

Lisa Schirch

*Conflict Assessment and Peacebuilding Planning:
Toward a Participatory Approach to Human Security*
(Boulder, CO: Kumarian Press, 2013, 227pp.)

Lisa Schirch sets out clearly the aim of this handbook: “Strategic peacebuilding requires long-term actions at all levels, from local to global, by multiple actors coordinating an approach that is led locally and based on explicit decision making informed by a systems approach. A systems approach sees violence as a result of a complex web of people and factors taking place in a complex local, cultural, and historical context. Peacebuilding requires acting in recognition of this complex system...Planning links different kinds and sectors of peacebuilding including economic development, human rights advocacy and participatory governance programs, all sensitive to reducing divisions and fostering peaceful and just relations between groups. Ideally, planning includes a balance between stopping conflict drivers and starting or supporting conflict mitigators. What beliefs, attitudes, or behaviors at the individual, relational, cultural, and structural levels need to stop? What beliefs, attitudes, or behaviors at the individual, relational, cultural, and structural levels need to start?”

Lisa Schirch who is a professor of peacebuilding at Eastern Mennonite University in the USA has been involved with a number of conflict resolution programs and institutes. She quotes from earlier guides and handbooks designed by the US Institute for Peace, Conciliation Resources in the UK, Catholic Relief Services, Search for Common Ground, the World Bank, International Alert, Interpeace (Geneva), the OECD, PRIO (Norway) and the Institute for Multi-Track Diplomacy.

There is wide agreement on the need for good analysis of armed conflict situations – here called conflict assessment. Conflicts are complex, and analysis – assessment – can be time consuming and expensive. However policies and projects for conflict resolution depend heavily on the quality of the analysis. As Lisa Schirch writes “This handbook seeks to make a more explicit connection between robust quality conflict assessment research and peacebuilding planning, monitoring and evaluation...This handbook's focus is on self-assessment, insider and outsider partnerships, and participatory processes.”

It is “self-assessment” that is the most innovative aspect of the handbook. Self-assessment are questions which an organization should ask itself before starting a conflict resolution effort. The handbook is primarily addressed to the growing number of non-governmental organizations and university institutes involved in conflict resolution activities. The United Nations and national governments have set procedures for taking decisions to involve themselves or not in a local armed conflict. Their methods of analysis could, no doubt, be improved, but it is smaller, non-governmental organizations which have to ask themselves questions on the value of getting involved at all, and if so, how: mediation, relief, Track II dialogue efforts, support to local groups etc. There is often a wide range of possibilities, but options are limited by money, by available persons, and the quality of existing contacts with groups and institutions in the conflict area. Moreover, in prolonged conflict situations such as Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria or Israel-Palestine, there are a good number of organizations at work. What is the nature and quality of cooperation, of information-sharing, of coordination of efforts? What information is received from local sources? How reliable is the information or the political analysis of local people directly involved in the conflict? How does the effort which my group undertakes fit into the overall pattern of conflict resolution?

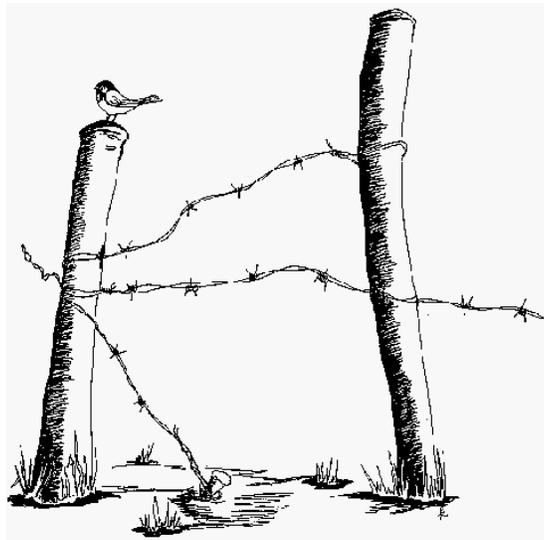
As Lisa Schirch indicates “Strategic peacebuilding addresses the questions of scale. Ideally, efforts build on each other to progress toward macro changes. Designing peacebuilding so that it

impacts macro-level change requires considering how to link micro peacebuilding efforts to macro changes to the system. A variety of strategies involve scaling up peacebuilding from micro to macro approaches.”

Ideally is the key word in the paragraph as well as in the book as a whole. The questions which one should ask of one's organization, of local informants and the techniques of research are all well set out and are important. This is no doubt the role of a handbook. What does not stand out as well is the reality of sitting in an NGO office in Geneva when some place far away, as currently the Central African Republic, is going up in flames, when there has not been that many studies on socio-economic structures, when one cannot reach local contacts and when local contacts are very “local” and have little idea as to what is going on in other parts of the country. Even the French Government, former colonial power with many intelligence sources had few answers to the handbook's framework and so sent in soldiers because soldiers are sitting around waiting (while social workers or development specialists are busy with other things.) Soldiers can keep people apart. In the Central African Republic case, the soldiers can more or less keep Christians and Muslims from crossing the road to kill each other. However, soldiers are less able to bring people together.

It is currently not clear how many non-governmental conflict resolution groups want to go to the Central African Republic to help at individual-level approaches which seek to change the attitudes, values and perceptions of individuals as an important first step in bringing about any type of real and lasting wider changes through inter-group or inter-religious dialogue. Nor is it clear how many groups want to work on structural-level approaches to support the creation of institutions that address the grievances that drive conflicts within the society. Those NGOs who do want to send people will benefit from Lisa Schrich's very useful series of questions which they should ask themselves.

Rene Wadlow



Drawing: Françoise Pottier