Essays on Microfoundations of Peacebuilding in War-Torn Societies:
Hypotheses and Evidence from a Field Experiment in Rural Liberia

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Introduction

1 Background

Can international interventions to build peace after civil war have positive influence on democratic outcomes at the grassroots level? Does any such influence comes from these interventions' military component or civilian component? What are the mechanisms governing these interventions in postwar processes at the grassroots level? Do such mechanisms operate the same way in different outcomes areas (i.e., political; social)? How do different local settings respond to various activities carried out under the auspices of peacebuilding interventions? These are important questions for our understanding of the effectiveness of peacebuilding and democratization efforts at the grassroots level. Surprisingly, the existing literature has not addressed these questions adequately. This dissertation attempts to provide answers.

Peacebuilding interventions are central to efforts by the international community to establish stable and self-sustaining peace in war-torn societies (Tschirgi 2004). Often–but not always–carried out within the context of UN multidimensional peacekeeping operations, they typically encompass military and civilian components and seek to resolve conflicts through a holistic approach that link security priorities with broader aims of good governance, democratization and social inclusion (Doyle and Sambanis 2006; Cousens and Kumar 2001). Crucially, peacebuilding interventions follow a *liberal* orientation, with an explicit aim "to remake war-shattered societies as liberal democracies–with popularly elected governments and civil liberties such as freedom of association and expression, which are presupposed by the idea of free and fair elections." While liberal democratization efforts have mainly focused at the macro-level, namely the national level institutions or processes and actors, the foundations of liberal change are actually at the micro-level (Baranyi 2008: 18; Manning 2003).

In other words, liberal transformations, presumed to be sine qua non conditions for self-sustaining peace, cannot take root unless the masses embrace the reform necessary for such transformations (Doyle and Sambanis 2006; Stedman et al. 2002: 20). To this end, peacebuilders have attempted to extend democratic liberal reforms at the micro-level through a wide range of programs, including direct efforts to reform local structures presumed to be conflict prone to make them more inclusive and legitimate; setting up new governance structures through Community Driven Development (CDD) programs that are supposed to operate democratically; and targeting the citizenry directly with education on democratic norms and liberal values (Jarstad and Sisk 2008; Pouligny 2006; Russett and O'Neal 2001). However, peacebuilding initiatives at the grassroots level remain ad-hoc and fragmented, with unclear links to the overall peacebuilding strategy (Autesserre 2010; Tschirgi 2004).

More problematically, however, peacebuilding and democratization efforts tend to be carried out in diverse local contexts –broadly defined to refer to a wide range of factors related to local structures, cultures, institutions, and histories as well as the socioeconomic and political dynamics–and yet this diversity is typically overlooked in the current peacebuilding approach (Richmond 2011; Autesserre 2010; Gizelis and Kosek 2005).[1] Specifically, from a micro-level perspective, the current approach is premised on unwarranted assumptions and false monoliths about local contexts, at both the institutional and ideational level. At the institutional level, international interveners tend to portray a monolithic view of local power structures and institutions as uniformly undemocratic, abusive of the local population and illegitimate. Because they view such institutions as illegitimate, they do not rely on them to reveal communities' social preferences and see them rather as hurdles or obstacles (Donais 2009).

At the ideational level, peacebuilders tend to view local norms and local customs and practices as antithetical to universal ones, even though they might be subscribed to by the communities themselves (Ponzio 2011). For instance, a frequent rationale underlying interventions such as CDD programs that seek to establish new democratic governance structures in war-torn communities is that previous structures either no longer fulfill their functions, having been destroyed during civil war, or lost their legitimacy and that they should therefore be transformed because local people have disavowed them (Richards 2005; Hanlon 2005). Yet, case studies from many postwar societies such as Afghanistan, East Timor or Liberia suggest that there

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[1]In this dissertation I use local context(s) and local setting(s) interchangeably.

is, in actuality, significant variation in existing structures' ability to provide public goods as well as in local people's attachments to them (Ponzio 2011; Sawyer 2005; Hohe 2002a).

In the case of Afghanistan, for example, Brick (2008) argued that despite persistent weaknesses of the central government a mix of customary organizations–from village executives (maliks), village councils (shuras/jirgas), and religious arbiters (mullahs/imams)–have provided, under certain conditions, public goods to the local communities. Mushi (2011) makes a similar observation in the case of DRC. He argues that a web of multi-layered networks in the South Kivu province–from traditional systems to militias to social clubs of various kinds–"continued to provide a degree of governance response after the central state apparatus disappeared." Moreover, as a growing number of studies revealed (Sandefur and Siddiqi 2013; Harper 2011; Dale 2009), these traditional and informal systems and mechanisms enjoy high levels of legitimacy, even in cases where rival formal systems might exist (Isser et al. 2009).This is not peculiar to post-conflict settings, however. Recent surveys of traditional systems in a wide range of African countries revealed that these systems enjoy considerable legitimacy and support from the majority of their people than local government officials, with 58% of respondents agreeing that "the amount of influence of traditional leaders have in governing your local community should increase," while only 8% of respondents felt it should decrease (Acemoglu et al. 2013, citing Logan 2011; 2009).

What this suggests, then, is that there is important variation in local settings in terms of the types of existing structures and the utility that local people derive from them and these differences are likely to have implications for the performance of peacebuilding interventions and the extent to which liberal objectives they pursue are achieved (Sawyer 2005).[2] Understanding this variation is important because distinguishing contextual factors such as prevailing cultural practices and traditions play an important role in people's life (e.g., Rubenstein 2008 2003; Hohe 2002a; Duffey 2000). Yet, the current peacebuilding approach has not paid adequate attention to variation in local settings, owing in large part to this approach's focus on macro-level and formal phenomena and processes.[3] A key premise of this dissertation is that variation in local

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[2]This is an uncontroversial claim to students of comparative politics, including those focusing on civil war and postwar processes (Autesserre 2010; Kalyvas 2008; 2003). There is a rich tradition of scholarship in comparative politics (see, for example, Moore 1966; Popkin 1979; Scott 1976 1985; Migdal 1989) that has long stressed a complex picture of local settings, with a great deal of variation in social and political dynamics.

[3]Both peacebuilding practice and research have typically been carried out at the macro-level, focusing almost exclusively on national-level processes such as constitution-making or elections, and on processes involving high-profile elites, especially those affiliated with armed factions. In contrast, local level processes and actors have generally received scant attention (Ginty 2011; Richmond 2011). Focus on national-level processes and the elites is not neces-

settings has important practical and theoretical implications for our understanding of the effectiveness of peacebuilding. From a practical point of view, failure to take this diversity into account can be a recipe for misdiagnosis of salient issues and to unwarranted expectations about local responses to interventions (Talentino 2007; Chopra and Hohe 2004; Clapham 2000). This is especially true with respect to democratization efforts, which typically seek to displace/transform local structures and to bring local norms into conformity with liberal norms and values (Richmond 2011; Donais 2009). Thus, a reasonable expectation is that different local settings will present peacebuilders with different challenges and opportunities for successful promotion of democratic norms and liberal values.

A related theoretical question is how and why different local settings respond to liberal reforms promoted within peacebuilding interventions. We know from social science theories that promotion of new ideas or values is not automatic. As Crawford (2002) argued with reference to new belief systems, "the transmission of beliefs does not necessarily guarantee their adoption. Members of cultures often resist new beliefs, and why any new belief is adopted must be explained since some beliefs and practices are adopted, while others are not" (74). Democratic norms and liberal values promoted through peacebuilding interventions are no exception. Thus it is imperative to clarify the conditions under which these norms and values can be promoted and adopted successfully at the local level. Based on the foregoing discussion, I hypothesize that local setting types–in particular the degree to which the local population values such structures–may be one operating condition of successful peacebuilding promotion of democratic norms and values, dictating when, and how the local population adopts or rejects them.

In this dissertation, I investigate–both theoretically and empirically–when and how various peacebuilding activities carried out at the grassroots level may be effective in promoting democrac outcomes in different local settings. Theoretically, I begin by laying conceptual foundations for my arguments. Using an existing culture as the most salient feature of local context, I introduce the concept of *cultural strength,* intrinsic to the distinction critical to my claims, between culturally established settings characterized by particular features associated with stability and predictability in patterns of social interactions, and *culturally fragmented settings* lacking in such features. My claim is that these differences are important because they suggest

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sarily misplaced, as effective national institutions and processes are essential for stable political and social order. Yet, excusive focus on macro-level phenomena and trends may not provide an accurate picture of what might actually be happening on the ground–that is, it can mask important variations that may ultimately the sources of peacebuilding success or failure.

different degrees of predispositions or susceptibility to change, suggesting and therefore opportunities and challenges for promoting democratic outcomes. In addition, I categorize different peacebuilding activities in two broad types: *(i) status-quo transforming strategies* (e.g., democracy and human rights activities) explicitly designed to alter at least some aspects of the existing sociopolitical order; and *(ii) status-quo preserving strategies* (e.g., military peacekeeping), which provide certain services without necessarily challenging the existing structures. I argue that these two strategies make different assumptions about important barriers to peacebuilding and entail different mechanisms and, as a result, they will tend to elicit different responses in different settings.

These conceptual foundations allow me to develop a micro-foundational theory of peacebuilding interventions and democratic outcomes at the grassroots level, re-assessing the premises and logic underlying specific strategies in light of social science theories and formulating specific hypotheses about the effects of these strategies in different setting types. My general claim is that different peacebuilding strategies will have differential influences on democratic outcomes in different local settings. Specifically, I argue that the *strength of an existing culture* plays a key role in moderating the influence of peacebuilding strategies on political participation. In established settings–where locals likely have strong valuation of the existing culture–strategies that seek to transform aspects of the status-quo social order will be less likely to have positive influence on democratic outcomes as the result of local resistance, whereas status-quo preserving strategies will tend to have positive effects by working through more subtle channels (e.g., elite socialization). In contrast, in fragmented settings–where locals likely have weak valuation of existing cultures, status-quo preserving strategies will tend to be ineffective, whereas status-quo transforming strategies will tend to have positive influence on democratic outcomes as they entail mechanisms to solve information problems pervasive in these settings.

Empirically, I test these claims using a nine-month field experiment titled "Peacebuilding and Democracy Promotion in Liberia" (PBDPL) carried out across 142 rural communities, in partnership with the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) and two local civil society organizations. Unique in its breath and depth, this trial was designed to mimic as closely as possible two key components of today's peacebuilding operations, namely: (i) status-quo preserving strategies represented by a security committee program that entailed monthly meetings between representatives from selected villages and UNMIL peacekeepers to

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discuss security and other issues of concern to local communities; and (ii) status-quo transforming strategies represented by a civic education program that entailed a 13-theme democracy promotion curriculum covering a wide range of issues including nationhood and citizenship, human rights and rule of law, democratic governance, inclusive political participation to name a few. At the end of the 9-month intervention period empirical data were gathered on a wide range of democratic outcomes at the grassroots level, particularly political participation and social cohesion.[4]

Statistical analyses reveal two sets of findings. With respect to political participation, the results confirm theoretical expectations: the effects of the two peacebuilding strategies are indeed linked to the cultural strength of local context. In areas of strongly established local cultures, my village security committee program had strong positive effects on overall measures of political participation, but no meaningful effects in culturally fragmented localities. In those fragmented areas, the civic education program has strong positive effects on the overall measures of political participation, but adverse effects in areas of strong local culture. With this heterogeneity, average effects of the peacebuilding strategies examined look no different from zero, as found in some of the macro-level empirical studies discussed earlier. These results help reconcile two seemingly contradictory views on the prospects of postwar democratization: on one hand, optimists who tend to make positive assessments of the influence of peacebuilding operations on postwar democratic outcomes; and, on the other hand, pessimists who hold the view that local settings may simply be too resilient to respond to any kind of outside intervention. They suggest that democratic change is possible in various types of local settings, provided that the right type of intervention is utilized. However, the results on social cohesion do not support my hypotheses, suggesting that cultural strength does not necessarily exhibit the same degree of saliency or significance when the focus of outside interventions is on social issues. Taken together, these findings are counterintuitive and suggest the need to further investigate how local context shapes different strategies to promote peace and democracy in war-torn societies.

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[4]Peacebuilding interventions target too many societal dimensions to be investigated properly within the confines of a single dissertation. This dissertation focuses on political participation and social cohesion because they are the most important aspect of postwar reconstruction (Papagianni 2008; Doyle and Sambanis 2006; Orr 2002; Cousens and Kumar 2001; Kumar 1998).

2 Scope and contributions

This dissertation makes important contributions, both substantively and methodologically, to the peacebuilding literature. From a substantive standpoint, this dissertation put forth a new microfoundational theory of peacebuilding that incorporates important variation in local settings and clarifies the conditions under which different components of the peacebuilding strategy can achieve positive influence on democratic outcomes at the grassroots level. The arguments and empirical findings presented herein suggest that a number of seemingly opposite theoretical views are not necessarily mutually exclusive. In fact, this dissertation argues that many of these views are different sides of the same coin and must be addressed in the same theoretical and empirical framework.

For instance, arguments and findings of this dissertation underscore the importance to move past the tendency in the current peacebuilding scholarship and practice to portray local settings as monoliths. By stressing the importance of variation in local contexts, this dissertation helps reconcile the disagreement between proponents of mainstream peacebuilding who tend to view local contexts as malleable and receptive to outside interventions and critics who tend to view local contexts as resilient and less susceptible to outside interventions. In other words, this variation highlights important features of postwar settings that co-exist, albeit in different geographic contexts. Hence the relevant debate and research question shift from *whether* one type of local settings is more or less favorable to democratic development to *under what conditions* local contexts matter for democratic development at the grassroots level.

In the same vein, this dissertation's arguments and findings question the merit of the current peacebuilding approach's tendency to give transformative aspects of the approach precedence over the more facilitative aspects of the approach on the ground that they offer the best prospect for democratic change. They suggest that both facilitative and transformative aspects do entail democracy promotion logics and stress the important of considering not just the mechanisms underlying a specific strategy, but also the peculiarities of local settings targeted by the strategy. Thus the main contribution here is to nudge the mainstream scholarship and practice to shift away from the tendency to find an "optimal" strategy that can promote democratic outcomes under any circumstances and instead to focus on understanding when and how different strategies might be effective in addressing the constraints to democratic outcomes facing different local settings. In other

words, successful promotion of democratic outcomes depends on the extent to which interveners are able to leverage in specific local settings the strategies that elicit positive response and to rely at minimum on strategies that elicit local sensitivities.

Furthermore, this dissertation investigates a wide-range of democratic outcomes, especially the local and informal mechanisms of social and political participation that are often overlooked by international peacebuilders. This is an important contribution because the tendency in the peacebuilding scholarship and practice has been to put more emphasis on activities geared towards participation in national and formal politics under the presumption that these are more "civic" and crucial for the restoration of state legitimacy, whereas informal and local mechanisms of participation are often regarded as parochial and lacking liberal underpinnings (Pouligny 2006; Sawyer 2005; Pouligny 2000). Yet as a number of scholars (e.g., Harper 2011; Sawyer 2006; 2005; Manning 2003, etc.) pointed out, in many war-torn societies traditional and informal mechanisms tend to be the most meaningful forms of engagement with politics and institutions for the vast majority of citizens either because they are most accessible and affordable or because they are perceived to be more legitimate (Sandefur and Siddiqi 2013; Isser et al. 2011; Sawyer 2025).[5]

Absent an understanding of traditional and informal mechanisms of social and political engagement, it may be difficult to promote democratic change effectively, for effectiveness depends on creating appropriate incentive structures that align local people's interests (if not preferences) with the reforms. Thus by identifying patterns of political and social participation that prevail at the grassroots level and the extent to which they are influenced by outside interventions, this dissertation's findings contributes to a better understanding of how traditional and informal mechanisms can provide a strong foundation for successful democratization efforts at the grassroots level.[6]

Methodologically, this dissertation uses a micro-level approach that has several advantages. First, this

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[5]In the case of El Salvador, for example, Pouligny's research revealed that the relative political apathy noticed in surveys conducted after the civil war in the late 1990s was merely a change in the nature of political engagement whereby political life for El Salvadorians was being "reorganized around community life," which in turn was becoming "more valued than the idea of delegating representatives at the state level."

[6]In addition, this dissertation brings the issue of "traditional and informal" systems and processes back into the field of international relations. While there has been perennial debate among the major International Relations paradigms (i.e. realism, neoliberalism and constructivism) about the effects of institutions on cooperative and conflictive behavior of domestic and international actors (Baldwin 1993), this debate has been limited to formal institutions and mechanisms. Yet today international actors are dealing with these other institutions on a daily basis, and a proper understanding of them can make a difference in the efforts to help establish self-sustaining peace in these Òdistantó societies. I hope this dissertation provides a window into some of these interactions.

approach offers a more nuanced understanding of the nature and extent of the social and political transformations at the grassroots level than has been possible with a macro-level approach. Second, experimental methods used in this dissertation provide rigorous empirical evidence to disentangle the channels of influence underlying the relationship between peacebuilding interventions and democratic outcomes and to investigate the role of culture in the process. Third, the micro-level approach helps provide a middle ground on the thorny issues about the timing necessary for democratic outcomes to take hold: On one hand, there is a consensus in the literature that the sought-after postwar social and political transformations are longer-term processes that may not fully consolidate until long after the departure of interveners (Paris 2004; Doyle and Sambanis 2006). Paradoxically, much of the empirical literature evaluates the effectiveness of peacebuilding interventions within a timeframe that many argue is not long enough for the changes to take hold–let alone consolidate (Call and Cook 2003; Miall et al. 2011). Furthermore, macro-level studies are often fraught with a pervasive twin identification problem. Peacebuilding interventions are by definition multidimensional, in which military strategies are carried out alongside a wide range of social and political programing. This multidimensional character makes it difficult to discern the individual contribution of specific programs to the overall success of the intervention, since it is nearly impossible to control for all potential factors (Humphreys and Weinstein 2007). The micro-level approach I use in this dissertation mitigates this shortcoming. The micro-level outcomes I investigate tend to be under the direct control of peacebuilding interventions. At the same time, experimental methods enable identification of causal effects of specific aspects of these interventions in a more precise way. In addition, intermediate outcomes may make it possible to determine what about peacekeeping works and what does not.

Finally, from a policy standpoint, the findings in this dissertation provide insights into how international interventions can be designed and implemented more effectively. The lack of theoretical guidance in current peacebuilding interventions often leads to misdiagnosis of the problems, which can in turn lead to bad policy responses. Moreover, while many studies in the existing peacebuilding literature tend to highlight dilemmas in peacebuilding processes, frustratingly few provide real insight into how those dilemmas can be overcome. The theory I develop in this dissertation goes beyond pointing out the obvious and provides a framework to identify relevant institutional and cultural dimensions that can help overcome the dilemmas that so often undermine peacebuilding efforts. In the end, peacebuilding interventions achieve self-sustaining peace only

with the active cooperation of the local population, the ultimate beneficiary. When all is said and done, peacebuilders may not always be able to incentivize all local actors to peace, but they can at the very least avoid squandering any existing opportunities for peace. Finally, it should be obvious that micro-level approach I employ in this dissertation is a complement, rather than an alternative, to the macro-level approach. Therefore, extrapolation from micro- to macro-level is not automatic While finding of positive effects will strengthen the micro-level mechanisms presumed in the current peacebuilding approach, negative findings will not necessarily suggest the approach is ineffective. Such findings will simply rule out the micro-level as plausible channel through which these operations influence democratic outcomes. This raises the obvious question about external validity of the results to which will be addressed in the conclusion.

3 Dissertation outline

The rest of this dissertation is organized around three parts comprising five chapters and a conclusion. Part one lays out conceptual and theoretical issues this dissertation addresses in two chapters. Chapter two provides a background on the context of peacebuilding interventions, highlighting the security priorities and legitimacy issues that confront the postwar state as well as pervasive local incapacities to address these issues autonomously. The chapter also discusses key aspects of the peacebuilding strategy and their rationales, emphasizing in particular the liberal underpinnings and microfoundations of these interventions as well as variation in local settings in which these interventions are carried out. Chapter three introduces a microfoundational theory of peacebuilding interventions that takes into account variation in local settings and formulates specific hypotheses about how they influence democratic outcomes in different local settings

Part two focuses on empirics in three chapters. Chapter four discusses my research strategy, describing the field experiment and various data I use to test hypotheses developed in chapter three. Chapter five investigates my hypotheses and presents findings with regard to political participation, while chapter six presents findings with respect to social cohesion. Each of the two empirical chapters include: (i) a discussion the strategy used to measure the relevant outcome variable; (ii) a discussion of the empirical framework and presentation of the results; and (iii) a detailed discussion of the results. Part three's sole chapter provides a conclusion and a discussion of research and policy implications of this dissertation's findings.