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**QUESTIONING THE LOCAL
IN PEACEBUILDING**

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Questioning the Local in Peacebuilding

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Questioning the Local in Peacebuilding

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CONTENT

Abstract	2
I. The local in peacebuilding research	3
II. Fragmentation of the local: contested actors	6
III. Actors and Space beyond Local Frontiers	10
IV. Questioning the notion of a collective local agency	13
V. Concluding Remarks	14
References	16

Abstract

Critics of the liberal peace paradigm call for the consideration of local realities in order to come to a more sustainable, comprehensive form of peace – which is not imposed by external actors. The “local” is generally seen as the place where bottom-up or grassroots peace is developed in contrast to the liberal peace proposed by external international agents. Whereas critical peacebuilding literature stresses the difference between the “liberal” and the “local” and acknowledges the incoherence of liberal actors, much less attention has been paid to differences and variations within the “local” sphere. Drawing on empirical research in Burundi and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) we argue that the “local” is much more complex than presumed by many critics of the liberal peace. We argue that a) the local is fragmented and actors and issues are highly contested; b) neither actors nor discourses are purely local; and c) the very idea of a coherent collective local agency is contested locally.

Key words: peacebuilding, liberal peace, Africa, local, customary authorities

It has been increasingly acknowledged that ordinary citizens affected by a conflict should be integral to peacebuilding. This inclusion of what can be summed up by the term “the local”, also referred to as local ownership, often stagnates in the form of rhetorical commitments (Donais 2009, 18; see also Pouligny 2009). Nonetheless, much literature has focused on the benefits of local involvement, especially amongst critical peacebuilding scholars, who oppose the imposition of external liberal peace models (e.g. Mac Ginty 2010). We discuss this literature and find that the “local” remains for the most part under-analysed as it lacks empirical grounding.¹ Using empirical data collected in two African post-conflict countries, namely Burundi and the DRC, we try to give a more intricate picture of what could be perceived as “the local” in these specific contexts. We find that – just like the “liberal” – the local can be incoherent and contradictory. We find that local actors are contested, and rarely exist on a purely local-local level. In addition, the very idea of a meaningful collective local agency is contested by the very “ordinary citizens” perceived as local. Our findings do not suggest that researchers should refrain from considering the problems of liberal peacebuilding or that the search for bottom-up peace is in vain. Nor do we propose that using the term “the local” is redundant itself. We rather argue, that the specific empirical complexity of a certain context must be considered if peacebuilding is to become more inclusive. Before going into more details describing our main findings, we review some of the current literature on the subject, and then conclude with some final thoughts.

I. The local in peacebuilding research

In recent years there has been a significant increase in studies considering sub-national dynamics, which Kalyvas termed the “micro-theoretic turn” (2008, 399). The reason for this focus on the sub-national level is that researchers have realized that local interests and conflicts are in fact diverse across a national territory and perhaps more influential on national dynamics than hitherto believed.

The most visible manifestation of this finding is in terms of conflict dynamics, namely that armed violence rarely affects entire states but is often concentrated in geographically confined areas. Moreover, conflict roots will often be tied to a specific local area. By looking exclusively at the national level researchers are unable to comprehensively understand why and how armed conflict emerges and when it becomes relevant beyond a certain area. For a long time analysts simply believed local dynamics to be “a mere (and rather irrelevant) local manifestation of the central [conflict] cleavage” (Kalyvas 2003, 481; see also Kalyvas 2006, 366–387). However, local cleavages can just as easily affect the master cleavages, or in any case be equally damaging (Ibid). In other words, local agendas, whether in a few villages or single communities, can be a source of violent conflict long before a nation-wide conflict erupts, and long after a peace agreement has been signed (Autesserre 2006, 3–4). Consequently, national peace processes and agreements have an uneven effect on the sub-national level. Some parts of a country may be pacified whilst others remain in a state of war (Simons et al. 2013). In practical terms, this means that narrow and centre-focused conceptions of peace which ignore local elements will prove

1 For a theoretical and conceptual critique of “the local” and the implication of researchers into a politics of scale in peacebuilding studies see Hirblinger and Simons (2014).

detrimental to not only understanding the root causes of conflict, but also to finding sustainable solutions. This is why the importance of the local – as a geographical space and as agents of their own agenda – has become increasingly discussed in terms of sustainable peacebuilding.

One important strand of literature addressing this is concerned with critiquing the liberal peacebuilding paradigm. This paradigm resulted from a plethora of UN-led peacebuilding operations in the 1990s, said to be restoring peace through liberalization policies, the idea being to promote peace through the top-down encouragement of political and economic liberalization including democratization, institutional reform, good governance, human rights, development and free market reform (Krause and Jütersonke 2005, 454; Paris 2010, 341; Richmond 2009a, 559; Uvin 2009, 43–44). Peacebuilding in this sense is tightly linked to liberal statebuilding, as peacebuilding measures always imply the re-ordering of politics and the reallocation of power, with the state and its institutions playing a central role (Manning 2003, 28).

On the one hand, the project of liberal peacebuilding has been normatively accused of being an imposition of Western values, accompanied by inherent ethnocentrism, which presumes the universalism of liberal goals (Mac Ginty 2010, 394; Paris 2010, 344–345; Richmond 2009a, 569). Since locally driven reforms do not necessarily fit into this paradigm, it is argued that people at the receiving end of liberal peacebuilding will end with something they simply do not desire (Lidén, Mac Ginty, and Richmond 2009, 592; Paris 2010, 343; Uvin 2009, 44). Thus, it is argued that a contextualization of the local is needed, in order to build peace that is sustainable, resilient and legitimate (Donais 2009, 11; Richmond 2009a, 572; see also Richmond 2009b, 340). The understanding of the local (or local-local in the words of Richmond [2012, 117]) in this literature is generally perceived as the place where a bottom-up or grassroots peace is developed in contrast to the liberal peace proposed by international agents (Krause and Jütersonke 2005, 457; Lidén, Mac Ginty, and Richmond 2009, 593). What is expected from the “local” is that its particular understanding of peace is original, emancipatory and based on everyday experience rather than the international blueprint for liberal peace (Richmond 2009a; Richmond 2012). This everyday nature of peace of a local community must be understood if peacebuilding is to be adapted into something sustainable and emancipatory (Eriksen 2009, 661; Richmond 2009a; Richmond 2009b). Although most critical peacebuilding literature refrains from romanticising the local as a place of inclusive decision-making, it is seen as the locus where decisions about peace should be taken. In very general terms, these contributions have called for peacebuilding from below (or bottom-up), as opposed to peacebuilding from above (the “imposition” of liberal peace). Interestingly, there is a parallel to earlier work of Lederach, who promotes the idea of what he calls “communitarian peacebuilding”, which emphasizes the importance of traditional and social context, creating a path of peacebuilding not influenced by international norms (1997).

Apart from this normative critique it is also pragmatically argued that the outcomes of liberal peacebuilding are dysfunctional and that considering local realities is thus “not only an ethical necessity, but also unavoidable for the aim of sustainability in peacebuilding endeavours” (Schaefer 2010, 504). This can be linked to a wider discourse on local ownership that has developed in response to peacebuilding practices. It is argued that any peace process “not embraced by those who have to live by it is likely to fail” (Donais 2009, 3). Any attempt at peacebuilding thus needs “grassroots legitimacy in immediate terms” (Richmond 2012, 122). In line with the micro-theoretic turn in conflict studies, it is argued that the local needs to be considered in order to develop sustainable peace across an entire territory. Local populations should have the possibility to decide which norms and institutions are to be implemented as their understanding of peace might be different from one place to another and from the liberal values promoted by international agents. It is acknowledged that in reality the “local” already permeates the liberal

project, reacts to it with compliance, resistance or modification. As a result hybrid institutions emerge which are informed by both liberal and local norms (Boege et al. 2008; Mac Ginty 2010; Richmond 2009a; Richmond 2012; Roberts 2008).

In order to achieve an understanding of what can be termed a hybrid peace, it is argued that a “mechanism or lens through which it can be locally asked whether and how an action, conversation, or policy contributes to a mutual form of peace” is needed (Richmond 2009a, 580). Part of the difficulty of developing such a mechanism is the conceptualisation of the “local”. As Donais puts it, “analysis of the specific identity of the relevant locals remains surprisingly thin” (2009, 11; see also Paffenholz 2010). Richmond associates the local with either a civil society or an everyday context (Richmond 2009a, 562). He notes however that civil society is not to be understood as the Western imagination of an organized liberal system of for examples NGOs (Mac Ginty 2010, 399) but in “resonant and indigenous terms” – as the “local-local” (Richmond 2012, 116–117) or the “really existing local” (2009b, 325), the part of society which is not already co-opted and influenced by international norms.

Whereas critical peacebuilding literature stresses that they do not assume a clear-cut division between local and liberal, acknowledge the incoherence of liberal actors (Mac Ginty 2010, 395) and admit that the local is a “fuzzy concept” (Richmond 2009a, 570) much less attention has been paid to differences and incoherence within the “local” sphere. In fact, the impression remains that the “local” in critical peacebuilding is a panacea of legitimacy, and is everything and anything, as long as it fits the image of being in opposition to liberal peacebuilding. By spending a lot of the time focusing on analysing hybridity, the “local” and “liberal” both become paradoxically homogenised and essentialised (Peterson 2012, 18). From the perspective of post-colonial critique, Spivak warns us of homogenizing the subaltern. In fact, critical peacebuilding literature uses the local as what Spivak calls a “catachresis”, a master term with no literal referent (Spivak 1993, 139 quoted in Kapoor 2008, 52). When scrutinized empirically, – “zooming in” on what could be discerned as “the local” in the sense of the critical peacebuilding literature – it becomes clear that heterogeneity rather than homogeneity prevails.² Richmond does acknowledge conflicts within the local sphere to a certain degree when he describes the everyday as a “terrain of conflicts over needs, rights, custom, culture, identity, citizens and imported state frameworks” (2009b, 335) and notes that local actors can be both positive and negative for peace (2012, 120; see also Pouligny 2005, 503). Even though valuable insights into local cleavages and their impact on national peace have been offered by empirically grounded research by for example Kalyvas (2003; 2006), Autesserre (2006; 2009; 2010) and Pouligny (2006, 42–95), little analysis of the complexity of local power relations and its implications for peace has been produced so far. Paffenholz points out that whilst the critical peacebuilding literature has focused on “the need to give voice to alternative, oppressed actors”, most of the contributors “do not actually analyse these...voices” (2010, 56). Schaefer hints at the difficulties in orienting peacebuilding processes upon local realities, as the “local is not monolithic, nor are local practices necessarily compatible with the aim of working towards a less violent society” (2010, 499). Strikingly, examples of local actors that are given in parts of the critical peacebuilding literature can be highly questionable. Mac Ginty uses the case of the Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan to illustrate the “ability of local actors to resist the liberal peace” (2010, 406). It is questionable to define the Taliban as a local actor, considering that they were the (internation-

2 Hirblinger and Simons (2014) furthermore argue that the very question who or what is perceived as local is part of power struggles within the peacebuilding environment

ally sponsored and connected) government before the war. Here it becomes clear that the line between international, liberal, local and national is blurred and that the terms are used without clear distinction. Furthermore, considering the Taliban as one coherent group is problematic in itself, let alone the idea, that they are uncontested at the local level (for the blurring between Afghan warlords and the state see Schetter, Glassner, and Karokhail 2007; for more on the Taliban see Giustozzi 2008).

In order to gain a more focused, less fuzzy understanding of the “local” and the implications for peacebuilding, the critical literature needs to be examined in light of empirical realities. The authors considered the meaning and importance of the “local” in two post-conflict countries, namely Burundi and the DRC.³ Using this data we realized that local conceptualisations and understandings of peace were much more complex than the critical peacebuilding literature suggests. We find that the local is fragmented, especially in terms of actors. Actors as well as concepts are highly contested, making it difficult to decide on what policies actually contribute to peace at the local level. Furthermore, we find that there is no purely “local”. Actors are part of complex networks of relations reaching far beyond their specific area of influence. Liberal and local values mix even in rural areas and it becomes difficult to decide on which discourse is to be trusted as the “true local”. Lastly, the very idea of a collective local agency is questioned locally. These findings will now be discussed in turn.

II. Fragmentation of the local: contested actors

In order to increase our understanding of post-conflict communities, one thing we asked in focus groups was who the participants thought were the most powerful actors in their area, whether these actors were thought to be national or local, and whether they had a positive or negative impact on *local* peace. The differences in the responses elicited show that neither is there one collective local understanding of peacebuilding nor is anything purely “local”. Of further interest is the extent to which actors were contested across different sections of the population. This is primarily exemplified by “traditional” authorities.

3 In Burundi a total of 25 interviews as well as eight focus groups were conducted in the rural area of Bubanza and the town of Gitega. An additional 29 interviews and two focus groups were held in the capital Bujumbura. In the DRC a total of 22 interviews and seven focus groups were carried out in the rural areas of Sake and Kalehe on top of one focus group and 42 interviews in the provincial capitals Goma and Bukavu. People interviewed included civil society actors, political activists, local government agents and administrators. The respondents came from diverse class, gender and ethnic backgrounds. The focus groups concentrated on the population Richmond describes as ‘local-local’, namely groups of up to ten market women, teachers and youth. In the semi-structured interviews and focus groups we asked (among other questions) whether people consider their area as peaceful, what has contributed to such peacefulness, what peace does in fact mean for them and which actors have contributed or should contribute to peace. Furthermore we asked for enduring conflict problems in their area and how they should be solved and by whom. In an effort of openness concerning data collection, and acknowledging any biases as a result, we would like to note that the interviews were conducted by one of the authors (white European female researcher) and the focus groups moderated by national research assistants (largely male, urban, middle class with university education). Please note that we gained similar impressions from our research conducted in Kenya and Liberia, but in order to fully develop the main argument in depth we decided to exclusively focus on Burundi and DRC in this paper.

A term that is recurrently associated with the local as opposed to the liberal in critical peacebuilding literature is “tradition” or “custom” (Richmond 2009a; Lidén, Mac Ginty, and Richmond 2009; Mac Ginty 2010). Often so-called traditional authorities are seen by default as the authentic representatives of local people. We analyse traditional authorities at some length in this paper. However, the argument would also hold true for other types of actors, most importantly armed groups, such as local defence groups (the Mai-Mai militias in DRC being a telling example). Note though, that we do not analyse armed groups in this paper as we argue that it is rather obvious that they are contested by default in civil war contexts. By definition, civil war includes opposing groups within the same country. In few cases this relates to a binary opposition between the government and an armed non-state actor. In Burundi and DRC, however, two or more rebel groups, which considered themselves representatives of specific groups of the population, were fighting against the government and between themselves. Therefore, armed actors in these contexts are naturally contested and represent partly antagonistic views of what “the local” wants. As we will show in the following, however, so-called traditional authorities are by no means less contested or more representative of the local and are often not purely “local” at all.

Much has been written on the invention of “tradition”, and its problematic uses. Difficulties arise because it is not clear who defines what counts as tradition in the first place (Kuper 2003). Moreover, tradition is by no means uniform or immutable across space and time (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). This is especially, but not exclusively, the case in sub-Saharan Africa, where colonialism forcefully regrouped diverse communities with their own respective ways of living into a centralised state. In addition, existing traditional institutions are likely to be part of local power games; they can be exclusionary or oppressive and are hence likely to be contested (Schaefer 2010). This last challenge is especially reflected in our own data. In fact, in Burundi as well as DRC, “tradition” is often very much contested and not necessarily accepted by all. Furthermore, discourses about tradition are not always separate from liberal values.

One example is the role of those actors, who claim to be “traditional chiefs” in eastern Congo⁴. Emerging from pre-colonial kingdoms these “native administrations” – in colonial language – are structured as a three-tiered system: The smallest entity is the *Localité*, several *Localités* form the *Groupement* which themselves constitute the *Collectivité-Chefferie*, the supreme traditional chieftaincy, headed by the *Chef de Collectivité* or *Mwami* (paramount chief). The power of these authorities derives both from a belief in divine ancestry as well from their practical role as feudal rulers controlling land allocation to the local population (Tull 2005, 13:73). The subjects of customary rule are usually ethnically defined and associated with a specific geographical area. The system of traditional authorities has never existed in the whole of the Congolese territory and has ceased to exist in many places today. However, in the Eastern provinces of North and South Kivu these authorities continue to play an important role. During the periods of colonialism, dictatorial rule and the different wars in the DRC “traditional” authorities in the Kivus have been part of political and military power games.⁵ They cooperated and were co-opted by various non-customary power holders in the region. Behind this background it comes as no surprise that today’s role of the *Bami* (plural of *Mwami*) was highly contested among interviewees and focus group discussants.

4 For a genesis of “chiefs” in DRC see for example Veit (2010).

5 For a comprehensive elaboration on traditional authorities in the Kivus see (Tull 2005, 68–71;142–149).

Especially in Sake, a very small town in North Kivu, people were sceptical towards those actors who claimed to be the legitimate traditional authority in the area. The current *Mwami* of the *Chefferie des Bahunde* (located in the southern part of North Kivu, including the *Groupelement Kamuronza*, of which Sake is a part) replaced his brother during the war and has since then cooperated with various power holders (militias, government) in the region. Most importantly, he did not resist the *Rassemblement Congolais pour la Démocratie* (RCD), a rebel group which started the war of 1998 with Rwandan backing, and which has been considered a foreign occupation force by most inhabitants of North Kivu. The former *Mwami* is in the meantime trying to get back his position with the support of parts of the population, ever since he has been forcefully “dethroned.”

The *Chef de Groupement Kamuronza* also cooperated with the RCD. He was even appointed by the RCD as one of their representatives in the transitional national parliament after a peace deal had been signed in 2003. When asked for their opinion about the *Mwami* and the *Chef de Groupement*, respondents usually explained that traditional authorities were important for peace in principle, but underlined their collaboration with the militias and therefore considered them to be a threat to local security. Thus, the institution as such was not criticized among focus group discussants but rather the fact that the “wrong” persons held it.

In Kalehe (a very small town, located in the northern part of South Kivu, in the *Groupement Mpinga Sud*, part of the *Chefferie des Bahavu*), opinions towards the *Mwami* of the *Chefferie des Bahavu* were quite different. This *Mwami* did not cooperate with the RCD and had to flee during the war. Only after a peace agreement was in sight (and in the words of respondents, after the population exercised enough pressure) did the RCD who governed the area let him come back with his family to resume his traditional position. What followed was an uneasy cooperation, whereby the *Mwami* was generally seen as the one to represent the interests of the population *vis-à-vis* the occupiers. Not surprisingly, all focus group discussants and interviewees (except from (former) RCD cadres) mentioned the *Mwami* as the first actor to bring peace to the region. The same was true for the *Chef du Groupement Mpinga Sud*. A notable exception to the generally positive attitude towards traditional authorities came from the a few Banyamulenge interviewees and focus group discussants in Bukavu. They were much more reserved about the *Bami*, understandably, given that the Banyamulenge have never been assigned any traditional authority themselves. The complex history of migration and of struggles for ethnic and civil citizenship of the Banyamulenge people in South Kivu has been accounted for elsewhere.⁶ Suffice to say that for the most part of history they have been considered to be foreigners (and continue to be perceived as such by the majority of the population). Therefore, they were never customary subjects of any local traditional authority, and thus never enjoyed customary rights.

Another telling example of contestation of traditional leaders are the *Bashingantahe* in Burundi. *Bashingantahe* means “those who bolt down the law” in Kirundi (Naniwe-Kaburahe 2008, 154). Their ‘traditional’ role was the management of conflict and the guarding of peace within the community. Throughout history they have been variously linked to the king, colonial powers and post-colonial governments (Ingelaere and Kohlhagen 2012, 43–44). During the recent past they have lost much of their credibility as neutral mediators due to their close ties to (some say exploitation by) the pre-civil war one-party state. In the eyes of many, they were no longer a customary institution but “informers of the state security” (Reintjens quoted in Ingelaere and Kohlhagen 2012, 44) and thus not neutral actors but rather implicit in the

6 For a comprehensive account of the history of Banyamulenge in the DRC see for example Vlassenroot (2002).

ethnic discrimination of Hutu by the Tutsi dictatorship. The post-civil war government, which emerged from a Hutu rebellion, is trying to reduce the influence of the *Bashingantahe*, whom they associate with the old regime. Newly established, elected *conseils collinaires* (hill councils, the hill being the smallest administrative entity in Burundi) are supposed to take over the traditional roles of the *Bashingantahe*. This has often led to conflicts between the two institutions⁷.

When we asked interviewees about the role that the *Bashingantahe* play for peace today, we received a variety of answers on a spectrum from “negative for local peace”, to “no importance” or “positive for local peace”. No single focus group came up with *Bashingantahe* at all when asked to mention actors that play a role in their community. However, after specifically asking for them we got diverse answers about how they had lost their influence and whether this was a positive or negative development. Most respondents were positive about the traditional role the *Bashingantahe* are supposed to have, but at the same time were negative about what the *Bashingantahe* had become in recent history. Mostly young respondents told us that the *Bashingantahe* were not respected anymore, especially from the Imbonerakure, the (partly armed) youth wing of the ruling party.

Despite the contestation by the Burundian youth the *Bashingantahe* are lauded by development NGOs and university scholars as a traditional institution which works for peace at the local level. As a result of this they argue them to be worth supporting and encourage the social rehabilitation and official recognition of the *Bashingantahe* (see Ingelaere and Kohlhagen 2012, 41).

What these examples show is that so called traditional authorities and institutions are highly contested depending on the historical context. They are entangled with political and military power and thus have often taken sides during civil wars. Liberal values are often based more on well working structures and institutions than on the actual behaviour of individuals. In Burundi and DRC institutions are however generally judged not by their nature as a structure but rather by the character and reputation of the persons making up the institution. The principle of *Bashingantahe* was not contested as such, rather those individuals which have for most part of Burundian history been invested as *Bashingantahe*⁸. The same is true for traditional authorities in DRC. The institution of the *Mwami* is generally seen as positive.⁹ However, traditional authorities in Kalehe were considered to be positive for local peace whereas those in Sake were highly contested.

Interestingly, a similar pattern can be observed when it comes to ‘liberal’ institutions, such as liberal democracy or truth and reconciliation commissions. In both DRC and Burundi almost all respondents underlined the importance of elections for peace. Some went as far as to argue that “only the vote can bring peace”.¹⁰ At the same time almost all respondents were extremely disappointed how elections in their countries were held. They complained about clientelism and the fact that people would not vote for representatives of their interest but for those who

7 For an exhaustive elaboration about how both the *Bashingantahe* and the *Conseils Collinaires* make use of the notion “local” in order to advance their interests and how this is linked to larger power struggles in post-war Burundi, see Hirblinger and Simons (2014)

8 The experience in our own research is reflected by accounts of Ingelaere and Kohlhagen who come to a similar conclusion (2012, 42).

9 Albeit with the obvious exception of the Banyamulenge, see above.

10 “Seulement la vote peut amener la paix”, Market woman Sake, DRC, July 2011.

“brought them caps and T-shirts”¹¹ or “promise to build a football stadium”.¹² When asked for their opinion about the plan to implement a truth and reconciliation commission and a special court to try human rights abuses during the civil war, Burundian respondents were generally positive. Most people underlined the need for punishment for the worst human rights abuses. However, they were sceptical about the actual implementation of the commission, as they were afraid that it would be manipulated by political elites, the latter variously characterised as inapt, corrupt or ruthless. What this shows is that neither traditional nor liberal institutions are regarded independently from their potential to be instrumentalised by powerful actors.

These examples show that local actors are often contested according to their individual personalities, rather than the institution they represent, or, put differently, that the legitimacy of a traditional institution does not necessarily imply the legitimacy of the person holding a position. Furthermore, the contestation of the actors also depends on who is being asked, especially considering generational differences. As Uvin observes, the many Burundians he interviewed “spontaneously desire[d] “better people” rather than “better structures” (Uvin 2009, 66). Therefore it is not always useful to think about “traditional institutions” or “local movements” as entities, but rather the personal behaviour and ties of individuals invested in these groups needs to be understood.

III. Actors and Space beyond Local Frontiers

Apart from the fact that the local is fragmented as actors are contested, our data also suggests that the local is never purely ‘local’. As Pouligny already showed for a variety of cases, local actors do not generally “develop in entirely separate worlds” but are rather “linked by many changing ties of solidarity” to other actors on all levels (2006, 43). We found that in terms of local actors, they are firstly influenced by and influence networks beyond their local sphere. Secondly, local actors are also guided by liberal values, which they often use to their own advantage.

In the focus groups, participants were asked whether they considered the actors they had mentioned as powerful in their areas as national or local.¹³ For the most part – except some of the traditional authorities and Mai Mai militias¹⁴ in DRC – very few actors were repeatedly characterized as “local”. Most actors mentioned were said to have some ties to national and international agents, indicating that for the respondents being in power was intrinsically linked

11 “Ils votent pour ceux qui amènent des képis et t-shirts” Interview with Civil Society activist, Bukavu, DRC August 2011.

12 This relates to Burundi’s president Pierre Nkurunziza, who built a football stadium in his home province of Ngozi. Discussion with our moderators in Bubanza, Burundi, November 2011.

13 Note that we intentionally refrained from conceptualising power before asking for “powerful actors” as we wanted to discern the meaning people attach to power. Interestingly, power was largely associated with having a formal position of power (e.g. in government, the army etc.) and thus it was not surprising, that it was also largely associated with the central level of government, as both DRC and Burundi are highly centralised states when it comes to formal administration.

14 Mai Mai Militia is a general term for loosely structured village based auto-defence groups. During the recent civil wars Mai Mai militias became part of larger armed networks and today some Mai Mai control parts of North and South Kivu, way beyond their village of origin.

to connections beyond their specific local area. Sometimes, their power was directly a result of their national or even international connections.

We also asked participants to discuss whether they thought local or national actors were more important for local peace and found that most groups made clear that actors who are influential on the national level had much more power to change the situation, so they were the ones who are important for local peace.

This suggests that not only are powerful local actors linked to external networks, but it is precisely the actors, which are not purely local, who are thought to be able to contribute to local peace with a more thorough impact. The reason given in the discussion groups was because these actors have more power and influence. Richmond warns that the local tends to overemphasize the power and capacity of the liberal peace model (2011, 116). Either way, the tendency of local actors to be influenced by outside networks, or seek to influence them – whether they are international organizations or central state institutions – is evident. As such, even the most ‘local-local’ actor can become subsumed by something larger. These findings are in line with Paffenholz et al. who find that strong external political actors influence the conditions of civil society activism, having the powers to create (or limit) the space for it (2010, 420–424).

In Burundi, the connection of locally powerful actors was mostly made through party affiliation. Even the smallest position (e.g. the director of a small rural school or local market) were said to depend on connections to the ruling party. In the DRC, some actors were directly sent from the provincial or national government, thus had ties through party affiliation or personal relations to higher politicians. As we found in all of the countries, political alliances are often a prerequisite for even the most localized agency. What this suggests is that there is no “local” untouched by or totally resistant to national/liberal influence and that the use of opposed notions of this sort is thus not helpful to understand dynamics in post-conflict societies.

The ‘traditional’ actors in Burundi and DRC, already outlined above are also not purely local, neither in terms of their influence and networks, nor in the values they claim to hold. The *Bashingantahe* in Burundi, as previously mentioned, have historically been linked to various central power holders before, during and after colonialism. Since the end of the war they have tied relations to civil society and international development agents. Especially from the latter, they had problems being taken seriously. In response the *Bashingantahe* thus reinvented themselves as an *association sans but lucrative* (registered non-profit association) in order to be able to interact with the government and the international community.¹⁵ By becoming part of registered civil society the *Bashingantahe* also hoped to regain their legitimacy in the wider population. The association made a firm statement that the *Bashingantahe* were a non-political institution and would only focus on local conflict resolution.¹⁶ In both Gitega and Bubanza they tried to work together with the elected *conseil collinaire* as close as possible. Furthermore, they opened the institution to women and democratised the process of becoming a *Mushingantahe*. Most respondents considered this a positive development. Democratizing the institution of the *Bashingantahe* along “liberal” lines, was desired by the local population and considered appropriate given changes within society which have occurred during the last decades, such as a growing emancipation of women. Therefore, the move towards more liberal values such

15 Interview with the Executive Secretary of the Institution of *Bashingantahe*, Bujumbura, Burundi, November 2011.

16 Interestingly, there are some cases of *Bashingantahe* who present themselves as candidates for elections of the *conseil collinaire*, thereby personally mixing traditional and liberal roles.

as gender equality was not only a response to international peacebuilding but also a shrinking legitimacy in the local population. What this shows is that the *Bashingantahe* are not only in no way purely local in terms of their influence and networks, but that they also seek to use external resources, authority and legitimacy to validate themselves¹⁷. At the same time, they base their legitimacy on a discourse of tradition. The *Bashingantahe* thus question the distinction of local and liberal while reinforcing it at the same time.

The same is true for the traditional authorities in the DRC. They have long been implied in power struggles reaching far beyond their traditional zone of influence. As described above, both the *Mwami* and the *Chef de Groupement* in Sake were allied to armed groups, mainly the RCD. Already during the peace process they wore different “hats”, such as being *Chef de Groupement* and MP for the RCD (Pouligny 2006, 43, 81). The contestation of traditional authority in DRC also shows the incoherence and overlap between “local” and “liberal” discourses concerning democracy. Many people mentioned that they wished the *Bami* were given more respect and power to act by the government, even though they did not fit into the idea of democracy. They were not criticizing the democratic system as such, but rather deplored that the *Bami* were so far hardly included in them. They were in fact generally asking for more democracy, and at the same time defended the system of traditional power – even in Sake, where people did not generally see much legitimate output with the current power holders. Interestingly, the people campaigning to bring the former *Mwami* back to Sake make use of democratic norms as a legitimising strategy. They collect signatures of the population in the Bahunde community to demonstrate the “will of the people” regarding their legitimate chief.¹⁸ Similarly, the brother of the *Chef de Groupement* Kamuronza makes use of the democratic way to advance his interests. He has been elected provincial deputy and is in fierce competition with his brother over political and economic power. Focus group discussants vividly described this conflict and did not agree whether democratic or traditional authority was more important when judging which one of the two brothers has and should have more power. Thus also in the case of the DRC traditional authorities are by no means independent of or necessarily in opposition to democratic norms and institutions. Rather, they strategically choose between traditional and liberal ways to advance their interests. This furthermore shows that the local population is not either for or against liberal democracy. In fact, opinions about the usefulness of democracy and its supremacy over traditional authority varied.

In summary, we found that it is almost impossible to limit actors to having a purely ‘local’ agency. Most are involved in external networks, and even outright seek to involve themselves in these. The perception amongst focus group participants in all countries was that those actors with external links are the most powerful, and that as a result they are able to contribute the most to local peace. In addition, local agents – even traditional actors – will often seek to hold on to liberal norms, as a strategy for advancement.

17 This partly reflects Bayart’s prominent argument that African politics are characterised by strategies of extraversion as a means to advance elite’s interests and autonomy with the paradox effect of maintaining a relationship of subordination (e.g. 1993; 2000). Indeed, extraversion not only functions on the level of economic resources but also with regard to symbolic resources such as legitimacy and recognition.

18 Participatory Observation in Goma, DRC, September 2011.

IV. Questioning the notion of a collective local agency

A third and final major finding is that the very concept of a collective local agency is in itself questioned locally.

Elite respondents in both Burundi and the DRC complained about the passivity of the local population. In DRC, especially interviewees working in civil society organisations or in the media told us that it was difficult to mobilise people from rural areas to advance their claims *vis-à-vis* the government. “Everyone waits for Kinshasa to make decisions and solve problems”, in the words of a journalist in Bukavu.¹⁹ This is perhaps not surprising if we consider that these respondents are themselves closer to liberal international agents than to marginalized groups of their own country. However, focus group discussants and interviewees from rural, marginalized groups also repeated statements about their inability and their powerlessness to act against political decisions. Some noted that the local population was nothing more than the implementation force of decisions taken at a higher political level. One respondent in Sake for example declared that it would not make any sense to ask whether people were happy with the rules and institutions being implemented, as they were in any case only limited to fulfilling orders from above.²⁰

When we asked participants who they thought should solve the problems they had identified during the discussion, national, regional and international actors were often ranked in top positions. Only one focus group in DRC and in Burundi clearly stated that problems should be solved first and foremost at the local level.²¹ In Burundi people referred mainly to the party in power (more specifically the executive committee) when asked who they think should solve their problems. One focus group insisted that their local problems as diverse as ethnic tensions and rising food prices can only find a solution at a regional or even international level, as the conflict was regional in the first place.²²

The doubting of a collective local agency is especially evident in the Congolese case. In a context of a regionalized (and at least economically internationalized) war like in the DRC it comes as no surprise that people refer to dynamics way beyond their reach when asked for solutions to their everyday problems. The local population was said to be too fragmented and too powerless to act against higher politics. In this respect they seem to look at their own situation with a disillusioned realism. After all, quite a few localized efforts of peacebuilding have been conducted in North and South Kivu with little success in reducing the presence of regional armed networks, only loosely connected to local problems and interests.²³ Most prominently, various interviewees and focus group discussants said that the Rwandan rebels *Forces Démocratiques de Libération du Rwanda* (FDLR) on Congolese territory had been “brought in here by the international community, so they [the internationals] should know how to get them out of

19 “Tout le monde attend que Kinshasa prenne des décisions et s’occupe des problèmes”, December 2011.

20 Interview with *Chef de Cartier* Sake, DRC, July 2011.

21 Female teachers focus group, Sake, DRC, July 2011; teachers focus group Bubanza, Burundi, October 2011.

22 Youth focus group, Gitega, Burundi, October 2011.

23 For a discussion on the success and failure of localised peacebuilding efforts see Séverine Auttesserre’s op-ed in the *New York Times* (2012) and Jason Stearn’s response on his blog (2012).

the country today.”²⁴ They refer to the complex situation after the Rwandan genocide in 1994, when hundreds of thousands of Hutu refugees as well as *génocidaires* crossed the border into the DRC (then called Zaire). Out of these refugee camps Rwandan Hutu rebel groups emerged, whose successor, the FDLR, is still active in many parts of North and South Kivu. In the eyes of the local population the solution to the problems that the FDLR presence entails, therefore obviously does not lie in their own hands.

The point we are trying to make is not that the local level has no agency whatsoever. Rather, we show that a “local-local” sphere entirely decoupled from national, regional or international agency simply does not exist. Most civil contexts today are characterised by regionalisation or even internationalisation processes, which strongly relativize the scope and impact of local agency.

Furthermore, it is difficult to know what measures people would prefer, if respondents act *as if* they had no agency vis-à-vis national, regional or international decision makers.

V. Concluding Remarks

We found through our empirical study that current contributions largely ignore the incoherence and complexity of the local sphere, as well as the power relations through which it is characterized, particularly with regard to the legitimacy of actors and concepts. Power and authority are in fact locally as contested as on the national level. Furthermore the literature assumes a willingness and capacity to come up with localized peacebuilding, an assumption which is in itself challenged by local actors.

As a final thought, we would like to reiterate that understanding local fragmentation and power games in peacebuilding is extremely difficult for outsiders. As already mentioned above, as white European researchers – and nationals of a middle class intellectual background (our moderators) – it is often difficult to get to the “truth” at the local level. Many researchers and development organizations will only scratch the surface of what is happening at the local level (see also Peterson 2012, 18). This has the repercussion that local actors can become “romanticised” (see for example Pouligny 2005, 500). The number of studies for example recommending a support of the *Bashingantahe* shows how traditional institutions are often rather blindly considered to be positive for local peace. The vicious circle is of course that asking for engagement with the “local” requires access and visibility. And access and visibility are largely defined by power relations within the local sphere. If we acknowledge with Spivak that the subaltern cannot speak, the ones who speak – i.e. the ones researchers can and are willing to hear – are per definition not subaltern (Spivak 1988; see also Sharp 2009). Just as international agents often only see civil society if it is organized according to Western ideals, so will the “local-local” – be it actors or interests – only be seen if it makes itself visible. However, the most visible does not mean that it is the most legitimate. What critics of current peacebuilding practices are often silent about is how exactly we will know what the “local” actually wants. Newer – and seemingly emancipatory – approaches to development, such as Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA)

24 “C’était la communauté internationale qui les [FDLR] a ammenées ici, alors elle devrait savoir comment les chasser du pays aujourd’hui”, Interview with Civil Society Activist, Kalehe, DRC August 2011.

are efforts to make the subaltern speak. However, as Kapoor shows, they are doomed to fail, as the subaltern is perceived as immutable, stable and homogenous (2008, 69). Furthermore, if it is us that make the subaltern speak, the conversations will comprise only those subjects that we can see, and the subaltern will most probably say what we want to hear. So the solution, it seems, would be to observe instead what the local *does*, rather than asking what it *wants*. (Dysfunctional) hybrid institutions as outcomes of peacebuilding could therefore be used as an indicator for what is perceived as more suitable in a given setting. However, this presupposes that political realities (such as hybrid institutions) are the outcome of a directed rationality, which is highly questionable. Furthermore, we need to ask, who is the driving force behind this hybridization? One can at least strongly doubt that it is the subaltern (the landless peasant, the urban homeless, whatever face you give her). Rather, those forces with a lot of power and networks on the national, regional and international level will know how to resist, pervert and make use of peacebuilding efforts to their advantage.

We do not wish to suggest that local narratives should not be taken seriously, because they are incoherent and difficult for outsiders to penetrate; nor do we propose to withdraw from the notion, that local knowledge and experiences should be taken into consideration, simply because they are diverse and contradictory. Deconstructing the “subaltern” obviously bears the risk – and is often deliberately used so – to impede emancipation and make collective political action impossible. Highlighting the internal contradictions, incoherence and limits of local agency can easily play in the hands of those forces who consider local actors to be incapable or incompetent to choose their own destiny. The purpose of this deconstruction is however not to legitimize the non-engagement with local actors and interests by international peacebuilding agents, arguing that if there is no local to talk to, we can as well just continue to impose our own ideas. Rather we hope to have shown that the “local” in peacebuilding is much more complex than often described and that understanding this complexity requires consideration of the specific historical context in which the “local” is situated. As such, processes of adaptation from an international blueprint to the local level in peacebuilding are multi-directional. Actors on all levels of analysis influence, and are influenced, by each other. There is no homogeneous essentialised ‘pure’ version of any group waiting to hybridize what is imposed from above. Proposing the liberal-local binaries as is often done in critical peacebuilding research disengages from the reality at hand. If we are to understand peacebuilding dynamics we will need to map the complex multi-directional processes of adaptation that take place between different actors and rationalities in the peacebuilding environment. These processes involve distinctions between ideas of institutions and concrete individuals filling these institutions and a recourse to liberal discourses as a means to gain legitimacy and power which on the one hand questions a local-liberal binary while at the same time reinforce it. The first step is in unraveling the complexity of the ‘local’. Local actors are contested; they are for the most part never purely local, but rather involved in external networks; and they strongly doubt themselves to have a collective local agency. A one-size-fits-all model of peacebuilding should not be criticized (and ultimately altered) on the basis of a one-size-fits-all conception of the “local”. In our search for a more inclusive, bottom-up, locally rooted post-liberal peace, we should not run the risk to ignore the complex power relations and multiple discourses which lie behind a presumed “authentic” version of local peace.

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