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After the Fall: Leaders, Leadership and the Challenges of Post-Conflict Peacebuilding

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Key Points

- The peacebuilding debate has focused on policy prescriptions – what needs to be done to bind up the wounds of war and to prevent a relapse into conflict. Less attention has been given to the role of leaders in post-conflict peacebuilding, who have to act within a specific country and regional context that define the parameters of opportunity. Two types of leadership can be distinguished: national leadership and leadership within the international community.
- While successful leadership is much more than a single leader, post-conflict peacebuilding does require individual leaders able to inspire trust and hope, capable of both adapting and changing their countries' post-conflict prospects. Personalities and personal leadership skills are an inescapable part of the equation of peacebuilding.
- Unless their countries possess exceptional strategic or material assets, post-conflict leaders will usually need the active political and material support of the international community. However, the international community should be careful to support and not substitute for effective national leadership in peacebuilding. International leaders must also display adaptive qualities in their leadership so that they can partner effectively with national leaders in complex and unstable environments. They too must inspire trust and confidence.

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Post-conflict peacebuilding efforts have largely focused on policy prescriptions for peacebuilding rather than the leadership qualities required for success.¹ This paper by contrast looks at the leadership dimension of peacebuilding based largely on the author's experiences over the last decade in four, conflict-ridden African states: Sierra Leone, Cote d'Ivoire, Liberia and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). It offers some insights into the role played by the national leaders of these four countries in adapting and shaping the peacebuilding environment and draws some conclusions about the context and the personal qualities – and failings – that may contribute to success or failure in peacebuilding. The paper also considers leadership within the international community and makes some suggestions on what kind of international leadership can best help the peacebuilding process.

Peacebuilding Leadership: The National Dimension

The UN Secretary-General in his 2009 report on peacebuilding remarked that the United Nations had learned many lessons from its experience in dealing with the aftermath of conflict noting that "First and foremost, we know that peacebuilding is a national challenge and responsibility. Only national actors can address their society's needs and goals in a sustainable way". He also stressed the "imperative of national ownership".² The report rightly emphasizes that multiple local voices should be brought into the peacebuilding process to create a "sense of ownership around a common vision". The OECD has also stressed the importance of state leadership in this process of visioning in its latest report on State building in fragile situations.³ In the same vein, in *Development as Leadership-Led Change*, the authors stress the notion that "leadership is more about groups than individuals". They add that leaders are identified more because of the "functional contribution" to change rather than their personal attributes and authority and argue that "leadership contributes to change when it builds *change space* – where leaders foster acceptance for change".⁴

National leaders need to know where they want to lead their people and accept that they cannot do it alone. Nevertheless, how that "common vision" or "change acceptance" is articulated and achieved depends a great deal on who is leading the process, and the context in which they are endeavouring to do so.

Leadership and Context: The Parameters of Opportunity

Post-conflict leaders function in a contextual environment shaped by political, cultural and economic realities, which influence or limit their capacity to set and implement an agenda for post-conflict peacebuilding. Although the contextual elements vary considerably from country to country, there are some common denominators.

Conflict outcome: a conflict that ends with a clear military victory will provide the winner with more room for an independent course of action if the victorious leader (for example presidents Museveni of Uganda and Kagame of Rwanda) has unambiguous control of the security forces. By contrast leaders who come to power (or who remain in power) following a negotiated peace will need to accommodate, or circumvent, demands from competing centres of power even if they are freely and fairly elected.

Strategic advantages: leaders of impoverished countries with few marketable assets – natural or geo-political – will enjoy fewer options for setting their own post-conflict course. By contrast, those that do have such assets are probably less vulnerable to pressures from neighbours or donors. Angola, for example, with its enor-

mous oil wealth, has been able to dictate its own post-conflict agenda and keep the donors at arm's length on governance and human rights issues (the so-called "liberal peace").⁵ Of course, natural resource assets can be a mixed blessing as evidenced by the troubles of the Eastern DRC where illegal exploitation of minerals has continued to fuel conflict.

Regional factors: fragile post-conflict states are especially vulnerable to their neighbours' influence (and interference). Instability in the Eastern DRC, for example, has been closely linked to Rwandan and Ugandan security concerns, and those countries' efforts to secure defence in depth on the other side of their common borders.⁶

Game Changers: Leaders and Peacebuilders

Contextual factors frame and create the challenges for post-conflict leadership. Nevertheless, the personal dynamic of leadership remains a crucial element in the peacebuilding equation; neither military victory nor electoral triumph guarantee success in peacebuilding. Charles Taylor, former president of Liberia had gained both by 1997. Within five years he had lost power, and forced into exile and subsequently put on trial in The Hague for war crimes. So what kinds of leaders are best suited for peacebuilding? What skills and personal attributes do they need?

In the paper "From Warlords to Peace Lords", a distinction is made between *transformational* and *transactional* leaders.⁷ Nelson Mandela is cited as an outstanding, contemporary example of a transformational leader, someone able to rise above historical grievances and unite his (or her) compatriots behind a national vision that embraces the future, remedying past wrongs in a non-violent manner and yet ready to leave office at the height of his power.

By contrast, transactional leaders "come to their choices based upon whether it will reap benefits and achievements for themselves and their followers".⁸ The great majority of leaders involved in state-based armed conflict⁹ fall into this category. This is not surprising. Leaders in civil wars usually acquire allegiance and power by promising to right wrongs or secure advantages based on ethnic, religious or regional identity, and not necessarily for altruistic reasons or with redemptive motives.

Making the Difference – Adapting for Peace

In "Leadership in a (Permanent) Crisis",¹⁰ the writers (referring to the business world) argue that crisis leadership has two phases: first is the *emergency* phase when the task is to stabilize the situation and buy time. The second is the *adaptive* phase when the underlying causes of the crisis are tackled and capacity is built to manage the new reality. Peacebuilding too is about this adaptive phase, moving the state to a new reality where conflict can be prevented or managed without resort to abusive and uncontrolled violence.

Post-conflict leaders with transformational qualities are likely to be the exception rather than the rule. It is usually transactional type leaders that lead after conflict. So the question is: are such leaders capable of adapting their own leadership styles and skills to the adaptive demands of peacebuilding?

Paths to Power

The post-conflict presidents of Sierra Leone, Liberia, Cote d'Ivoire and the DRC presented contrasting portraits of leaders responding to the adaptive challenges of the peacebuilding transition. There were some commonalities in their respective paths to office. Three of them – Kabbah in Sierra Leone, Johnson Sirleaf in Liberia and Gbagbo in Cote d'Ivoire – had prior careers in public services. Before they assumed presidential office they had com-

pleted post-graduate education abroad, spending considerable periods of time outside of their countries before returning home to resume political careers. All three were involved in opposition to the governments of the day and imprisoned at one time or another on political charges.

Joseph Kabila (DRC) did not follow the same path, becoming president by a violent event – the assassination of his father Laurent-Desire Kabila in 2001. Unlike the other three, Kabila was a military commander but he too spent a considerable time outside his country (largely in neighbouring Tanzania). Although Kabila had commanded units during the Congolese war he had not gained prominence as a war time leader. The major point of political convergence among the four was that they were all elected to office following on internationally marshalled peace initiatives and agreements. The election of Kabbah, Johnson Sirleaf and Kabila were generally endorsed by the international community. Gbagbo's election in 2000 was not, mainly because the leading opposition candidate (Alassane Ouattara) was disqualified from running. To varying degrees, all four leaders were dependant on external security support and none had won an outright military victory. Post-election politics seemed to dictate therefore an adaptive agenda, recognizing that compromise and reconciliation were indispensable to consolidate the peace process.

Leadership in Practice

While the four presidents shared some common, formative experiences, notably the long periods spent outside their home countries, their styles of leadership had little in common. Johnson Sirleaf displayed a confident and engaged style in contrast to the diffident and reserved approach of Kabila. Gbagbo and Johnson Sirleaf were excellent communicators, capable of crowd rousing, impromptu speeches; Kabbah, and especially Kabila, far less so. Kabbah and Johnson Sirleaf, former international civil servants, were comfortable in technocratic discussions. Gbagbo and Kabila left day-to-day government business to subordinates preferring a much less hands-on style of leadership (perhaps unavoidable in countries that are much larger than Liberia and Sierra Leone) while keeping political and security decisions under tight control of a close inner circle.

Both Kabbah and Johnson Sirleaf were at ease (although often frustrated) in working with the international community. They developed good support networks, within and outside the region, which proved highly valuable for mobilizing debt relief (for Liberia) or, in times of trouble, military assistance (Sierra Leone's case), which helped in turn to reinforce their political positions at home. Johnson Sirleaf has been particularly effective in working with non-governmental and business groups, which has broadened her appeal in and beyond the donor community.

An ability to speak the language of the international community (Kagame has proved to be a master of the art) helps – provided it is backed up by action. Kabbah and Johnson Sirleaf's previous experience in the UN was an undoubted asset in that regard and they both emphasized issues such as the fight against corruption that they knew were of concern to donors as well as to their compatriots. Nevertheless, the presence in government of individuals widely suspected of corruption was a source of international criticism, undermining their credibility with the donor community.

By contrast, Gbagbo and Kabila struggled to convince the international community and regional partners of their credibility, caused, in part, by the perception – justified or not – that they did not make good on promises or commitments. Although both of them have changed political course and made deals with erstwhile adversaries (presidents Compaore of Burkina Faso and

Kagame of Rwanda respectively), these moves came late in the diplomatic day, in response to mounting pressures at home and abroad, leaving an impression of weakness rather than leadership.

Despite his credentials as campaigner for democracy while in opposition and in exile, Gbagbo acquired a reputation as a Machiavellian temporizer, capable of making incremental concessions but unable to make the broader strategic changes that might have bolstered his presidency. His concessions came to be seen as purely tactical, designed to buy time and divide the opposition. At the end, as at the outset, he seemed unable to rise above partisan interest to make hard choices, distinguishing reality from rhetoric.

At the start of his presidency, few observers believed that Kabila would still be in office a decade later. There has been progress (much of the country is relatively stable and some human development indicators show significant improvement) but Kabila has yet to overcome an impression of presidential ineffectiveness. He is not at ease in the media spotlight and is a reluctant communicator, even with his own people. He too is more comfortable with incremental approaches rather than grand strategy, responding to rather than leading events. This has been especially evident in his handling of the security situation in the East and other critical concerns, notably security sector reform and endemic corruption. He has been very anxious not to alienate the security forces and has only belatedly spoken out and taken (some) action against notorious human rights violators. Kabila's relations with Western donors – which he berates as demanding but not delivering – have sharply deteriorated in recent years because of his perceived failure to deal with human rights abuses and to implement key reforms.

The Essence of Peacebuilding Leadership

Cultural perceptions of leadership vary enormously. What is an acceptable form and style of leadership in one country or region may jar in another, so generalizations have to be used with care. Nevertheless, the ability to inspire trust, at home and abroad, is a crucial leadership asset in post-conflict countries where confidence is fragile and old enmities still lie close to the surface, and external actors are wary of any relapse into corrupt or abusive practices.

Kabbah and Johnson Sirleaf, although not overcoming all mistrust, were willing and able to reach out beyond their immediate political base, engaging with communities and individuals previously hostile to them. They avoided damaging allegations of personal venality even though some of their associates were tarnished by corruption charges; they remained relatively open but not immune to criticism and did not resort to violent repression. They recognized the need for compromise before it was thrust on them. Although neither leader has enjoyed universal admiration locally or abroad (few politicians do), they were able to create a reservoir of goodwill in support of their leadership, and a sense of hope that the future could be better than the past, which is the essence of peacebuilding.

It remains to be seen, if Kabila's cautious, somewhat hesitant style might actually prove the best one in a country troubled by many competing ethnic and regional interests and undisciplined security forces. Could this be a case where "leading from behind" is the way to build peace? Will this approach afford him the time and political space to finally implement critical reforms? Or will his caution further erode confidence and simply delay change to the point where the state again falters and widespread violence returns?

Peacebuilding Leadership: The International Dimension

National leadership is the crucial factor in successful peacebuilding. But is it enough? It has been said that “we should not concentrate exclusively on local leaders to end conflicts and build peace”.¹¹ The international community, it is argued, should focus on the influence of international leaders and organizations and how to use them “to effect change and influence local leaders”¹² is essential. Timothy Sisk adds that “the parties cannot do it on their own: protagonists in civil wars need reassurances throughout the transition from war to peace, and they are more likely to succeed if a robust third party helps consolidate the peace”.¹³ The UN Secretary-General 2009 peacebuilding report also stresses that the “international community can play a critical role”¹⁴ in peacebuilding, and underlines the importance of coherence in the international peacebuilding effort, calling for partnerships and coordination as does the OECD.

From Brokers to Builders: International Leadership in Peacebuilding

If the role of the international community does not end with the brokering of a peace agreement, how should the international community channel its support for peacebuilding in a way that reinforces national ownership but also gets national leadership to move ahead with a progressive agenda for peace? What kind of international leaders should the international community seek out to aid peacebuilding transitions on the ground? And how can those international leaders balance their advocacy for change while promoting national ownership of the peacebuilding process? Here again, contextual factors are important.

Partners or patrons: as already noted, a country’s relative political and economic strength has a direct bearing on the post-conflict peacebuilding dialogue (or indeed if there can be one) with the international community. Leaders of countries emerging from conflict that have strategic or marketable resources are likely to be less amenable to the pressures and priorities of the international community. But even in countries where international influence is strong every care should be taken to build and not subvert the credibility of national leadership. While still insisting on the basic principle of accountability, external actors have to avoid the perception that they are calling all the shots, by creating, for example, organizational enclaves largely dependent on their funding.

Personal politics: good relations with national leaders can make a difference – up to a point. A leader from the international community (resident or otherwise) who works with a newly enfranchised government has to be sensitive to the “seduction of sovereignty”. While referring specifically to the challenges of leadership in UN peacekeeping operations, the *International Challenges Forum* makes a point that is equally valid about international engagement in peacebuilding noting that the relationship between a “mission and the host government will be dynamic and will likely change over time. The close political engagement, which is needed and sought after in the early days... may become resented as national ownership and pride (re-) asserts itself”.¹⁵

Personal experience leads me to underline this conclusion. The “body language” of external actors has to evolve as changing realities take hold. After winning the presidential elections in 2006, President Kabila quickly dispelled any notion that the inter-governmental committee providing oversight for the transition would continue, and he was reluctant to see any other formal coordination bodies set up, particularly on high profile issues

such as security sector reform. This attitude may have resulted from his perception – mistaken or not – that the committee had patronized him, and that following the elections he needed to be seen as “his own man”. The challenge for the intermediaries of the international community is how to untangle the message from the messenger: in essence how to ensure that concerns are fully and faithfully transmitted but in a manner that does not close down access and with it the opportunity to influence government thinking and actions. Influential leaders, as well as local public opinion, have to be convinced that the international community is not an opponent, even though it may oppose certain Government policies and actions. Good communication skills are part of this dynamic.

Actors and agendas: the third parameter that international peacebuilders have to contend with is the profusion of external actors involved in peacebuilding. Aid and advice comes from many sources, in many forms, creating multiple agendas and competing priorities,¹⁶ which poses a systemic challenge of coherence.

Getting external partners to agree and cooperate around a given set of objectives (whether in peacebuilding, emergency relief or development) is never an easy task, even when the host Government takes a strong lead. Various mechanisms have been employed to improve coordination – consultative and contact groups, round tables, partners’ forums, priority action plans, integrated strategic frameworks – with mixed results. To make such mechanisms work leaders and participants have to forego their institutional agendas, putting nationally articulated priorities at the forefront in the spirit of partnership.¹⁷ This requires a collective will to pursue a limited number of high value goals in a “joined up” fashion. The UN has characterized this as “delivering as one”, an approach that has also drawn support from the OECD.¹⁸

In or outside of the UN, peacebuilding requires a style of leadership that can adapt and innovate. Partners have to empower their local representatives and choose people who can display the adaptive qualities and collaborative work practices that are so important for national leaders engaged in peacebuilding. And they should be ready and willing to respond to the lead of their country representatives rather than impose preconceived approaches in a top down fashion from capitals.

A Man or Woman for all Seasons

Where the UN has a multi-dimensional mission in place the lead coordination role is usually taken on by the Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG) who is mandated by the Security Council to coordinate UN efforts and beyond. It has been argued that the primary task for an SRSG in the peacebuilding transition is taking forward a process that “generates and maintains strong strategic and operational coherence across the political, governance, development, economic and security dimensions”.¹⁹ While this prescription certainly rings true, does it go far enough? The SRSG (or someone in an analogous position) must be more than a “super facilitator” of process, critical though that role may be. At any one time, the SRSG may be a facilitator but also a visionary, politician, referee, conciliator, negotiator, advocate and managing director. His or her ability to play this multi-sided role may be limited, or made possible, by the contextual factors previously outlined but personal skills and abilities count as well. Certainly the SRSG has to be able to get people to work together relying – in the absence of formal authority (even within the UN system) – on the power to convene and ability to persuade.²⁰ There may be trade-offs, however, and at times a more assertive style may be required to overcome obstacles that threaten to de-

rail the peacebuilding agenda.

In that respect, it has been argued that the SRSG should be a "gardener not an engineer"²¹ and focus on cultivating rather than building an enabling environment for the consolidation of peace. In reality, he or she may need to be a bit of both – an agricultural engineer – helping to prepare the ground but also willing to put his or her shoulder to the wheel of peace when needed. Getting that balance right is the essence of sound leadership.

No-one is likely to fill all of these roles with equal success, and as the situation on the ground evolves the international community may need to reconsider the leadership formula in the country context.²² But in considering such a move the UN and the international community should avoid the pitfall of "mediation shopping" – a revolving demand to jettison the mediator if the protagonists believe that they can strengthen their hand by changing the dealer. Gbagbo was a master at that game – extending or withdrawing cooperation to and from mediators as negotiations evolved in his favour, or not.

Conclusions: After the Fall

Despite the propensity of conflict prone states to relapse into violence, many countries have been able to recover and escape from recurring violent conflict propelled in large measure by effective national leadership. Authentic peacebuilding must be shaped and directed by a country's own leaders – in the executive, the security services, in the legislature, the judiciary, and civil society. But leaders are the product of the environment that spawned or perpetuated the conflict and the qualities of leadership evident in war time leaders – single-minded determination, self-will and ruthlessness – are not necessarily the ones that can consolidate peace.

Few are endowed with the transformational qualities that enable them to completely overcome their own formative experiences. Leaders that emerge from conflict to assume positions of authority and influence have therefore to possess or develop adaptive qualities if they are to lead their country and communities forward to a better future.

While there are no ready-made formulae for success, peacebuilding calls for leaders with adaptive type qualities such as tolerance, flexibility, openness, empathy (plus the universal qualities of effective leadership – courage and determination). These qualities equip them to better understand and overcome both the causes of conflict in societies, as well as the inevitable disenchantment that arises when the initial post-conflict euphoria begins to wear thin. Above all, if they are to be convincing and credible with their own people, as well as the international community, post-conflict leaders must set a positive tone by their

own attitudes and behaviour, responsive to genuine grievance, otherwise peacebuilding will flounder in a tide of doubt, cynicism and recrimination.

Where leaders do not possess or exercise the qualities of adaptive leadership the international community should send clear and unambiguous messages pressing for change, and if need be, progressively suspend support or possibly adopt more assertive measures including sanctions (although the use of sanctions to effect policy change has a mixed record). But the international community should not over-estimate its ability to secure positive change especially when post-conflict states have resources that make them less vulnerable to outside pressures.

External actors should be realistic, however. The international community can only reinforce or caution national leadership not substitute for it. Partners and donors should be prudent when they try to pick leadership "winners" simply because they appear (initially) compliant and manageable; their choices sometimes turn out to be disasters – tyrants and worse. Peacebuilding is a laborious process of trial and error, which has to be fashioned from local materials with local hands. The political context in post-conflict countries is usually quite fragile and leaders – even tough and determined ones – have to survive, making unpalatable choices and uneasy compromises.

The adaptive qualities that are so essential in national leaders apply equally to the leadership of the international community. This requires a style of leadership that is inclusive and collaborative, able to adjust to changing circumstances, respectful of national dignity and sensitivities, while articulating and pursuing a core vision of where and how the international community can best support the national agenda. External partners also have to inspire trust: among their peers in the international community but even more so with national and local leaders, inside and outside of the government. Disillusion with aid and advice can quickly set in if promises are not kept.

Peacebuilding is about institutions as well as individuals. The institutions of the State – political, judicial and economic – matter because they link the state and society and, if soundly constructed and diligently led, help to adjudicate peacefully the dissension and strife that all states encounter at various stages in their formation and growth. In practice, however, strong institutions also require strong men and women capable of making a qualitative difference to the way those institutions function. Leadership in peacebuilding is essentially about making that difference with the hope that the future can be better than the past.

NB: The views expressed in this paper are entirely and solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the GCSP.

Endnotes

- 1 See for example, *Report of the Secretary-General on peacebuilding in the immediate aftermath of conflict*, A/63/881-S/2009/304, United Nations, New York, June 2009; see also *Supporting Statebuilding in Situations of Conflict and Fragility: Policy Guidance*, OECD-DAC, 2011.
- 2 See *Report of the Secretary-General on peacebuilding in the immediate aftermath of conflict*, *op.cit.*, p.4.
- 3 See *Concepts and Dilemmas of State Building in Fragile Situations: From Fragility to Resilience*, OECD, Paris, 2008.
- 4 M. Andrews, J. McConnell and A. Wescott, *Development as Leadership-Led Change – A report for the Global Leadership Initiative and the World Bank Institute*, Faculty Research Working Paper Series, Harvard Kennedy School, March 2010, p.3.
- 5 See R. Soares de Oliveira, "Illiberal Peacebuilding in Angola", *Journal of Modern African Studies*, Vol. 49, No.2, Cambridge University Press, 2011.
- 6 See G. Prunier, *Africa's World War*, Oxford University Press, 2009; and R. Lemarchand, *The Dynamics of Violence in Central Africa*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009.
- 7 *From Warlords to Peace Lords: Local Leadership Capacity in Peace Processes*, INCORE, UN University, December 2004.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p.19.
- 9 See *Human Security Report Project 2010* (Part III: "Trends in Human Insecurity", Chapter 10: "State-based Armed Conflict"), Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, 2010.
- 10 R. Heifetz, A. Grashow, and M. Linsky, "Leadership in a (Permanent) Crisis", *Harvard Business Review*, July-August 2009.
- 11 *From Warlords to Peace Lords: Local Leadership Capacity in Peace Processes*, *op.cit.*, p.14.
- 12 *Ibid.*
- 13 T. Sisk, "The SRSs and the Management of Civil Wars", *Global Governance*, Vol.16, No.2, 2010, pp.237-242.
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- 15 *Considerations for Mission Leadership in United Nations Peacekeeping Operations*, International Forum for the Challenges of Peace Operations, Stockholm, 2010, p.18.
- 16 For a discussion on how institutional agendas and identities can collide in peacebuilding, see T. Tardy, "Cooperating to Build Peace: The UN-EU Inter-Institutional Complex", *Geneva Paper – Research Series No. 2*, GCSP, May 2011.
- 17 See *Policy Commitment and Principles for Good International Engagement in Fragile States and Situations*, OECD-DAC, 2007; and *Understanding State Building from a Political Economy Perspective*, Overseas Development Institute, September 2007.
- 18 See "Implications for Bilateral and Multilateral Organization and Financing", in *Concepts and Dilemmas of State Building in Fragile Situations...*, *op.cit.*, OECD, p.2.
- 19 See C. de Coning, "Mediation and Peacebuilding: SRSs and DSRSs", *Global Governance*, Vol. 16, No.2, 2010, pp.281-299.
- 20 For a detailed review of leadership qualities in a UN context see F. Hochschild, "In and Above Conflict: a Study of Leadership in the United Nations", Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, Geneva, July 2010.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p.292.
- 22 See K. Papagianni, "Mediation, Political Engagement and Peacebuilding", *ibid.*, pp.243-263.

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