International Journal of Migration, Security, and Peace Studies (IJMSPS), Vol. 1, No. 1, 2025.
Available online at https://transglobalpunet.com/index.php/ijmsps. Indexed in google scholar, etc.
Emmanuel Shebbs (2025) IJMSPS, 1(1): 1- 15

Social Engineering and the Failure of Liberal Peacebuilding in Post-conflict African Societies

Emmanuel Shebbs, PhD
Department of Political Science, Abia State University, *Nigeria*
emmanuel.shebbs@abiastateuniversity.edu.ng
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5182-4128

Abstract

This research argues that liberal democracy, liberal peacebuilding and social engineering efforts of are doomed to fail in post-conflict African societies if liberal democratic actors adopt a methodology that seeks to undermine the local structures existing within the African society. Social engineering (which is the process that involves imposition of liberal values, while undermining local contents) is highlighted as the bane of liberal peacebuilding efforts in Africa. This research demonstrates the distinction between pro-liberal values and the pro-liberal implementation methods adopted to transfer liberal democratic values. Furthermore, it examines the power dynamics between local and international methods of peacebuilding during the implementation of positive peace in post-conflict societies. Evidence and literature were obtained from secondary sources relevant to the conversation around systems of government and how these contribute to development in Africa. The analytical method used is content analysis which his used to analyse opinions, empirical and theoretical evidence in a comparative manner which drawing conclusions on simple polemics. Using the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) as a case study, this qualitative research shows that the neglect of local alternatives to peacebuilding and the use of social engineering can potentially lead to the failure of liberal peacebuilding processes.

Keywords: *liberal democracy; liberalism; social engineering; Africa; third world*

Introduction

This research examines liberal peacebuilding from a value-methodology dichotomy perspective by distinguishing between the values of liberal democracy and the methods used to implement those values in post-conflict societies. It argues that liberal peacebuilding efforts are doomed to fail if liberal peacebuilding efforts employ methods that undermine local alternatives and indigenous methodologies for peacebuilding. Philipsen (2014:42) refers to this value-methodology dichotomy argument as the "double contract of peacebuilding," meaning that, according to Chandler (2010), liberal peacebuilding efforts aim to fundamentally restructure post-conflict societies by creating a double contract that introduces liberal democratic policies, thereby providing a pathway to positive peace (Galtung, 2007).

For greater clarity, this research shall consider liberal peacebuilding from two major dimensions: substantive and procedural. From the substantive dimension, liberal peacebuilding represents a system of values that serve as a foundation for economic and political governance. It is an entity identifiable by its inherent nature, qualities, and characteristics, such as political freedoms, market freedoms, and civil rights provisions, among others. The substantive element conceptualizes liberal peacebuilding as an object associated with pro-liberal values and identities Fukuyama (1992). Secondly, the procedural element of liberal peacebuilding, as identified in this research, pertains to the methodological factors that ensure the implementation of liberal peace. This involves the methods adopted by liberal peacebuilding actors in the implementation of pro-liberal values in post-conflict societies, such as the dismantling of domestic and local structures, sponsoring of political and economic reforms, and systemic restructuring. These methods have been adopted by states like the United States in operations which Mearsheimer (2014:10) referred to as “interventionist foreign policy” through “social engineering”.

The central argument presented in this research is that the methodology or processes through which pro-liberal values are implemented in post-conflict societies act as a catalyst for conflict and are the primary reason why liberal peacebuilding continues to fail. Thus, the problem this research seeks to interrogate is not 'what' liberal peacebuilding entails but rather 'how' it operates, including how it is implemented.

This research examines the methodology of liberal peacebuilding, which it argues is the primary factor contributing to its failure. This methodology impacts liberal peacebuilding in two ways.

Firstly, based on academic evidence, the methodology of liberal peacebuilding encourages systemic restructuring and undermines the local status quo of post-conflict societies by introducing a liberal state (Philipsen, 2014). It is important to understand that liberal peacebuilding is an extrinsic political and economic phenomenon (Goodhand & Walton, 2009). Any attempt to impose novel structures that undermine and displace local ones will be perceived as a threat by the local population. As this research will argue, such an approach risks reopening the wounds of colonial history-a historical memory that no nation wishes to relive. Any event that rekindles memories of colonial domination is likely to provoke a reprisal response from nationalist-oriented state and non-state actors. Consequently, the methods employed by liberal peacebuilders in post-conflict societies often create the perception of systemic recolonization. In response, nationalist-oriented tendencies embedded in these societies naturally intensify in self-defense. This reaction exacerbates and polarizes the conflict, ultimately leading to the failure of the liberal peacebuilding process.

Academic evidence from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), as provided in this research, illustrates that underlying every instance of failed liberal peacebuilding is a significant presence of nationalist movements that oppose peacebuilding methods. Many of these nationalist movements arise due to the perceived threat of recolonization and the imposition of foreign structures. This research will demonstrate how such pro-nationalist reprisal attacks are directed at the methodology of liberal peacebuilding rather than at the pro-liberal values themselves.

Secondly, this research argues that the methodology of liberal peacebuilding misidentifies the root cause of the conflict. Instead of addressing the absence of pro-liberal values, liberal peacebuilding methodologies seek to dismantle local structures by implementing structural reforms that impose foreign political and economic frameworks on the affected societies. However, it is evident that the existence of local structures was not the primary cause of the conflict; rather, it was the decline in pro-liberal values. These structures existed prior to the outbreak of conflict, which suggests that their presence did not inherently contribute to the crisis.

Local structures are integral to the cultural identities of the people, and any attempt to undermine them is likely to provoke a strong and even violent reaction. According to Goodhand & Walton (2009), such actions are perceived as an illegitimate dismantling of the welfare state to which the people are historically connected. Evidence from the DRC further illustrates that most conflict-ridden societies experience a progressive decline in pro-liberal values such as human rights and political freedoms. This decline reaches a tipping point that triggers conflict. Therefore, since local structures were not responsible for the conflict, liberal peacebuilding efforts will inevitably fail if they focus on the wrong causal factors.

This research identifies a critical gap in the implementation of liberal peacebuilding: the failure of liberal actors to distinguish between neoliberal values and the methods used to implement them. This lack of distinction results in the non-recognition of local structures and ultimately leads to a decline in local acceptance of peacebuilding efforts, thereby provoking opposition from the local population and deepening the conflict (Goodhand & Walton, 2009; Shebbs, Agbor and Uduma, 2022). This research argues that the primary cause of failure in liberal peacebuilding is the methodology used in implementing the values rather than the pro-liberal values themselves.

The success or failure of liberal peacebuilding is considered in this research as a dependent variable, while the methodology employed by actors in the process of liberal peacebuilding is treated as an independent variable. Drawing on academic and empirical evidence from Cambodia, Kenya, the DRC, and Somalia, this qualitative study argues that the success or failure of liberal peacebuilding efforts is largely determined by the methodology adopted by the actors involved in the peacebuilding process.

The Concept of Liberal Peacebuilding

The concept of liberalism and liberal peacebuilding stem from the broader framework of liberal democracy. This discourse has been a subject of significant intellectual debate, particularly following the Cold War era. Among the most influential scholars in this debate is Francis Fukuyama (1992), who argues that the triumph of liberal democracy as the final form of human governance marks the end of history. Fukuyama (1992) asserts that liberal democracy represents the ultimate ideological evolution of governance within the global political system. He contends that with the collapse of the Soviet Union, liberal democracy effectively vanquished its ideological rivals, such as fascism and communism, thereby establishing itself as the most viable political and economic system.

Fukuyama underscores the universalization of liberal democracy by stating that it is the natural endpoint of historical development due to its ability to satisfy human desires for recognition and dignity (Fukuyama, 1992). He further argues that massive economic modernization, which fosters the growth of middle-class societies, increases the likelihood that states will be accountable to their citizens which will bring more checks to governance. This, he maintains, will lead to the emergence of stable liberal democracies (Fukuyama, 2004). Fukuyama (2018) also suggests that alternative governance models, such as authoritarianism and religious fundamentalism, lack the ideological appeal necessary to challenge liberal democracy in the long term and will, as a result, gradually decline.

Diamond (1999), in support of the concept of liberal democracy, argues that democracy has demonstrated resilience and adaptability, ensuring that it remains the dominant form of governance in the 21st century, effectively overcoming all foreseeable opposition. Similarly, Dahl (2000) emphasizes the superiority of pluralistic democracy in fostering civic participation and ensuring accountability. He highlights the significance of accountability in democracy and argues that liberal democracy possesses an inherent self-accountability mechanism, which reduces the likelihood of corruption. Although Huntington (1996) critiques certain aspects of Fukuyama's argument, he acknowledges that waves of democratization have generally reinforced the global spread of democracy and liberal peacebuilding.

Liberal peacebuilding is generally aimed to have two primary objectives. The first is to end violence in conflict-ridden states, and the second is to establish a liberal political and economic system in post-conflict societies (Paris, 2010; Galtung, 2007). Systematically, liberal peacebuilding achieves the implementation of negative peace (Galtung, 2007) by ending direct violence and subsequently fosters positive peace (Rocha, 2011) by creating an environment that discourages the recurrence of violence. These two broad objectives of liberal democracy is expected to create stable governance structures, promote economic prosperity, and minimize the risk of conflict relapse (Newman, Paris, & Richmond, 2009) in the near future.

Liberal actors like the United State of America (Mearsheimer, 2014) seek to instil the fundamental values of neoliberalism in a manner that influences both the political and economic systems of post-conflict states (Heathershaw, 2013; Paris, 2010; Goodhand & Walton, 2009). This strategic reform facilitates the introduction of liberal democracy, guarantees civil rights and liberties, and establishes market freedom; what Goodhand and Walton (2009:313) refer to as the "sovereignty of the market." Through these interventions, the state is restructured to align with global liberal economic standards, emphasizing privatization, deregulation, and limited state intervention in economic affairs (Chandler, 2017; Mac Ginty, 2011).

The foundation of liberal peacebuilding is neoliberalism, a political and economic theory that advocates for the reduction of government power in favor of market-driven mechanisms. This approach diminishes the interventionist role of the state and relegates it to the periphery of systemic governance operations. Consequently, liberal peacebuilding seeks to achieve peace through the introduction of pro-liberal ideologies, assuming that liberal democratic governance and economic liberalization inherently foster stability and development (Wallis, 2018; Zambarkari, 2016).

However, recent scholarship has critically examined the effectiveness of liberal peacebuilding, particularly its universal applicability and unintended consequences. Critics argue that while liberal peacebuilding promotes stability, it often does so in a manner that overlooks local socio-political contexts and imposes Western-centric governance models that may not be suitable for all societies (Mac Ginty & Richmond, 2013; Pospisil, 2019) as it was recorded in Somalia (Shebbs, Agbor and Uduma, 2022b). The one-size-fits-all approach to peacebuilding has been critiqued for reinforcing inequalities, exacerbating grievances, and failing to address the root causes of conflict (Autesserre, 2014). Moreover, scholars such as De Coning (2018) argue that adaptive and hybrid models of peacebuilding; those that integrate local traditions and customs with international norms, may offer a more sustainable alternative to rigid neoliberal frameworks.

Additionally, the assumption that liberal democracies are inherently peaceful has been challenged by recent geopolitical events. While Doyle (2005) asserts that democratic states are less likely to engage in violent conflict with one another, empirical studies suggest that democratization processes can sometimes lead to instability, particularly when implemented hastily or in the absence of strong institutional frameworks (Mansfield & Snyder, 2007). The Arab Spring, for instance, demonstrated how rapid democratization without robust institutional support can lead to renewed violence and state fragility (Carothers, 2014).

In light of these critiques, contemporary discussions on liberal peacebuilding emphasize the need for more inclusive, context-specific approaches. Scholars advocate for a shift towards "resilient peacebuilding," which focuses on empowering local actors, strengthening indigenous governance structures, and ensuring economic inclusivity (Chandler, 2020: 32; Donais, 2012). This perspective argues that peacebuilding efforts must be flexible, participatory, and responsive to the specific needs and histories of post-conflict societies.

In summary, while liberal peacebuilding remains a dominant paradigm in international conflict resolution, its limitations necessitate a re-evaluation of its strategies. Future peacebuilding efforts must balance liberal economic and political reforms with locally driven initiatives to ensure sustainable peace and development. By integrating adaptive, inclusive, and bottom-up approaches, peacebuilding can become more effective in addressing the complexities of contemporary conflicts (Mac Ginty & Richmond, 2020).

Social Engineering as An Implementation Method for Liberal Peacebuilding

Realists like Mearsheimer (2001) have strongly argued against the liberal optimism of scholars such as Fukuyama. While Fukuyama (1992) famously posited that liberal democracy represented the 'end of history' following the Cold War, Mearsheimer (2001; 2014) asserts that the global political landscape remains shaped by great power competition, rendering liberal peacebuilding efforts largely ineffective. Fukuyama (1992) posits the subsequent political development sweeping across the world will be tilted towards liberal democracy as the cold war marked the end of every other form of extreme political ideology. Mearsheimer (2001; 2014; 10) describes this approach to liberal peacebuilding as a form of 'social engineering'; where Western powers attempt to impose democratic governance and market-oriented reforms on post-conflict societies. He argues that such interventions often fail due to the disregard for historical, cultural, and institutional particularities of these societies (Mearsheimer, 2018). This perspective aligns with critiques by scholars like Chandler (2010), who highlights that externally imposed

democratic models tend to generate resistance, rather than sustainable governance. Empirical cases such as Iraq and Afghanistan support Mearsheimer's claim that liberal peacebuilding is inherently flawed. Mearsheimer (2011) argues that social engineering in these regions not only disrupted existing power structures but also exacerbated instability, leading to prolonged conflict rather than democratic consolidation. This critique is echoed by Bellamy and Williams (2010), who argue that liberal peace interventions often overlook local governance traditions, ultimately undermining the legitimacy of imposed democratic institutions.

Furthermore, Mearsheimer (2001) contends that liberal peacebuilding serves the strategic interests of powerful states, allowing them to exert geopolitical influence under the guise of promoting democracy. This reflects a broader realist concern that international politics remain driven by power and self-interest rather than idealistic notions of global governance (Waltz, 1979). Scholars such as Paris (2004) further elaborate on the shortcomings of liberal peacebuilding, noting that externally driven democratization efforts tend to prioritize rapid institutional changes at the expense of long-term stability and local agency.

Beyond the strategic interests of powerful states, critics argue that social engineering fails due to the oversimplification of governance models. Scott (1998) highlights how high-modernist ideologies underpin social engineering efforts, assuming that societies can be transformed through top-down institutional changes without accounting for local knowledge and traditional governance systems. This technocratic approach has been criticized for disregarding the informal political structures that often play a crucial role in maintaining stability.

Similarly, Mitchell (2002) critiques Western development initiatives, arguing that many projects rooted in social engineering fail because they impose artificial structures that do not align with existing social realities. Mitchell highlights how external interventions, particularly in the Middle East, have created fragile institutions that collapse under local pressures. Sen (1999) provides a counterargument to the universal applicability of Western democratic models, emphasizing that democracy must be rooted in a society's unique economic and cultural context. Sen argues that sustainable democracy requires a gradual, organic development rather than externally imposed frameworks, further reinforcing Mearsheimer's critique of social engineering.

In recent years, the failure of Western-led interventions in Libya and the ongoing instability in post-U.S. withdrawal Afghanistan have further validated Mearsheimer's arguments. Scholars like Porter (2020) emphasize that liberal internationalism often underestimates the resilience of local political dynamics, leading to overconfidence in the transformative power of democratic promotion. Huntington (1996) argues that cultural differences present significant barriers to the successful implementation of democracy in diverse regions. His 'clash of civilizations' thesis suggests that efforts to impose Western democratic norms often clash with deeply ingrained religious and cultural traditions, making social engineering an inherently flawed project. Barnett et al. (2020) argue that peacebuilding organizations often adopt a supply-driven approach, delivering services aligned with their own specializations rather than addressing the specific needs of recipient communities. This misalignment leads to interventions that are disconnected from local realities, undermining the effectiveness of peacebuilding efforts. Similarly, Autesserre (2014) highlights that international peacebuilders often lack a deep understanding of the conflicts they aim to resolve, as they seldom engage local leaders, do not speak local languages, and have short postings that prevent sustained involvement.

Weinstein (2005:108) introduces the concept of "autonomous recovery," where countries achieve lasting peace and development in the absence of international intervention. Weinstein (2005) argues that internal processes, though prolonged and tumultuous, lead to more sustainable governance structures than externally imposed social engineering efforts. His perspective reinforces Mearsheimer's argument that external interventions disrupt local governance rather than fostering stable institutions. If this is viewed in line with the submission of Scott (1998) and Mitchell (2002) the argument becomes clearer that social engineering often fails because it assumes a level of state control and predictability that does not exist in many societies. They

argue that imposing rigid frameworks overlooks the adaptability and resilience of local institutions, leading to unintended consequences that can exacerbate conflict rather than resolve it.

Mearsheimer's realist critique of liberal peacebuilding remains highly relevant in the conversation on social engineering as it projects an interventionist form of liberal democracy which breaches the rule of state sovereignty. His argument that great power politics continues to dictate international relations through social engineering clearly aligns with the liberal assumption that democracy can be universally implemented through interventionist policies. The failures of U.S.-led state-building efforts in multiple regions underscore the inherent flaws in social engineering, reinforcing the view that international politics, development and liberal democracy will remain a realm of strategic rivalry rather than cooperative democratic expansion.

Social engineering and liberal peace: the problem of implementation

However, scholars have criticized the implementation method of liberal peacebuilding through the use of social engineering. This is because the methodology involves a top-down hegemonic influence of foreign ideologies, practices and methods (Mac Ginty & Richmond, 2013; Mac Ginty, 2010) which is being imposed on the local people in the process of liberal peacebuilding. As a result, there is clear erasure of the local content and structure in the liberal peacebuilding implementation process (Mac Ginty & Richmond, 2013). This summarily implies that the methods of liberal peacebuilding disregard the local structure which the local people have known for a long time. This disregard creates a power dynamic which will lead to the failure of liberal peacebuilding.

What appears to be a seeming solution to the outright disregard of local alternatives by liberal peacebuilding efforts was the hybridisation model as opinionated by scholars like Mac Ginty and Richmond (2013) and Paffenholz (2015). This involves the combination of local and international actors (and of course methods) in the peacebuilding process.

However, the value-methodology dichotomy in liberal peacebuilding (which this research argues) is not same with hybridization. Hybridization is a prescription for intervention into the affairs of the locals (Mac Ginty & Richmond, 2013; Millar, 2014) by creating a marriage of methods; the international and local methods. Hybridisation deals with the coexistence of a dualistic socio-political order (Boege, 2018) or at best the fusion of two dissimilar institutions (Goodfellow and Lindemann, 2023) which eventually creates an apparent illusion of ownership (Björkdahl & Höglund, 2013) of the peacebuilding structure by the locals.

Hybridisation recognises the existence of pro-liberal values and fusion of the local and international methodologies in liberal peacebuilding. This does not clearly distinguish between the values of liberal democracy and methods though which liberal actors implement those values. A clear distinction between the values of liberal democracy and the method of liberal democracy is the puzzle in this research and the gap in literature which the value-methodology dichotomy seeks to explain.

Social engineering in the Democratic Republic of Congo: case study analysis

The social engineering of liberal peacebuilding involves the hunting of the local. It demonstrates outright lack of agreement with the local (Ojendal & Ou, 2024) and thereby engages in its strategic deconstruction. By undermining the local strategies to peace building, the liberal peacebuilding methodology triggers a crisis which leads to its failure. This factor operates in two forms which will be explained below.

First is that the methodology of liberal peacebuilding opens-up the wound of colonialism and gives an impression of a repeat of colonial history (Goodhand & Walton, 2009; Goodhand and Klem, 2005). Ross (2013), argues that there is a corelation between present event and its ability to unravel the memories of the past and subsequently determine continuity or change of

actions of a people. Understanding of the past has a way of reshaping the frameworks of future occurrence of events in a society (Halbwachs 1995; Olick, Vinitzky-Seroussi & Levy 2011). Ross further argues that for a memory to have a correlational impact on the actions of the people, and subsequently determine the framework of actions, such a memory has to be a collective memory in that the people should have a shared heritage in it (Ross, 2009). Also, as Shesterinina (2016) argues, people who share a common social identity are more likely to be wrapped into one form of collective threat syndrome which will propel their tendency to mobilize for their collective protection against opposing forces.

Every society has layers of underlying nationalistic formations, founded on the cultural, traditional, and religious ideologies of the people. These formations tend to initiate a reflex response to anti-nationalistic and opposing forces and is usually a rallying point for patriotic actions of people towards protecting their heritage in times they perceive a collective threat (Shesterinina, 2016).

The number of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) was used to measure the level of

Figure 1: Number of Internally displaced persons in DRC.
Source: The World Bank Data obtained on 09/05/2024
https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/VC.IDP.TOCV?end=2022&locations=CD&start=2010

violence in DRC. Statistical evidence shows that the period after United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) and the Luanda summit failed, there was massive breakdown of peace and proliferation of conflicts on a higher scale leading to more violence. The number of IDPs went from 1,700,000 to over 5,000,000 in about ten years during this period. The report from Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect (2024) disclosed that the attacks of pro-nationalist groups are channelled towards the methods of peacebuilding to supress a presumption of systemic recolonisation.

Shacklock & Ntanyoma (2022) discovered in their research that the terror groups in DRC justify their agitations on non-inclusivity during the peacebuilding process. Terror groups, such as the M23, have nationalistic ideologies underpinning their agitations. Thus, MONUSCA

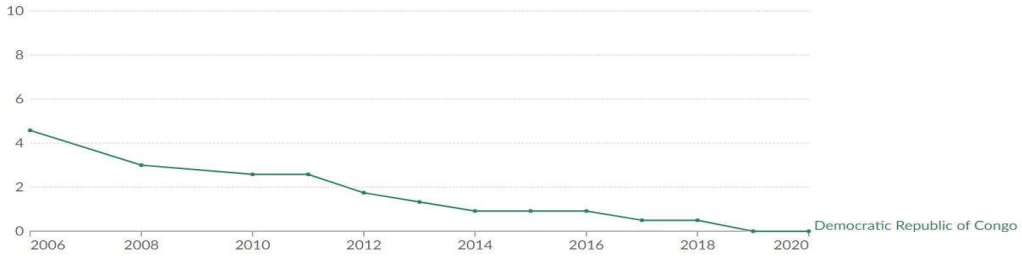

Figure 2: Electoral pluralism index of DRC from 2006 to 2020
Source: Our World in Data. Assessed on 10/05/2024
https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/electoral-pluralism-index-eiu?tab=chart&time=earliest..2020&country=~COD

peacebuilding failed in DRC because its methods undermined the local structures, creating a presumption of structural colonisation, which triggered a reprisal response from the pro-nationalist actors which further deepened the conflict. This will make peacebuilding more difficult to achieve, because (according to Hirblinger & Simons, 2015), the local has the ability to hunt peacebuilding.

The second argument this research brings forward is that the methods adopted by liberal peacebuilders will lead to potential failure of liberal peacebuilding because the methods attack the wrong cause of the conflict. The cause of the conflict was the absence of pro-liberal values and not the presence of illiberal structures.

Statistical evidence from DRC between 2006 to 2020 shows that the decline in the quality of pro-liberal values is significant in the period following the MONUSCO liberal peacebuilding effort. Electoral pluralism was used to measure existence of pro-liberal values. This is because it is the core neoliberalism and because it gives the people the opportunity to demonstrate their political rights which determines their levels of economic freedom on the long run.

Statistical evidence from Figure 2 shows a gradual decline in electoral pluralism in DRC for a period of 16 years, including the period following the commencement of MONUSCO. Thus, the absence of pro-liberal values, and not the presence of the local structures, over the years is more significant to the conflict. Scholars like Collier (2007) and Ghani, Lockhart, & Carnahan (2006) are of the opinion that wrong calculations and other fragile decisions taken in times of post-conflict reconstruction and peacebuilding can recline the levels of progress and success recorded. Shacklock & Ntanyoma (2022) illustrated in their work how wrong direction will, rather than stop the conflict, create a new cycle of violence, by encouraging rebel group mobilisation. This concludes the fact that a methodology designed to target the wrong cause can potentially cause a failure of liberal peacebuilding.

Social engineering: Systemic Restructuring and the Threat of Recolonization

Social engineering as a methodology adopted in liberal peacebuilding encourages systemic restructuring, often undermining the local status quo by introducing a liberal state (Philipsen, 2014; Paris, 2004). This process involves externally driven interventions aimed at reconstructing political, economic, and social institutions within post-conflict societies, aligning them with Western liberal democratic ideals. However, such externally imposed transformations often face resistance due to their perceived imposition of foreign values and governance structures (Goodhand & Walton, 2009; Mac Ginty, 2011). As argued by Shebbs and Irokansi (2020), domestic policies that run at cross purposes with the social rights of the public face rivalry

which potentially results to breakdown of law and order. This demonstrates ways in which Africa societies are naturally formed to protect its social synergy against values that tend to break them apart. Liberal peacebuilding and social engineering, in this context, are not merely mechanisms for conflict resolution but an extrinsic political and economic phenomenon that disrupts existing power dynamics and social synergy within the Africa society. Efforts to impose novel structures that displace local systems are frequently interpreted as a direct threat to national identity and self-determination. This dynamic rekindles historical memories of colonial domination, which no nation wishes to relive.

The historical backdrop of colonial rule has left a deep imprint on many post-conflict societies, particularly in the Global South (Shebbs & Uduma, 2019). The imposition of foreign governance structures during colonialism was often justified under the guise of civilization and progress (Shebbs & Irokansi, 2020; Shebbs, Ekwuribe & Iheonu (2018)). Similarly, modern liberal peacebuilding frameworks employ the rhetoric of democracy, human rights, and economic liberalization to justify interventions. However, this resemblance to historical colonial practices elicits skepticism among local populations and elites, leading to nationalist resistance (Chandler, 2006). Nationalist movements, rooted in historical grievances and aspirations for self-determination, view externally driven peacebuilding as an infringement on their sovereignty. The imposition of Western-style governance, legal systems, and market-driven economies reinforces anxieties over a potential recolonization process. Events that evoke colonial experiences tend to provoke nationalist resistance, leading to a backlash from both state and non-state actors (Mearsheimer, 2014; Shebbs & Irokansi, 2020). This is particularly evident in post-conflict societies where sovereignty remains a sensitive issue. The presence of foreign actors, whether in the form of international organizations, NGOs, or Western governments, engaged in restructuring local governance raises concerns over external domination. These concerns are further exacerbated when peacebuilding efforts entail direct involvement in state-building processes, including constitutional reforms, electoral processes, and security sector reorganization (Duffield, 2001). While these measures are intended to stabilize fragile states, they are often perceived as mechanisms of foreign control rather than genuine efforts to establish sustainable peace (Richmond, 2011; Pugh, 2005).

Thus, the methods employed by liberal peacebuilding actors in post-conflict societies create a presumption of systemic recolonization. This perception is not merely symbolic but is grounded in tangible experiences of power asymmetry between interveners and local actors. Liberal peacebuilding often sidelines indigenous institutions and decision-making processes in favor of externally formulated frameworks. As a result, local communities and political elites may interpret such interventions as attempts to undermine their autonomy (Mac Ginty, 2013). In response, nationalist-oriented movements embedded within these societies (Shebbs, Ekwuribe,& Iheonu, 2018) tend to be triggered, mobilizing in defense of their national sovereignty. This mobilization can take multiple forms, ranging from political opposition to violent resistance against foreign peacebuilding efforts.

Empirical evidence from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) illustrates that underlying many instances of failed liberal peacebuilding is the presence of nationalist movements opposing externally imposed peacebuilding methods. Following the end of the Second Congo War in 2003, international actors, including the United Nations, the European Union, and bilateral donors, undertook extensive peacebuilding initiatives aimed at democratization, economic liberalization, and institutional reforms. However, these efforts faced substantial resistance from local political factions and armed groups who perceived them as foreign-imposed solutions that disregarded Congolese agency (Autesserre, 2010; Tull, 2009). The failure to integrate indigenous political structures and local conflict-resolution mechanisms into the broader peacebuilding agenda contributed to ongoing instability and the persistence of armed conflict.

Nationalist movements in the DRC, as in other post-conflict settings, often emerge due to fears of recolonization and foreign intervention. These fears are not unfounded, as external

actors frequently exert considerable influence over domestic policies under the guise of peacebuilding. For instance, international financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank impose structural adjustment programs that prioritize market liberalization over local economic priorities. Similarly, electoral processes supervised by international organizations sometimes undermine local political dynamics by favoring candidates who align with Western interests (Paris, 2010). Such interventions reinforce the perception that liberal peacebuilding serves external agendas rather than addressing the root causes of conflict (Chandler, 2010; Barnett & Zürcher, 2009).

This research argues that such resistance is not a rejection of pro-liberal values but rather a rejection of the imposed social engineering efforts used by actors to implement them. Many post-conflict societies do not inherently oppose democracy, human rights, or economic development. Instead, they resist the coercive and prescriptive nature of externally driven peacebuilding efforts. The challenge, therefore, lies in reimagining peacebuilding approaches that respect local agency and prioritize participatory processes. A more inclusive and context-sensitive approach to peacebuilding; one that engages local actors as equal partners rather than passive recipients, may mitigate nationalist resistance and enhance the legitimacy of peace initiatives (Mac Ginty & Richmond, 2013).

In conclusion, the failure of liberal peacebuilding in many post-conflict societies can be attributed to its social engineering approach, which disrupts existing political and social structures. By imposing externally designed frameworks, liberal peacebuilding interventions inadvertently evoke historical memories of colonial domination, triggering nationalist resistance. The Democratic Republic of Congo serves as a case study illustrating how nationalist movements mobilize against externally driven peacebuilding efforts, perceiving them as threats to sovereignty. However, resistance to liberal peacebuilding does not necessarily equate to opposition to liberal values. Rather, it reflects a demand for greater ownership and inclusion in the peacebuilding process. Future peacebuilding initiatives must therefore shift towards more localized and participatory methodologies to avoid exacerbating tensions and undermining their own objectives.

Social engineering: Targeting the Wrong Cause of Conflict

One of the most critical flaws in social engineering as a method for instilling liberal peacebuilding is its tendency to misidentify the root causes of conflict. Liberal peacebuilding efforts often prioritize structural reforms that seek to replace or modify local governance and economic frameworks with externally imposed models. However, this approach erroneously assumes that existing local structures are the primary drivers of conflict. In reality, conflicts frequently stem from a decline in pro-liberal values such as human rights, political freedoms, and inclusive governance.

Historical and contemporary cases explain how local institutions, despite their imperfections, have often functioned as stabilizing forces before conflicts erupt (Shebbs, 2015; Shebbs, Ekwuribe & Iheonu, 2018). Their mere existence, therefore, cannot be the root cause of instability. Instead, a deterioration in liberal democratic norms often precedes conflict. Goodhand and Walton (2009) argue that dismantling local structures in the name of liberal peacebuilding is frequently perceived as an illegitimate intervention that disregards the social and political significance of these institutions. This perspective aligns with Richmond's (2011) critique of liberal peace, which highlights how externally driven interventions tend to overlook indigenous political cultures, thereby exacerbating resistance and delegitimizing peace processes.

Empirical evidence from post-conflict contexts such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) supports this argument. Studies suggest that before conflicts reach their tipping point, there is often a noticeable regression in democratic governance, human rights protections, and political participation (Autesserre, 2010). This decline weakens the social contract between the state and its citizens, leading to widespread disenfranchisement and, ultimately, conflict.

Consequently, efforts to impose liberal peacebuilding strategies that disregard these fundamental issues result in misguided interventions that fail to address the real sources of instability.

Moreover, by misdiagnosing the underlying causes of conflict, liberal peacebuilding efforts risk exacerbating local grievances. Paris (2004) warns that rapid liberalization in post-conflict societies, when implemented without sufficient regard for local political dynamics, can fuel instability rather than mitigate it. In some cases, the introduction of foreign governance models disrupts pre-existing mechanisms of conflict resolution, further alienating local populations. This is evident in Afghanistan, where externally imposed liberal democratic institutions struggled to gain legitimacy, partly due to their perceived disconnect from indigenous governance traditions (Zaum, 2012). Therefore, the failure of liberal peacebuilding lies not only in its methods but in its fundamental assumptions. By focusing on restructuring local institutions (Shebbs, 2015) rather than addressing the actual drivers of conflict (such as political disenfranchisement, economic inequality, and human rights abuses) these interventions misallocate resources and ultimately face resistance from the very communities they aim to assist. To achieve sustainable peace, peacebuilding strategies must be informed by a deeper understanding of the political, historical, and social realities of post-conflict societies rather than relying on generalized liberal frameworks that fail to resonate with local contexts.

Summary and conclusion

The methodology of liberal peacebuilding is not the same as pro-liberal values. This research establishes a fundamental distinction between the values that liberal peacebuilding seeks to promote and the methodologies employed to achieve those values. By identifying social engineering as the dominant methodology, the study argues that such an approach deconstructs local alternatives, thereby generating tensions within post-conflict societies. The central argument put forth is that liberal peacebuilding efforts are doomed to fail if their methodologies work to undermine or dismantle local traditions, customs, and governance structures rather than incorporating them into a sustainable peace framework.

One of the primary issues identified in the study is the perception that liberal peacebuilding methods are a form of systemic recolonisation. When external actors impose a set of methods that disregard or actively dismantle local traditions and governance systems, they risk creating the impression that such interventions are neocolonial in nature. This perception leads to resentment, resistance, and ultimately, repressive responses from nationalist factions. Nationalist tendencies, deeply rooted in the history and ideologies of the local populations, can become a significant source of opposition to peacebuilding efforts. Instead of fostering long-term stability, such externally imposed methodologies may exacerbate tensions and lead to renewed cycles of conflict.

Furthermore, the study challenges a core assumption underlying liberal peacebuilding: that illiberal structures are the primary cause of conflict. Instead, it posits that conflicts often arise not from the presence of illiberal institutions but from the absence of pro-liberal values such as democracy, human rights, and inclusive governance. The persistence of traditional governance systems and social structures does not inherently cause conflict; rather, tensions emerge when efforts to impose pro-liberal values directly challenge these long-standing institutions. The failure to recognize this distinction results in interventions that misdiagnose the root causes of conflict, leading to misguided strategies that ultimately prove ineffective.

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) serves as a case study illustrating these dynamics. The research highlights how nationalist ideologies have played a critical role in shaping the trajectory of conflict within the country. Armed groups and political factions frequently frame their struggles in nationalist terms, positioning themselves as defenders of local traditions and sovereignty against foreign interference. By doing so, they gain legitimacy among local populations, further complicating peacebuilding efforts that rely on external methodologies perceived as intrusive.

Moreover, evidence from the DRC demonstrates a direct correlation between the decline of pro-liberal values and the persistence of conflict. While external interventions often focus on dismantling illiberal structures, the study finds that these structures have existed long before conflicts erupted. Instead of eradicating them, peacebuilding efforts should focus on strengthening pro-liberal values in a manner that respects and integrates existing social and political systems. The failure to do so results in fragile peace processes that lack local legitimacy and are prone to collapse under nationalist pressures.

In summary, this research underscores the importance of distinguishing between the values and methodologies of liberal peacebuilding. It argues that social engineering, as a method, is counterproductive because it deconstructs local alternatives, thereby fuelling resistance and exacerbating tensions. Liberal peacebuilding efforts that seek to impose methodologies perceived as recolonisation risk triggering nationalist backlashes, undermining their own objectives. Additionally, by misidentifying the root causes of conflict, such interventions fail to address the true drivers of instability. The case of the DRC illustrates how nationalist ideologies shape conflicts and how the gradual decline of pro-liberal values correlates with ongoing violence. Thus, for liberal peacebuilding to be effective, it must adopt an approach that respects local traditions while promoting pro-liberal values in an inclusive and context-sensitive manner.

References

Autesserre, S. (2010). The Trouble with the Congo: Local Violence and the Failure of International Peacebuilding. Cambridge University Press.

Autesserre, S. (2014). Peaceland: Conflict Resolution and the Everyday Politics of International Intervention. Cambridge University Press.

Barnett, M., & Zürcher, C. (2009). The Peacebuilder's Contract: How External Statebuilding Reinforces Weak Statehood. International Studies Quarterly, 63(1), 1–13.

Barnett, M., Kim, H., O'Donnell, M., & Sitea, L. (2020). "Peacebuilding and the Limits of the Liberal International Order." International Affairs, 96(1), 1-18.

Bellamy, A., & Williams, P., (2010). Understanding Peacekeeping. Polity Press.

Björkdahl, A. & Höglund, K. (2013). Precarious Peacebuilding: Friction in Global–Local Encounters. Peacebuilding, 1(3), 289–299. doi.org/10.1080/21647259.2013.813170

Boege, V. (2018). Hybridisation of Peacebuilding at the Local-International Interface: The Bougainville Mac. In Wallis, J., Kent, L., Forsyth, M., Dinnen, S. and Bose, S., (eds) Hybridity on the Ground in Peacebuilding and Development: Critical Conversations. Australia: ANU Press

Carothers, T., (2014). Democracy aid at 25: Time to choose. Journal of Democracy, 26(1), 59-73.

Chandler, D. (2006). Empire in Denial: The Politics of State-building. Pluto Press.

Chandler, D. (2010). International Statebuilding: The Rise of Post-liberal Governance. London, England: Routledge

Chandler, D. (2017). Peacebuilding: The twenty years' crisis, 1997–2017. Springer.

Chandler, D. (2020). Resilience and the autotelic subject: Toward a critique of the societalization of security. International Political Sociology, 14(2), 135-150.

Collier, P. (2007). The Bottom Billion: Why the poorest countries are failing and what can be done about it. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.

Dahl, R. (2000). On Democracy. Yale University Press.

De Coning, C. (2018). Adaptive peacebuilding. International Affairs, 94(2), 301-317.

Diamond, L. (1999). Developing Democracy: Toward Consolidation. Johns Hopkins University Press.

Donais, T., (2012). Peacebuilding and local ownership: Post-conflict consensus-building. Routledge.

Doyle, M., (2005). Three Pillars of the Liberal Peace'. American Political Science Review, 99(3), 463–466. doi.org/10.1017/S0003055405051798

Duffield, M. (2001). Global Governance and the New Wars: The Merging of Development and Security. Zed Books.

Fukuyama, F. (1992). The End of History and the Last Man. Free Press.

Fukuyama, F. (2004). State-Building: Governance and World Order in the 21st Century. Cornell University Press.

Fukuyama, F. (2018). Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Galtung, J., (2007). Introduction: Peace by peaceful conflict transformation-the transcend approach. In Webel, C. and Galtung, J. (eds). Handbook of Peace and Conflict Studies. New York, USA: Routledge. (Pp. 14-34)

Ghani, A., Lockhart, C., & Carnahan, M. (2006). An Agenda for State-Building in the Twenty-First Century. The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs, 30(1), 101–123.

Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect (2024). Democratic Republic of the Congo. Assessed on 09/04/2024 from https://www.globalr2p.org/countries/democratic-republic-of-the-congo/

Goodfellow, T. & Lindemann, S. (2013). The Clash of Institutions: Traditional Authority, Conflict and the Failure of "Hybridity" in Buganda. Commonwealth & Comparative Politics, 51(1), 3–26,. doi.org/10.1080/14662043.2013.752175

Goodhand F. & Walton, O. (2009). The limits of liberal peacebuilding? International engagement in the Sri Lankan peace process. Journal Of Intervention and Statebuilding, 3(3). 303-323. DOI https://doi.org/10.1080/17502970903086693

Goodhand, J. & Klem, B., (2005). Aid, conflict and peacebuilding in Sri Lanka. Colombo: Asia Foundation. Cited in Goodhand F. & Walton, O. (2009). The limits of liberal peacebuilding? International engagement in the Sri Lankan peace process. Journal Of Intervention and Statebuilding, 3(3). 303-323. DOI https://doi.org/10.1080/17502970903086693

Goodhand, J., & Walton, O., (2009). The Limits of Liberal Peacebuilding? International Engagement in the Sri Lankan Peace Process. Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding, 3(3), 303-323.

Goodhand, J., & Walton, O., (2009). The sovereignty of the market? The political economy of peacebuilding. Conflict, Security & Development, 9(2), 161-186.

Halbwachs, M., (1995). La memoire collective, Paris: Albin Michel.

Heathershaw, J., (2013). Towards better theories of peacebuilding: beyond the liberal peace debate. Peacebuilding, 1(2), 275–282, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/21647259.2013.783260

Hirblinger, A. T. & Simons, C. (2015). The good, the bad, and the powerful: Representations of the 'local' in peacebuilding. Security Dialogue, 46(5), 422-439. https://doiorg.uea.idm.oclc.org/10.1177/0967010615580055

Huntington, S. (1996). The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order. Simon & Schuster.

Mac Ginty & Richmond, O. (2013). The Local Turn in Peace Building: a critical agenda for peace. Third World Quarterly, 34(5), 763-783.

Mac Ginty, R. (2011). International Peacebuilding and Local Resistance: Hybrid Forms of Peace. Palgrave Macmillan.

Mac Ginty, R. (2013). Against Stabilization. Stability: International Journal of Security and Development, 2(1), 1–6.

Mac Ginty, R., & Richmond, O. P. (2020). The fallacy of constructing hybrid political orders: A critique of the hybrid turn in peacebuilding. International Peacekeeping, 27(2), 219-242.

Mac Ginty, R., (2010). Hybrid Peace: The Interaction between Top-Down and Bottom-Up Peace. Security Dialogue, 41(4), 391–412. doi.org/10.1177/0967010610374312

Mansfield, E., & Snyder, J., (2007). The sequencing "fallacy". Journal of Democracy, 18(3), 5-9.
Mearsheimer, J. (2001). The Tragedy of Great Power Politics. W.W. Norton & Company.
Mearsheimer, J. (2011). Why Leaders Lie: The Truth about Lying in International Politics. Oxford University Press.
Mearsheimer, J. (2014). The burden of responsibility. The National Interest, no. 129, pp. 9-30.
Mearsheimer, J. J. (2018). The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities. Yale University Press.
Millar, G., (2014). Disaggregating Hybridity: Why hybrid institutions do not produce predictable experiences of peace. Journal of Peace Research, 51(4), 501–514. doi.org/10.1177/0022343313519465
Mitchell, T. (2002). Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics, Modernity. University of California Press.
Newman, E., Paris, R., & Richmond, O. P. (2009). New perspectives on liberal peacebuilding. United Nations University Press.
Ojendal, J. and Ou, S. (2024) The "local turn" saving liberal peacebuilding? Unpacking virtual peace in Cambodia. Third World Quarterly. Volume 36, No. 5. Pp 929-949
Olick, J.K., Vinitzky-Seroussi, and Levy, D. (2011). Introduction. In J.K. Olick, Vinitzky-Seroussi and D. Levy (eds). The Collective Memory Reader. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press. 3–62.
Our World in Data, (2024). Electoral Pluralism Index for Democratic Republic of Congo. Assessed from https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/electoral-pluralism-index-eiu?tab=chart&time=earliest..2020&country=~COD on 09/05/2024
Paffenholz, T., (2015). Unpacking the local turn in peacebuilding: a critical assessment towards an agenda for future research. Third World Quarterly, 36(5), 857-874, DOI: 10.1080/01436597.2015.1029908
Paris, R. (2004). At War's End: Building Peace after Civil Conflict. Cambridge University Press.
Paris, R. (2010). Saving liberal peacebuilding. Review of International Studies, 36, 337–365. DOI:10.1017/S0260210510000057
Philipsen, L. (2014). When liberal peacebuilding fails: Paradoxes of implementing ownership and accountability in the integrated approach. Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding, 8(1), 42–67. https://doi.org/10.1080/17502977.2014.877628
Porter, P. (2020). The False Promise of Liberal Order: Nostalgia, Delusion and the Rise of Trump. Polity.
Pospisil, J. (2019). Peace in political unsettlement: Beyond solving conflict. Springer.
Pugh, M. (2005). The Political Economy of Peacebuilding: A Critical Theory Perspective. International Journal of Peace Studies, 10(2), 23–42.
Richmond, O. P. (2011). A Post-Liberal Peace. Routledge.
Rocha, A. (2011). State Building for Peace: a new paradigm for international engagement in post-conflict fragile states? Third World Quarterly, 32, 1715-1736
Rocha, J. (2011). Beyond positive and negative peace: A critical theory approach to peace and conflict studies. Journal of Peace Research, 48(4), 487-500.
Ross, M. H. (2013). The politics of memory and peacebuilding. In Mac Ginty, R. (ed). Routledge Handbook of Peacebuilding. New York, USA: Routledge. (Pp. 91-102)
Ross, M.H. (2009). Cultural Contestation and the Symbolic Landscape: Politics by Other Means? In M.H. Ross (ed). Culture and Belonging in Divided Societies: Contestation and Symbolic Landscapes. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press. 1–24.
Scott, J. C. (1998). Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed. Yale University Press.
Sen, A. (1999). Development as Freedom. Oxford University Press.
Shacklock, T. & Ntanyoma, D. R. (2022). Why 'liberal peacebuilding' isn't delivering for DR Congo's ethnic minorities. Open Democracy. Assessed on 09/05/2024 from

https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/democratic-republic-congo-indigenous-ethnic-minorities/

Shebbs, E. & Irokansi, J., (2020). Management of Covid-19 in Nigeria: Contending Paradigms of Democratic State's Protectionist Rights Versus Individual's Libertarian Rights. International Journal of Peace and Conflict Studies, Vol. 7(1), pp.39-47.

Shebbs, E. & Uduma, D., (2019). Kush Versus Egypt's Relations (2000 BCE-700 BCE): Implications for the Development-oriented Regional integration of West African States. Internaitional Journal of Economic and Development Research and Investment, Vol. 10(1), pp.1-6.

Shebbs, E., (2015). Performance of Public Corporations in the 21st Century: Challenges and future needs for rationalization. International Journal of Capacity Building in Education and Management, 2(3), pp. 43-55

Shebbs, E., Agbor, U & Uduma, D., (2022). Local Government as Potential Leverage for the Management of Internally Displaced Persons in Nigeria: Study of Bakassi Loca Government Area of Cross River State. International Journal of Public Administration and Management Research, Vol. 7(6), pp.18-32.

Shebbs, E., Agbor, U & Uduma, D., (2022b). United Nations Humanitarian Intervention Strategy in Africa: Examining the Novelties and Paradigm-Shift in the case of Somalia 1992. International Journal of Peace and Conflict Studies, Vol 7(3), pp.42-77.

Shebbs, E., Ekwuribe, U., & Iheonu, A., (2018). The 21st Century role of the state machinery in resource control: imperatives for good governance in Nigeria. Journal of Humanities and Social Policy, 4(2).

Shesterinina, A. (2016). Collective threat framing and mobilization in civil war. American Journal of Political Science, 110(3), 411-428. DOI: 10.1017/S0003055416000277

The World Bank, (2024). Internally displaced persons, total displaced by conflict and violence (number of people) in Congo Dem. Rep. Assessed on 09/05/2024 https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/VC.IDP.TOCV?end=2022&locations=CD&start=2010

Tull, D. (2009). Peacekeeping in the Democratic Republic of Congo: Waging Peace and Fighting War. International Peacekeeping, 16(2), 215–230.

Wallis, J. (2018). Is There Still a Place for Liberal Peacebuilding? In Wallis, J., Kent, L., Forsyth, M., Dinnen, S. and Bose, S., (eds). Hybridity on the Ground in Peacebuilding and Development: Critical Conversations. Australia: ANU Press

Wallis, J. (2018). Liberal peacebuilding and the global South: Beyond the binary of peace and violence. Palgrave Macmillan.

Waltz, K. N. (1979). Theory of International Politics. Addison-Wesley.

Weinstein, J. (2005). Autonomous Recovery and International Intervention in Comparative Perspective. Center for Global Development Working Paper No. 57.

Zambakari, C. (2016). Challenges of liberal peace and statebuilding in divided societies. Conflict Trends. 4, 18-24

Zaum, D. (2012). Legitimating International Peacebuilding: From Transitional Administration to Humanitarian Intervention. Oxford University Press.