



## Scrutinising UN peacebuilding: entangled peace and its limits

Ignasi Torrent

To cite this article: Ignasi Torrent (2021): Scrutinising UN peacebuilding: entangled peace and its limits, *Peacebuilding*, DOI: [10.1080/21647259.2021.1999166](https://doi.org/10.1080/21647259.2021.1999166)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/21647259.2021.1999166>



© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 09 Nov 2021.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

# Scrutinising UN peacebuilding: entangled peace and its limits

Ignasi Torrent 

Politics and International Relations, School of Humanities, University of Hertfordshire, UK

## ABSTRACT

This article examines the suitability of entanglements and relations to think and see peacebuilding events. Through a reflection upon the limited results of the United Nations (UN) in securing lasting peace in war-torn scenarios, the text critically engages with three debates on contemporary peacebuilding literature: the inclusion of 'the locals', the achievement of an organisational system-wide coherence and the agential condition of peacebuilding actors. Whilst acknowledging the analytical potential of affirming the entangled ontogenesis of actors and processes in the conflict-affected configuration, the article ends with a cautionary argument about entanglement fetishism, namely the celebratory, normative and exclusionary projection of a relational world. Entangled peace is an invitation to read the peacebuilding milieu, and by extension the broader theatre of the real, as radical openness, where events emanate from the collision of an infinite multiplicity of possible worlds.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 10 May 2021  
Accepted 25 October 2021

## KEYWORDS

Peacebuilding; United Nations; entangled peace; relations; entanglement fetishism

## Introduction

In the recent years a plethora of accounts across the social and natural sciences have instrumentalised entanglements and relations as a mode of reading world events.<sup>1</sup> Noticeably inspired by continental philosophers such as Alfred North Whitehead,<sup>2</sup> these

**CONTACT** Ignasi Torrent  [ignasi.torrent@gmail.com](mailto:ignasi.torrent@gmail.com)

<sup>1</sup>See Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2007); Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

<sup>2</sup>Most notorious historical figures who pioneered relational thinking include Baruch Spinoza, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, Henri Bergson, Alfred North Whitehead and Gilles Deleuze. Whilst the article mostly draws from Western continental philosophy to elucidate the sources of inspiration of the entangled peace account, non-Western philosophy has produced similar accounts regarding the relational condition of the human and its environment. For example, Ngcoya argues how in Ubuntu philosophy, shared by numerous communities in the sub-Saharan region, the being of a person is entirely dependent on its relations with other people. In other words, interdependence precedes the being (Mvuselelo Ngcoya, 'Ubuntu: Toward an Emancipatory Cosmopolitanism?', *International Political Sociology* 9, no. 3 (2015): 248–62). Similarly, Ling unfolds part-whole relations as the constituency of beings in Daoist philosophy, an ancient Chinese cosmology (L.H.M. Ling, *Imagining World Politics. Sihar & Shenya, A Fable for Our Times* (London: Routledge, 2014)). In addition, Malhorta unpacks the interconnectedness and continuity between the spheres of the Self and the Other in Dharmic philosophy, which comprises several Indian systems of thought, including Buddhism and Hinduism (Rajiv Malhorta, *Being Different: An Indian Challenge to Western Universalism* (India: Harper Collins, 2013)). Drawing from Australian indigenous cosmologies, Graham reveals how relations between peoples and land enable and enact social and political configurations (Mary Graham, 'Some Thoughts about the Philosophical Underpinnings of Aboriginal Worldviews,' *Worldviews: Global Religions, Culture, and Ecology* 3, no. 2 (n.d.)). Finally, as illustrative of Caribbean postcolonial thought, Glissant argued that it is the relations amongst cultures that define and affect them. Thus, cultures are somehow boundless for the limits are constantly redefined by internal and external relations (Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, n.d.)). For a further discussion on non-Western relationalism see Astrid H.M. Nordin et al., 'Towards Global Relational Theorizing: A Dialogue between Sinophone and Anglophone Scholarship on Relationalism,' *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* (Routledge, September 3, 2019).

contemporary conversations embrace a wide tradition of thought that supersedes an elemental and primal essence of the being with a non-essentialised, relational and processual form of becoming, which is never found in isolation, but constitutively entangled with further processes of becoming.<sup>3</sup> Entangled ontologies thus claim that beings and processes of the world co-emerge and compose one another in relation. Hence, relations precede beings or, in below terminology, actors. A crucial implication of this relational form of seeing the world, which has not come without its detractors,<sup>4</sup> involves the fade of the modern subject-object Cartesian dualism, which unleashes a hubristic and hierarchised ontology where the (human) subject becomes a sine qua non condition for the existence of the world. This form of knowing involves a hierarchical separation between the 'knower' (i.e. the UN) and the 'known' (i.e. the local civil society). Resonating with Barad, beyond modern epistemologies underpinned by a hubristic Man that knows the world, the article intends to argue that 'the knower cannot be assumed to be a self-contained rational human subject. Rather, subjects (like objects) are differentially constituted by intra-actions',<sup>5</sup> meaning that entanglements are the constitutive elements of beings, which are never static or essentialised, but always on continuous processual mutual reinvention. The author continues: 'knowing is not a play of ideas within the mind of a Cartesian subject that stands outside the physical world the subject seeks to know. (...) Knowing is a physical practice of engagement'.<sup>6</sup> Thus entangled sensitivities unveil the vulnerability of all beings and processes, whose very existence hinges on their ontological relational condition. As Haraway puts it, things never become in the world in an essentialised form, but emanate from 'a vital entanglement of heterogeneous scales, times, and kinds of beings webbed into fleshly presence, always a becoming, always constituted in relating'.<sup>7</sup>

Relationality is increasingly emerging as an analytical framework for the study of International Relations as well as the area of Critical Peace and Conflict Studies.<sup>8</sup> In critical peacebuilding debates authors have emphasised the suitability to focus on relations and interactions between actors and processes in conflict-affected contexts in order to capture the complex interconnectedness that shape the peacebuilding milieu. In brief, the relational perspective in peacebuilding centres on the unpredictable negotiations between actors and processes in war-torn scenarios and, particularly, on what the outcomes of these encounters will entail. Brigg argues that the prime position of a peacebuilder in a relational approach is the acknowledgement of the absence of authority and capacity of the individual to know the world over the recipient of

---

<sup>3</sup>Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (New York, NY: Free Press, 1979), 158.

<sup>4</sup>See Charles Develennes and Benoît Dillet, 'Questioning New Materialisms: An Introduction,' *Theory, Culture & Society* 35, no. 7–8 (December 29, 2018): 5–20.

<sup>5</sup>Barad, *Meeting the Univers Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, 342.

<sup>6</sup>Barad, op. cit., 342.

<sup>7</sup>Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 163.

<sup>8</sup>As examples of the use of relationality in International Relations, see Laura Zanotti, *Ontological Entanglements, Agency and Ethics in International Relations: Exploring the Crossroads* (Abingdon-on-Thames: Routledge, 2019); Milja Kurki, *International Relations in a Relational Universe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020). As examples of the use of relationality in critical peacebuilding literature, see Wren Chadwick, Tobias Debiel, and Frank Gadinger, eds., *Relational Sensibility and the 'Turn to the Local': Prospects for the Future of Peacebuilding* (Duisburg: Käte Hamburger Kolleg/Centre for Global Cooperation Research, 2013); Jonathan Joseph, 'Beyond Relationalism in Peacebuilding,' *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 12, no. 3 (July 3, 2018): 425–34; Morgan Brigg, 'Relational and Essential: Theorizing Difference for Peacebuilding,' *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 12, no. 3 (July 3, 2018): 352–66; Ignasi Torrent, 'Problematising UN-Local Civil Society Engagement in Peacebuilding: Towards Non-Modern Epistemes Through Relationality,' *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 13, no. 5 (2019): 618–37; Ignasi Torrent, 'An Introduction to "Peace, Conflicts and Security in the Anthropocene: Ruptures and Limits,"' *Revista de Estudios En Seguridad Internacional* 7, no. 1 (June 21, 2021): i–vi.

peacebuilding, as that epistemological collision mutually constitutes its participants. The author suggests that in relational and flatter ontologies hierarchy is less important than openness and change.<sup>9</sup> Thus Brigg emphasises the need to recognise other forms of thinking, doing and knowing as constituencies of our forms of thinking, doing and knowing.<sup>10</sup> In all, relational peacebuilding perspectives focus on the outcomes of non-linear transactions and entanglements between actors and processes to reach a more comprehensive understanding of the complexity of contemporary social phenomena, in which entanglements produce sharp and obvious unexpected effects, such as the ‘local resistance’ that critics of liberal peacebuilding have pointed out.<sup>11</sup>

The following text scrutinises the suitability of the entangled lens to reflect upon the seeming limited results of UN peacebuilding endeavours in conflict-affected scenarios, with a focus on the cases of Sierra Leone, Burundi and the Central African Republic (CAR). The chosen qualitative mode of enquiry is based on an exploratory approach to narratives and practices emerging from reports and interviews, which allows for the production of a broader picture of the emergent challenges in the peacebuilding milieu.

The article is organised into three main sections, corresponding to an engagement with three contemporary critical peacebuilding debates. First, through critically reflecting upon the limited results of UN peacebuilding efforts in knowing and engaging ‘the locals’ in peacebuilding projects, the text problematises the UN mode of knowing and capturing the host society as an essentialised and objectifiable actor. Rather, this piece hints that the observer/UN and the observed/‘locals’ are mutually constituted in relation. Second, thinking with the UN flawed performance to achieve organisational system-wide coherence as a necessary step to enhance the peacebuilding outcomes, the text interrogates the assumption of a Newtonian linear unfolding of events in conflict-affected scenarios. Beyond deterministic cause-effect relations, the article invokes a reconfigured notion of causality that might have significant implications for the expectations of peacebuilders in the field. Third, in light of the UN faulty performance amidst numerous deployed actors in peacebuilding settings, the article suggests that the growing complexity of the war-torn milieu questions actors’ autonomous and purposeful agency, which is conceived of as vulnerable to their relational condition. In the conclusion, whilst acknowledging the analytical potential of affirming the entangled ontogenesis of actors and processes, the article also makes a cautionary argument about what is defined in the following pages as entanglement fetishism, namely the emancipatory, normative and deterministic projection of a relational world. Far from this, entangled peace is an invitation to think peacebuilding instances, and by extension the broader world, as radical openness, where events emanate from the collision of an infinite multiplicity of possible worlds.

---

<sup>9</sup>Morgan Brigg, ‘Relational Sensibility in Peacebuilding: Emancipation, Tyranny, or Transformation?’, in *Relational Sensibility and the Turn to the Local: Prospects for the Future of Peacebuilding*, 2013, 12–18.

<sup>10</sup>Brigg, ‘Relational and Essential: Theorizing Difference for Peacebuilding.’

<sup>11</sup>See Oliver P Richmond, ‘A Pedagogy of Peacebuilding: Infrapolitics, Resistance, and Liberation1’, *International Political Sociology* 6, no. 2 (June 1, 2012): 115–31; Roger Mac Ginty, ‘Between Resistance and Compliance: Non-Participation and the Liberal Peace’, *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 6, no. 2 (June 1, 2012): 167–87; Stefanie Kappler, ‘Coping with Research: Local Tactics of Resistance against (Mis-)Representation in Academia’, *Peacebuilding* 1, no. 1 (March 1, 2013): 125–40.

## Failing to include ‘the locals’ in UN peacebuilding

In pursuit of broadening legitimacy and effectiveness in peacebuilding engagements, the UN peacebuilding apparatus has gradually sought to turn the highly liberal, top-down and externally-led engagements from the 1990s and early 2000s into bottom-up, context-sensitive processes, where the interests of ‘the locals’ ostensibly prevail. The 2000 Brahimi report expressed that ‘the need for the United Nations to reach out to civil society (...) who can be useful partners in the promotion of peace and security for all’.<sup>12</sup> Whilst the Department of Political Affairs was the main UN responsible body for peacebuilding tasks from the 1992 institutional reform, since 2005 the international organisation has materialised these efforts on the ground mostly through the Peacebuilding Commission (PBC), an inter-governmental advisory body for which the local civil society is conceptualised as a key element for the so-called national (or local) ownership principle, an essential feature of UN peacebuilding processes according to which ‘it is the citizens of the countries where peacebuilding is underway’.<sup>13</sup> More recently, the 2015 final report from the High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations (HIPPO) reinforced that UN missions should seek objective feedback from local and international civil society experts to improve their impact.<sup>14</sup> Shepherd develops a concise critical analysis of this conceptual and operational UN journey. The author observes how local civil societies, in the frame of the UN peacebuilding enterprise, have evolved over time from a passive to an implementing actor: ‘The emphasis on “national ownership” and the construction of the national community as agent of its own renaissance is in keeping with the construction of civil society actors as agents of change’.<sup>15</sup> Yet, unveiling the problematic patronising intimacies of the entwinement between the externals and the locals, the author observes that the elements belonging to the latter are ‘at once valued (in the process of extraction) and yet subordinated’.<sup>16</sup>

Despite efforts made by UN policy-makers towards centring the peacebuilding process on ‘the locals’, externally-led engagements are becoming increasingly protracted and real self-government remains deferred.<sup>17</sup> Numerous scholars have rethought and criticised why these international policy attempts have had rather limited results in turning externally-led peacebuilding processes into bottom-up processes in which field-based local actors adopt a central role.<sup>18</sup> From a Foucauldian perspective, arguably the dominant trend over the last two decades in the analysis of external-local relations in critical peacebuilding debates, Chandler argues in a conspicuous analysis that the conceptual production of civil society in the international peacebuilding framework reproduces the foundations of an ontology of difference which previously established the taxonomies of

<sup>12</sup>UN General Assembly and UN Security Council, ‘Report of the Panel on United Nations Peace Operations,’ art. 269.

<sup>13</sup>UN Peacebuilding Support Office, ‘UN Peacebuilding: An Orientation,’ 5.

<sup>14</sup>UN General Assembly and UN Security Council, ‘Report of the High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations on Uniting Our Strengths for Peace: Politics, Partnership and People,’ 2015.

<sup>15</sup>Laura J. Shepherd, ‘Constructing Civil Society: Gender, Power and Legitimacy in United Nations Peacebuilding Discourse,’ *European Journal of International Relations* 21, no. 4 (December 16, 2015), 899.

<sup>16</sup>Shepherd, op. cit., 904.

<sup>17</sup>Pol Bargañés-Pedreny, *Deferring Peace in International Statebuilding: Difference, Resilience and Critique* (London: Routledge, 2018).

<sup>18</sup>See Nina Wilén and Vincent Chapaux, ‘Problems of Local Participation and Collaboration with the UN in a Post-Conflict Environment: Who Are the “Locals”?’ *Global Society* 25, no. 4 (October 2011): 531–48; Gearoid Millar, ‘For Whom Do Local Peace Processes Function? Maintaining Control through Conflict Management,’ *Cooperation and Conflict* 52, no. 3 (September 5, 2017): 293–308.

race and culture, successively, as well as their resulting exclusionary and violent implications.<sup>19</sup> In a similar vein, Richmond argues that external actors create a hegemonic discourse and regulatory framework that intervened societies can hardly escape from. Their emancipation, that author suggests, hinges on the capacity or will of the locals to circumscribe to these externally-led peacebuilding endeavours.<sup>20</sup> Seeking to surpass the Foucauldian impasse, Danielsson, noticeably inspired by entangled thinking, argues that the process of knowledge production on the ‘local turn’ debate should not be grasped through the modern binary colonisers/internationals vs colonised/locals, but instead as an embodied, situated and co-constituted phenomenon. Following Haraway, Danielsson admits that a situated knowledge might ‘inform a new type of scholarly critique better suited to making known, disentangling and critiquing the contemporary politics and power relations of peacebuilding inclusivity projects’.<sup>21</sup>

Along these interpretative lines, the case of the UN peacebuilding involvement in post-conflict Sierra Leone offers suggestive observations. In this country, civil society organisations and personalities have often questioned the PBC for failing to comprehensively conceptualise, capture and engage local civil society. A few interviews illustrate these standpoints. The bishop Joseph Humper, former commissioner of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, highlighted the UN disregard to genuinely include local civil society in the peace process.<sup>22</sup> In addition, the head office of Fambul Tok, a Freetown-based NGO, defined the PBC mandate as narrow and not visible, claiming it dealt mostly with state actors, leaving minimal space for others.<sup>23</sup> Finally, the Country Director of Search for Common Ground, another Sierra Leonean NGO, highlighted the UN-civil society relationship as still presenting a challenge, as power relations continue to be uneven.<sup>24</sup>

This ontological limitation, for which the UN cannot grasp and include an apparently ‘out-there’ objectifiable actor, has been reinforced by evidence from reports and field interviews with experts. On the one hand, the Peacebuilding Fund’s (PBF) National Steering Committee election of two civil society representatives, one from the West African Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP) and another from the Mano River Women’s Network for Peace (MARWOPNET) resulted controversial, conducting field practitioners to complain that the chosen two were primarily urban-based actors, i.e. not representative of the grass-roots level, and that they had been hand-picked by the Government.<sup>25</sup> On the other hand, commentators have also problematised the highly institutionalised form of engagement that the UN peacebuilding machinery offers to the Sierra Leonean host society. For example, the National Steering Committee, aimed at assisting in post-conflict arrangements, and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission were expected to accommodate the demands and the voice of the local civil society through institutionalised mechanisms. Similarly, the south-south learning process paved

<sup>19</sup>David Chandler, ‘Race, Culture and Civil Society: Peacebuilding Discourse and the Understanding of Difference,’ *Security Dialogue* 41, no. 4 (August 1, 2010): 369–90.

<sup>20</sup>Oliver P Richmond, ‘Resistance and the Post-Liberal Peace,’ *Millennium* 38, no. 3 (May 1, 2010): 665–92.

<sup>21</sup>Anna Danielsson, ‘Transcending Binaries in Critical Peacebuilding Scholarship to Address “Inclusivity” Projects,’ *Third World Quarterly* 41, no. 7 (July 2, 2020), 1086.

<sup>22</sup>Interview I, Bishop Joseph Humper. Freetown, 23/07/2016.

<sup>23</sup>Interview II, anonymous. Freetown, 27/07/2016.

<sup>24</sup>Interview III, anonymous. Freetown, 07/07/2016.

<sup>25</sup>See Action Aid, CAFOD, and CARE International, ‘Consolidating the Peace?: Views from Sierra Leone and Burundi on the United Nations Peacebuilding Commission – GSDRC,’ 2007.

the ground for Sierra Leonean civil society representatives and elected officials to engage in structured dialogue about the electoral processes with their Burundian counter-parts, thus aiming to enhance the electoral contexts of 2007 and 2010, respectively. The particular south-south learning process, Jenkins suggests, 'while no doubt useful at the margins, frequently serve as an occasion for UN officials to highlight the invaluable role they are playing'.<sup>26</sup> The author exemplifies how, in the frame of this south-south learning process, the Deputy SRS (Special Representative of the Secretary General) took the opportunity to reiterate in a celebratory pose the value of the PBC's support to Sierra Leone's Election Commission and police force, and the PBC's commitment to doing the same in Burundi. Indeed, despite all these UN-supported efforts, several field actors reported the organisation's flaws in bringing the peace process closer to the local civil society, thus questioning the highly institutionalised nature of the engagement. Amongst several hindrances, the PBC-civil society relationship deteriorated over time because the PBC would announce meetings at very short notice. These pressing timings hinder a wide and thorough consultation with civil society, which often depends on short project budgets and therefore does not have the institutional capacity to engage in protracted or periodic policy discussions.<sup>27</sup>

Here, the lens of entangled ontologies introduced above allows for a fresh reading of these operational setbacks and deciphers in a nuanced mode the incapacity of the UN to grasp a representative sample of the local civil society. Moreover, the highly technical and institutionalised form of engagement offered by the UN is also compromised. These ontological limitations show how the international organisation imagines local civil society as an essentialised, objectifiable and manipulable object that can be externally known and engaged in a peacebuilding process. Illustrative of this ontological quandary, the current Sierra Leonean minister of Tourism, Memunatu Pratt, was a relevant figure of the Sierra Leonean local civil society by the time the PBC included the country in its agenda in 2007. Particularly, Pratt was the head of the Department of Peace and Conflict Studies at Fourah Bay College, the University of Sierra Leone, and she was also actively involved in various peacebuilding initiatives and entities, including the Freetown-based WANEP. The UN Peacebuilding Task Force as well as the UN Development Program (UNDP) in Sierra Leone regularly consulted Pratt regarding aspects closely connected to the peacebuilding process, such as poverty reduction strategies and mass youth unemployment, amongst other issues. The Pratt-UN relation became so intimate that she was eventually appointed to the UN-backed Special Court for Sierra Leone from 2007 to 2010. From the entangled ontological angle, the ontogenesis of both Pratt and the UN stems from their co-constitutive relation, which makes it unfeasible to trace a clear ontological cut to distinguish what is the international organisation and what is the local civil society representative. What ultimately sets the conceptualisation of local civil society is not a limited ontological definition, but the countless entangled interactions from which it stems.

---

<sup>26</sup>Rob Jenkins, *Re-Engineering the UN Peacebuilding Architecture. Working Paper: The Future of the Peacebuilding Architecture Project* (Oslo: Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, 2010), 10.

<sup>27</sup>See Action Aid, CAFOD, and CARE International, 'Consolidating the Peace?: Views from Sierra Leone and Burundi on the United Nations Peacebuilding Commission – GSDRC.'

## Unattaining system-wide coherence in UN peacebuilding

In a 1997 report former UN Secretary General (SG) Kofi Annan suggested addressing issues such as the relationship between the New York-based headquarters and field missions, the effectiveness on the ground level and the suitability of merging operational concepts like peace, security, development and human rights.<sup>28</sup> Along with the shift towards the inclusion of the local civil society in the peacebuilding enterprise described in the previous section, the creation of the PBC in 2005 stressed the necessity for a ‘coordinated, coherent and integrated approach (. . .) and to advise on and propose integrated strategies for post-conflict peacebuilding’,<sup>29</sup> particularly between donor States, the UN Headquarters and field missions. As former SG Ban Ki-Moon expressed in a 2009 report, coherence is critical to peacebuilding processes, as these require a tight coordination between security, political and development stakeholders, within and outside of the UN.<sup>30</sup> De Coning points out that the key operational issue of UN coherence and its associated mechanisms of coordination and integration is that it seeks to be system-wide, hence the apparent significant complexity of the process.<sup>31</sup> The author continues to classify this UN system-wide endeavour as facing four major challenges, namely facilitating its own internal coherence, supporting coherence amongst all host government’s agencies, encouraging coherence among all international or external actors, and facilitating coherence between the external and internal actors.<sup>32</sup> In the words of the HIPPO report, ‘coordination mechanisms should facilitate strategic coherence between the various organizations’ presence and operations in-country.’<sup>33</sup> De Coning identifies that while coherence is the aim, coordination encompasses the whole set of technical mechanisms through which coherence is achieved.

Despite all the above discursive and operational efforts, UN results in achieving a system-wide coherence and intracoordination have been significantly limited.<sup>34</sup> With a focus on the case of the UN peacebuilding engagement in Burundi, the following lines instrumentalise the entangled lens to problematise how the UN expects ground strategies to unfold in a cause-effect linear and predictable manner. Throughout the decade from 2004 to 2014, one of the most significant endeavours of UN peace operations deployed in Burundi was towards system-wide coherence.<sup>35</sup> Through the establishment of the United Nations Integrated Office in Burundi (BINUB) in 2007 the UN requested the mission to ensure ‘coherence and coordination of the UN agencies in Burundi, under the leadership of the Executive Representative of the Secretary-General (ERSG)’.<sup>36</sup> To be precise,

<sup>28</sup>UN Secretary General, ‘Renewing the UN: A Program for Reform,’ 1997.

<sup>29</sup>UN General Assembly, ‘2005 World Summit Outcome,’ arts. 97 and 98.

<sup>30</sup>UN Secretary General, ‘Peacebuilding in the Immediate Aftermath of Conflict,’ 2009.

<sup>31</sup>Ironically, the former MSF country director in the CAR assured during an interview that the UN spends half of its time on internal and external coordination (Interview IV, anonymous. Freetown, 29/06/2016, via Skype).

<sup>32</sup>Cedric De Coning, ‘Coherence and Coordination in United Nations Peacebuilding and Integrated Missions – A Norwegian Perspective’ (Oslo, 2007), 6.

<sup>33</sup>UN General Assembly and UN Security Council, ‘Report of the High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations on Uniting Our Strengths for Peace: Politics, Partnership and People,’ 229.

<sup>34</sup>See UN General Assembly and UN Security Council, ‘Review of the United Nations Peacebuilding Architecture,’ 2010; Advisory Group of Experts, ‘The Challenge of Sustaining Peace: Report of the Advisory Group of Experts for the 2015 Review of the United Nations Peacebuilding Architecture,’ 2015.

<sup>35</sup>There are numerous studies discussing problems of coherence and coordination in the UN peacebuilding framework. See Sebastiaan Rietjens and Chiara Ruffa, ‘Understanding Coherence in UN Peacekeeping: A Conceptual Framework,’ *International Peacekeeping* 26, no. 4 (August 8, 2019): 383–407; De Coning, ‘Coherence and Coordination in United Nations Peacebuilding and Integrated Missions – A Norwegian Perspective.’

<sup>36</sup>UN Security Council, ‘Resolution 1719,’ 2006.



BINUB was mandated to implement a multidimensional, integrated and coordinated mandate tackling a wide range of areas, including security. With this goal, BINUB's head took on the responsibility for four additional field roles, including the ERSG, the Resident Coordinator, the Humanitarian Coordinator and the head of the UN Information Centre. Later in 2010, the United Nations Office in Burundi (BNUB) replaced BINUB stressing the 'importance of establishing a fully integrated office with effective coordination of strategy and programs among the UN agencies, funds and programs in Burundi'.<sup>37</sup>

Several setbacks illustrate how unexpected events hinder the UN longed-for outcomes of peacebuilding strategies.<sup>38</sup> First, the unforeseen expulsion of BINUB's Special Representative of the Secretary General, Youseff Mahmoud, and BNUB's security chief, Paul Debbie, by the Nkuruziza government in 2010 and 2014, respectively, severely affected UN's efforts towards organisational intracoordination and coherence. Second, reported hostile and even disrespectful behaviours of UN peacebuilding officers towards local population in Bujumbura resulted in a deterioration of the trust the UN offered to Burundians. A former Security Sector Reform officer of the United Nations Operation in Burundi (ONUB) criticised during an interview that 'the UN presence in Bujumbura was too visible, with UN officers insensitively displaying wealth, creating distrust and dislike amongst locals'.<sup>39</sup> Third, the intra-UN turf battles resulting from conflicts of interest as well as issues of leadership and personality traits were overtly recognised in assessment reports as an operational inability for which the PBC failed to deploy a coordinated peacebuilding action in Burundi.<sup>40</sup> Asked about the deployment of BINUB in Burundi and its efforts towards coordination, a policy expert commented: 'there were still turf battles under the same headings, so they did not really succeed in this goal, at least in the beginning'.<sup>41</sup> In spite of the UN conviction that coherence leads to better peacebuilding, a formulation that resonates with cause-effect linear framings, the complexity and unforeseen clashes of war-torn scenarios impede coherence to be ever fully attained.<sup>42</sup> Therefore, the limits of coherence-oriented mechanisms such as coordination, integration and highly technocratic planning illustrate how the outcomes of peacebuilding scenarios stem from non-linear, unpredictable and entangled micro-political processes unleashed by a wide range of actors and processes at the ground level.<sup>43</sup>

Critical peacebuilding conversations on non-linearity have criticised the modern expectation that social events in the world occur in a linear, progressive and quasi-teleological fashion, which bases on the Newtonian contentious assertion that world events occur in sequential spacetime framings. Non-linear peacebuilding literature questions that phenomena in conflict-affected scenarios unfold in a deterministic, predictable and cause-and-effect

---

<sup>37</sup>UN Security Council, 'Resolution 1959,' 3.

<sup>38</sup>See Severine Rugumamu, 'Does the UN Peacebuilding Commission Change the Mode of Peacebuilding in Africa?', 2009; Anne M. Street, Howard Mollett, and Jennifer Smith, 'Experiences of the United Nations Peacebuilding Commission in Sierra Leone and Burundi,' *Journal of Peacebuilding and Development* 4, no. 2 (2008): 33–46.

<sup>39</sup>Interview V, anonymous. Barcelona, 16/03/2016, via Skype.

<sup>40</sup>See UN General Assembly and UN Security Council, 'Review of the United Nations Peacebuilding Architecture'; Robert Jenkins, *Peacebuilding From Concept to Commission* (Abingdon-on-Thames: Routledge, 2013).

<sup>41</sup>Interview VI, anonymous. Barcelona, 14/03/2016, via Skype.

<sup>42</sup>De Coning, 'Coherence and Coordination in United Nations Peacebuilding and Integrated Missions – A Norwegian Perspective,' 7.

<sup>43</sup>Laura Zanotti, 'UN Integrated Peacekeeping Operations and NGOs: Reflections on Governmental Rationalities and Contestation in the Age of Risk,' *International Peacekeeping* 17, no. 1 (February 1, 2010): 17–31.

linear path. Far from this, these accounts stress that actors and processes in the war-torn milieu collide in a rather uncontrollable mode. Chandler criticises how previous linear peacebuilding frameworks, which were highly intrusive, linear and top-down, were guided by the assumption that rational subjects from conflict-affected societies were awaiting to be freed by the external intervening actor. The author continues by elucidating how non-linear peacebuilding represents a shift away from liberal rationality and a theoretical and practical move towards a sensitivity with deeper and entwined social practices that eventually compose the overall peacebuilding outcome.<sup>44</sup> Seeking to move forward the affirmation of non-linear peacebuilding, this section, following Barad's application of entanglements, hints that the sequence of unexpected events involving field actors invites us to rework the notion of causality, which cannot be explained as specific relations between isolated objects, as one cause-thing resulting in an effect-thing separately. Cause and effect emerge through intra-action, namely they are mutually constituted at the point of their entanglement.<sup>45</sup> Causality is thus reconfigured as the outcome of unforeseeable relations, which renders the creativity of the future beyond deterministic linear unfolding of events.<sup>46</sup>

In sum, the asset of the entangled mode of looking into Burundi's peacebuilding case lies in the embrace of the indeterminacy of the future, which becomes an unknowable outcome that hinges on the chancy encounters between actors and processes. Thus, non-linear notions of causality and spacetime framings open up the possibilities for reconceptualising how actors such as the UN engage with the world with which they are ontologically entwined. The UN fruitlessly expects that a better coordination of its parts will result in system-wide coherence, for these parts have no autonomy per se, but they are contingent: they are produced through their interactions with other UN components. Hence advocates for the non-linear essence of the peacebuilding milieu tend to invoke a relational and process-based approach, arguably better suited to deal with unexpected outcomes, uncertainties or continuously transforming patterns. As Zanotti suggests, 'in a world of emergences, political action always takes place in conditions of uncertainty regarding the effects it triggers. The possibility that universal norms, principles, or totalizing planning rationalities may offer a valid ground for making sound decisions is slim'.<sup>47</sup> Unlike transformative interventions which ultimately seek for changes of 'out-there' objectified externalities expected to be sensitive to a cause-effect linear scheme, for instance the endeavour towards securing peacebuilding through a coherent field strategy, the entangled mode of thinking the world potentially enables actors such as UN peacebuilders to abandon the anxious pursuit of linear and rigid strategic goals.

### Rethinking the UN agency in complex peacebuilding

In addition to the debates about the problematics of recentring the peacebuilding enterprise on 'the locals' as well as the endeavour towards a system-wide coherence as prime conditions for the success of peacebuilding engagements, this section unpacks the

---

<sup>44</sup>David Chandler, 'Peacebuilding and the Politics of Non-Linearity: Rethinking "Hidden" Agency and "Resistance,"' *Peacebuilding* 1, no. 1 (March 1, 2013): 17–32.

<sup>45</sup>Barad, *Meeting the Univers Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, 140, 141, 178.

<sup>46</sup>See Milja Kurki, *Causation in International Relations Reclaiming Causal Analysis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

<sup>47</sup>Laura Zanotti, 'Reorienting IR: Ontological Entanglement, Agency, and Ethics,' *International Studies Review* 19, no. 3 (September 1, 2017), 369.

efforts and the implications of the UN goal to overcome the challenge of delivering peacebuilding amidst a plethora of actors with dissimilar political rationalities. UN peacebuilding performance does not occur in isolation, but amongst a multiplicity of actors and processes that constantly interact, negotiate and collide with the UN. This quasi-chaotic amalgamation of actors is illustrated in the following pages through the paradigmatic case of the CAR,<sup>48</sup> which over the last two decades has hosted over a dozen of peace missions, most of them led and/or authorised by the UN, the European Union (EU), the African Union (AU), the Central African Economic and Monetary Community (CEMAC) and the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS).

In the recent times, the UN peacebuilding efforts to overcome field complexity have been noticeable both at the discursive and operational level. The 2015 HIPPO report endorsed the reliance on cooperation with domestic, regional and global organisations in order to successfully pursue the international peace agenda. The report acknowledges that cooperating with regional and sub-regional actors 'will be an essential aspect of planning and deploying all UN peace operations in the future'.<sup>49</sup> On the ground, the UN has promoted a holistic and multidimensional approach aiming to improve inter-actor relations in the peacebuilding setting. The establishment of United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA) in 2014, which sought to merge country-wide peace efforts in one single pole of operations, is a clear example of the UN tendency towards sensitising with and overcoming field complexity.<sup>50</sup> As Juncos suggests, this form of integrated missions ultimately seek to overcome field complexity by achieving coherence amongst UN agencies and departments but also with external actors.<sup>51</sup> This strategy thus presumes that lasting peace results from a coordinated network of interdependent agencies between local, governmental, regional and international actors.

In light of the limited results of MINUSCA and the rest of peacebuilding stakeholders in the CAR over the last two decades,<sup>52</sup> the following lines seek to argue that the deployment of a multiplicity of varied peacebuilding actors illustrates how the messy field entanglements between them undermines their purposeful and autonomous agential condition.<sup>53</sup> To be sure, the question of agency in peacebuilding has not gone unaddressed. Jabri, for example, defines the notion of 'hybrid agency' to refer to the blurry distinction between the local and the external in the peacebuilding setting. To this author, this form of agency speaks to a wider network enabling 'practices that view their target as populations to be governed'.<sup>54</sup> Whilst dispelling facile dichotomies between

---

<sup>48</sup>For a detailed study of the CAR security situation see Tatiana Carayanis and Louisa Lombard, eds., *Making Sense of the Central African Republic* (London: Zed Books, 2015).

<sup>49</sup>UN General Assembly and UN Security Council, 'Report of the High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations on Uniting Our Strengths for Peace: Politics, Partnership and People,' art. 55.

<sup>50</sup>See Advisory Group of Experts, 'The Challenge of Sustaining Peace: Report of the Advisory Group of Experts for the 2015 Review of the United Nations Peacebuilding Architecture.'

<sup>51</sup>Ana E Juncos, 'Resilience in Peacebuilding: Contesting Uncertainty, Ambiguity, and Complexity,' *Contemporary Security Policy* 39, no. 4 (October 2 2018): 559–74. To read further on the interplay between peacebuilding and complexity see Cedric De Coning, 'From Peacebuilding to Sustaining Peace: Implications of Complexity for Resilience and Sustainability,' *Resilience* 4, no. 3 (September 1, 2016): 166–81.

<sup>52</sup>See Evan Cinq-Mars, 'Too Little, Too Late: Failing to Prevent Atrocities in the Central African Republic,' 2015.

<sup>53</sup>See Elisa Randazzo and Ignasi Torrent, 'Reframing Agency in Complexity-Sensitive Peacebuilding,' *Security Dialogue*, April 16, 2020.

<sup>54</sup>Vivienne Jabri, 'Peacebuilding, the Local and the International: A Colonial or a Postcolonial Rationality?,' *Peacebuilding* 1, no. 1 (March 1, 2013), 6.

local and international, Jabri's conceptualisation of agency continues to ground the latter in the imperative, governmentalising and policing element that characterises and delineates the actors seen as part of the peacebuilding architecture. This approach presumes the external actor's desire to enable further governance and constrain other forms of agency in the process, which are the expression of wider forms of contested politics. Without disavowing this critical point, this section attempts to move this conversation forward by hinting at the seemingly unnoticed effect that increasing entangled interactions between peacebuilding actors have in their condition of agents.

Illustrative of how entangled ontologies might reconfigure the notion of agency, when MINUSCA was deployed in the CAR, the African military and policy personnel who had been previously employed by the AU-led International Support Mission to the Central African Republic (MISCA) was simply re-hatted and became UN officers overnight.<sup>55</sup> This is indicative of the vulnerability of agency to ongoing entwinements and negotiations among a wide spectrum of actors. In a thorough analysis of stakeholders' agency in peacebuilding, Zanotti states that agency 'is not the quest for a pristine freedom by a subject that is ontologically independent from, and inevitably crushed by, power. Instead political agency is the result of one's position within social relations. It is constituted within a series of uneven, agonistic, situated responses to contingent conditions that in turn it transforms.'<sup>56</sup> Through observing the role played by NGOs in peacebuilding scenarios, this author suggests that agency is based on a 'continuous negotiation between ideal aspirations and contingent possibilities',<sup>57</sup> involving a wide range of actors such as international donors, regional actors as well as local stakeholders.

Informed by the above policy observations and theoretical accounts, the emphasis is hereby laid on the blurring boundaries between actors and their rationalities. At the same time, being cognisant of these entanglements is meaningful in contributing to an understanding of how the structures of power wherein peacebuilding takes place are shaped. In this regard, inter- and intra-actor relations can then be regarded as open-ended processes, constantly evolving on the basis of their mounting entanglements. In other words, this approach can enable a re-engagement with the agency of actors as deriving from the iterative processes seen beyond the phenomena that actors of peacebuilding are reacting against, trying to manipulate, or trying to find some leverage to emancipate themselves from (as if these existed outside themselves). This agential reformulation has major policy-oriented implications for actors such as the UN, currently seeking to focus on designing alternative practices and beliefs. Acknowledging relations as constitutive of their ever-transforming agency binds actors with a condition of vulnerability, which is indicative of the unfeasibility of an autonomous consecution of peacebuilding goals. Building on the previous section, the example of the UN deployment in the CAR amidst a wide range of peacebuilding actors hints at the agential weakness of both peacebuilders and recipients alike, whose entangled and complex form of becoming in the conflict-affected setting surpasses the possibility of a unilaterally manipulable social reality.

---

<sup>55</sup>Cedric De Coning, 'Peace Enforcement in Africa: Doctrinal Distinctions between the African Union and United Nations,' 154.

<sup>56</sup>Zanotti, 'UN Integrated Peacekeeping Operations and NGOs: Reflections on Governmental Rationalities and Contestation in the Age of Risk,' 27.

<sup>57</sup>Zanotti, *op. cit.*, 28.

## A cautionary conclusion: the limits of entanglement fetishism

The entangled ontogenesis of actors and processes in the war-torn milieu has been brought forward in this article as a potential analytical contribution to the comprehension of peacebuilding events. With a focus on the limited results of UN peacebuilding in the post-conflict cases of Sierra Leone, Burundi and the CAR, the paper has hinted at the suitability of entanglements and relations to shed light on the underlying problematics of three notorious contemporary critical peacebuilding debates, namely the inclusion of 'the locals', the achievement of organisational system-wide coherence as a *sine qua non* condition for the consolidation of lasting peace and the increasingly questioned agency of peacebuilding actors. By engaging with these debates, the entangled lens has allowed for, first, questioning the efforts towards engaging 'the locals' as if these were 'out-there' independent actors, second, reimagining the causality of a sequence of events beyond tethered and deterministic futures and, third, undermining the ostensible autonomous agential condition of actors due to their entangled genealogy. In brief, presuming that relations precede the very ontology of actors reminds us of their vulnerability, which compromises their purposeful interventive performance in the world, let alone the consecution of an objectifiable state of peace as ontologically separated from them. In the words of the English philosopher Alfred North Whitehead, 'the experience of Peace is largely beyond the control of purpose',<sup>58</sup> an assumption that frees peacebuilders from their protracted anxiety induced by a teleological ethos and renders efforts towards peace in an unsettling terrain.

Whilst entangled peace offers a worldview for which all elements constitute one another in relation, this conclusion intends to formulate a word of caution about the problematic implications of what is hereby defined as entanglement fetishism, namely the liberatory, normative and exclusionary projection of a relational world. Kurki, for example, renders the very existence of the cosmos subjected to the relational character of reality. In her own words, 'relations are everywhere in that "everything" is made of multiple relations and every "thing" in relations is situated in them specifically'.<sup>59</sup> In addition to an array of critical voices towards entangled thinking,<sup>60</sup> this article casts doubt on the supremacy of entanglements. What is intended to be brought forward is a mode of seeing the world that acknowledges the vulnerability of beings and processes as a result of their entangled ontogenesis, thus debunking the modern illusory desires of mastery like those of the UN. Nonetheless, through the frame of entangled peace the article has not sought to unleash an emancipatory, deterministic and homogenising project. The present account simply invokes relations as inexorable, even oppressive. As Shaviro suggests, the human fundamental condition 'is one of ubiquitous and inescapable connections. We are continually beset by relations, smothered and suffocated by them'.<sup>61</sup> Inspired by Whitehead, this author asserts that the ultimate metaphysical question is how to escape these overdetermined relations, thus 'finding space that is open for decision'.<sup>62</sup> In a similar vein, Colebrook warns that by reducing the existence of

---

<sup>58</sup> Alfred North Whitehead, *The Adventure of Ideas* (London: Macmillan Publishers, 1969), 368.

<sup>59</sup> Kurki, *International Relations in a Relational Universe*, 123.

<sup>60</sup> See Joseph, 'Beyond Relationalism in Peacebuilding.'

<sup>61</sup> Steven Shaviro, *The Universe of Things. On Speculative Realism* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 33.

<sup>62</sup> Shaviro, *op. cit.*, 34.

beings to an entangled ontogenesis intensifies the normative stress on life, being and becoming as relation. Thus, to this author imagining a world without relationality enables the possibility for multiple worlds, hence surpassing deterministic tics.<sup>63</sup>

In short, seeking to configure an all-encompassing relational world might reproduce a similar exclusionary logic to that of linear, progressive and universalising ventures of modernity, as illustrated by the UN peacebuilding telos. As Scott famously suggested, modernity behaves as a homogenising rationality that reduces and simplifies the cartographies of places and their forms of knowledge production so as to turn these vernacular stories in governable, controllable and mouldable beings.<sup>64</sup> Entangled peace refrains from claims of an entangled ontogenesis of all beings and processes so as to prompt an intervention in the world. It is not the object of entangled peace to unleash a saviour breakthrough towards a longed-for telos. Any other affirmation would fall once again under modern taxonomical and uniforming modes of seeing, thinking and living in the world. Entangled peace attempts to modestly eschew ontological elitism: Entanglements, relations, collisions, tensions, negotiations, frictions, entwinements, knots and so forth have not been approached in this article as rigid, deterministic and totalising cuts that claim how the world should be. Far from the celebratory character of a large part of literature inclined to an unquestioned fashion of entanglement fetishism, entangled peace enables a gaze at conflict-affected scenarios wary of this exclusionary slippage. Indeed, whilst entangled peace recognises the analytical value of sensitising with the relational ontogenesis of actors and processes in the peacebuilding arena, it also admits that a normative version of entangled ontologies does not seem to overcome the problems of exclusion characteristic of modern projects such as the UN peacebuilding endeavour. In conclusion, the article does stand by entangled ontological assumptions, but to the ultimate implications: Entangled peace is an invitation to speculate over the peacebuilding milieu, and by extension the broader world, as radical openness, where events emanate from the clash of an infinite multiplicity of world-making possibilities.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

### Notes on contributor

*Ignasi Torrent* is a Lecturer in Politics and International Relations and a research member of the Critical Humanities and International Politics Research Group (CHIP) in the School of Humanities at University of Hertfordshire, UK. His research interests are framed in the area of Critical Peace and Conflict Studies, the Anthropocene as well as new materialisms and their limits.

### ORCID

Ignasi Torrent  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9253-6133>

---

<sup>63</sup>Claire Colebrook, 'A CUT IN RELATIONALITY: Art at the End of the World,' *Angelaki* 24, no. 3 (May 4, 2019): 189.

<sup>64</sup>See James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2020).