragility
(INCAF) and the Civil Society Platform on Peacebuilding and Statebuilding — is engaging the demand for appropriate goals, frameworks and methods to assess countries’ fragility and progress towards peace. Concurrently, the heated debates around what belongs in the post-2015 Development Agenda are being strongly engaged by the peacebuilding community to ensure that all development practice engages with issues of conflict, violence and fragility. The *Journal of Peacebuilding & Development* monitors and reports on these intense global debates in its ‘Policy Dialogues’ section.

The current issue of the journal is an important, if modest, contribution to these peacebuilding, development and evaluation initiatives. While many of the above noted initiatives focus on methods to evaluating peacebuilding initiatives, our analytical ambit includes all types of interventions — developmental, humanitarian, peacebuilding, private sector investment and so on. This allows us to emphasise and explore the impact of different conflict contexts on interventions. It also allows us to explicitly include all the thousands of other projects and programmes in conflict zones (i.e. in more traditional development related areas) that are excluded from the narrow peacebuilding lens but nonetheless have profound peace and conflict impacts. Additionally, we do not restrict our case selection to militarised zones of violent conflict. Analytically, we include cases from the broadest spectrum of conflict environments — be they characterised by ‘proto-violence’, social violence, criminalised violence or militarised violence. This provides a richer source of potential learning around the conflict and peace related interactions of programmatic work within such contexts, providing opportunities to better identify and understand when, why and how non-violent conflict becomes violent. By bringing this broad peace and conflict impact lens to the evaluation of all kinds of research and programming, our intention is to bridge discussions that are taking place in different literatures, fora and areas practice — which have a tendency to be siloed.

It is our hope that this special issue will contribute to current debates and efforts in a number of ways:

- **Deepen dialogue around these issues that challenge the fields of development and peacebuilding and inhibit our work.**
- **Focus critical attention on issues that need to inform efforts to improve the DM&E of interventions in conflict contexts — in particular, politics, logistics, methods and ethics.**
- **Highlight the need to better understand the impact of conflict context on evaluation — and the impact of the evaluation on the (peace and) conflict context.**
- **Increase awareness that conflict context forces us to think about, and conduct, our evaluations differently; and that efforts to employ or to impose evaluation-as-usual evaluations (i.e., non-conflict sensitive) in conflict zones risks inflicting profound harm.**
- **Underscore the need for a broader dialogue between evaluation research and peace and conflict studies.**

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Endnotes

1 Findings from this project will be published in a collected volume, “Evaluation in Extremis. Research, Impact and Politics in Violently Divided Societies” (forthcoming, 2013)

2 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, Development Assistance Committee

3 The portal involves the Alliance for Peacebuilding (AFP), Search for Common Ground (SCG) and the Center for Peacebuilding and Development (CPD). The PEC includes AFP, CPD, SCG, Mercy Corps and the United States Institute for Peace (USIP), and is supported by the Carnegie Foundation.