

# Top-down and bottom-up narratives of peace and conflict

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## Abstract

Based on findings from the Everyday Peace Indicators project, the article considers how top-down and bottom-up narratives and understandings of conflict often differ. The article posits that top-down narratives are often the result of a peculiar framing system that imposes imaginaries on conflicts and those experiencing them. The bottom-up narratives, based on research in South Africa, South Sudan, Uganda and Zimbabwe, show that localised perceptions of peace, safety and security are not only articulated in different ways to top-down narratives but also raise different issues.

## Keywords

everyday, liberal peace, narrative, peacebuilding

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## Introduction

This article is interested in the discursive framing used for conflict, security and peace. In particular, it is interested in how everyday bottom-up narratives might differ from those employed by international peace-support actors. Put simply, bottom-up and top-down views of peace and conflict often rely on different sources of information. These sources may differ in terms of the methodologies used, categorisation and terminology – all with potentially significant impacts on the information gathered and the weight afforded to it. Divergent narratives and framings of the same conflict have potentially serious policy and political consequences. Put simply, the different framing of a conflict might lead to very different ameliorative mobilisations and responses. The article is based on early findings from an on-going, experimental research project entitled Everyday Peace Indicators (EPI). Operating in four sub-Saharan countries, the project gathers bottom-up, crowd-sourced narratives and indicators of change in local

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communities. What is emerging from this research is what Carolyn Nordstrom (1997) has termed 'a different kind of war story'. The broad story of insecurity and precariousness is there in both the top-down and the bottom-up versions, but the 'stories' are often told differently. They contain different emphases, inflections and silences.

These different stories are revealing not just about the different perspectives and ways of 'seeing' conflict and social change. They are also revealing about issues of epistemology and positionality. Crucially, they are also revealing about power: the power to write, to over-write and be heard.

The focus on everyday peace is in keeping with the local, micro and narrative 'turns' we have seen in the study of peace and conflict in recent years (Brewer, 2010; Justino et al., 2013; Mac Ginty and Richmond, 2013). The notion of 'everyday peace' has been part of a critical research agenda that seeks to recognise the agency and significance of actors at the sub-state level (Mac Ginty, 2014; Richmond, 2009). Thus, it is potentially subversive of orthodox and statist research agendas that often concentrate on institutions and traditional views of security and peace. Drawing on notions of vernacular and human security (Bubrandt, 2005), everyday peace is context specific and involves the observations and decisions made by individuals and communities as they navigate their way through life. While everyday peace navigation is required in all societies (for example, daily life in cities involves substantial degrees of tolerance and civility (Seidman, 2012; Smyth and McKnight, 2013; Tonkiss, 2003)), it may have greater importance in deeply divided and post-conflict societies. In such contexts, seemingly small issues and isolated incidents risk becoming a trigger for something more serious.

The article begins with a consideration of the factors that enable top-down actors to discursively frame conflict. It argues that a combination of factors come together to produce, and reproduce, a *system* of framing. Importantly, this system is co-constitutive of the conflict, or the top-down version of the conflict. Through acts of epistemic closure, the top-down telling of conflict frames and reinforces the nature of the conflict. The article then switches to give a brief explanation of the EPI project, before moving on to show examples of the everyday narratives of peace, conflict and social change. The article concludes by discussing how, and to what extent, these bottom-up narratives might differ from the top-down, orthodox narratives as told by states, international organisations and others engaged in standard forms of peace-support interventions.

## **The top-down framing of peace and conflict**

Let us begin with a caveat: peace and conflict are not the complete imaginaries that Baudrillard (1995) suggests. Although many aspects of conflict are open to multiple interpretations and re-interpretations, we must be careful not to overlook the 'realities' of conflict in terms of hurt, pain, displacement and destruction. Some academic commentary has a penchant for becoming caught up in post-modern and post-structuralist analyses of conflict to the extent that it forgets the very real human costs of conflict. So while this article discusses imaginaries and interpretations it does so in the knowledge that academic conceit and sophistry is no substitute for the very human and felt dimensions of conflict that have real costs in terms of emotions and material. At the same time, the 'realities' of social experience are viewed through the prism of human memory, something that Günther Grass (2008) in his autobiography likened to the peeling of an onion. Indeed, one particularly revealing military memoir begins with a discussion of why the author – reflecting back on his boyhood and incidents that left him terrified – was not to be trusted to tell his own story (Macdonald Fraser, 2000).

On top of the consequences of the frailties of the human mind, we should also be aware of the very real political agendas that deliberately try to push particular representations and narratives on to others. Here, for example, we can think of the partisan writing of school history books (Oberschall, 2013: 177–180), or the mobilisation of a particular version of events for political purposes (McCurry, 2013). This article is more interested in the structural framing of histories and events so as to form systems of thinking and representation. It is argued that a combination of mutually reinforcing factors come together to enable certain actors to promote their version of a particular conflict or peace process. Central to all of these factors is power or the ability of some actors to over-write the narratives of other actors. Three factors seem worth concentrating on: the material power of liberal peace proponents, the technocratic turn in peacebuilding, and academic strictures.

### *Material power of the liberal peace*

The first of these factors, the material power of the liberal peace, comes from the sheer size of donor budgets, the reach of military force, and the diplomatic capital amassed by international and regional security organisations. The liberal peace is taken as the most prominent form of internationally sponsored peace making and peacebuilding. It uses the language of liberalism to justify peace-support interventions and, according to circumstances, deploys a series of incentivising and coercive strategies to produce stable outcomes (Joshi et al., 2014). Fukuyama's (2011) caricature of 'getting to Denmark' is about right: the aim of liberal peace interventions is to produce market-orientated democracies that do nothing to endanger international stability. The liberal peace has been the recipient of significant academic coverage and critique and this article does not give scope for a full explication of this form of liberal interventionism (Campbell et al., 2011; Richmond, 2011). Instead, it is more fruitful to highlight the significant discursive and framing resources that liberal peace agents can mobilise in promoting their version of a narrative.

Liberal peace agents often comprise the most powerful actors internationally and nationally and so may be well placed to make sure that their narrative becomes hegemonic. A good example comes from the 'Middle East peace process' of the 1990s. Unsurprisingly, the Oslo process gained enormous goodwill and was seen by many as a chance to break the spiral of Israel–Palestinian violence through a negotiated settlement (Egeland, 1999). Yet, even when the evidence on the ground was that the peace process was non-existent, the narrative of there being a peace process continued. This narrative was perpetuated in the face of critical Palestinian voices, most notably Edward Said (2000), saying that there was no peace process. These critical voices pointed out that after initial popular euphoria, many Palestinians came to realise that their representatives were inept and corrupt, and that Israel had little intention of significant concessions. As Hermann and Newman (2000) noted, Palestinians made 'limited political achievements' (p. 121).

Yet, despite the evidence among many Palestinians that there was no viable peace process, Western political leaders and Western media outlets regularly used phrases such as 'kick start' or 're-start' the peace process (Kissinger, 1997). Indeed, somewhat startlingly, the phrases are still in usage despite the patent distrust between Palestinians and Israeli negotiators, and the repeated failure of negotiations to move beyond a preliminary phase (Pontz, 2013). The notion of restarting or kick starting a peace process suggests a premise that a peace process was already in existence. In part, this notion of an already existing peace process can be put down to a sense of hope and optimism that the remnants

of the optimism of the early days of the Oslo process could be salvaged. But there is more to the story than simple optimism. The perpetuation of the myth of a peace process also points to the discursive power of Western actors in being able to over-write Palestinian opinion that the peace process either did not exist or that it was so fatally damaged as to be beyond salvage. Indeed, as Mandy Turner (2014) argues persuasively, Western international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) are complicit in Israeli counterinsurgency policies against Palestinians, yet the INGOs see this (often with the best of intentions) as part of a peacebuilding programme. In other words, the key lies in the material power of external actors to endorse or maintain a particular argument.

Crucial here is the material power that liberal peace actors are able to employ, and how this power can be mobilised to label conflicts and conflict actors. Thus, for example, leading states and international organisations are able to name conflicts as ‘insurgencies’ or ‘civil wars’, and label actors as ‘insurgents’, ‘rebels’ or ‘terrorists’. This naming power (or in Butler’s, 2009, term ‘framing’) is not independent of the material power that liberal peace actors have through their military, economic and diplomatic power. It manifests itself in peacebuilding, statebuilding, stabilisation and good governance programmes. In totality, it amounts to a significant project of socio-political and economic engineering staffed by tens of thousands of personnel. It operates in tandem with the set of assumptions that attend liberal interventionism – or a sense of belief that there is a right to intervene – and it is held primarily by selected states and institutions based in the global north (Moore, 2007: 10–12). This sense of mission is imbued with a peculiarly Western worldview that privileges specific notions of acceptable statehood, governance and economic models. Alternative and non-standard models are treated as being less legitimate.

The key point for this article is that liberal peace actors are empowered, and crucially – feel empowered – to ‘write the script’. The details of the script may change from context to context (the liberal peace is rarely consistent), but one common thread is the sense of entitled righteousness. It is well summed by the title of a 2014 book from a US think-tank: *Still ours to lead* (Jones, 2014). The ‘ours’ was the world.

### *The technocratic turn in peacebuilding*

Crucial in the privileging of some narratives of peace and conflict over others has been the increasing power of technocracy in the organisation and norms of peacebuilding and statebuilding interventions (Donais, 2009). Technocracy is taken to mean the privileging of bureaucratic processes and rationales over competitor processes and rationales, and has had an impact on many spheres of life (Centeno, 1993). It can be witnessed in the transfer of norms and practices from the business world into the third sector (Box, 1999). Thus, we can see the rise of the ‘neoliberal university’, the privatisation of public and welfare services, and the adoption of corporate language and practices by INGOs and charities. Peacebuilding, in line with other sectors, has experienced a ‘technocratic turn’ that manifests itself in the professionalisation of personnel, the standardisation of operating procedures, and the adoption and honing of ‘best practice’. Given that so much of peacebuilding revolves around statebuilding (Call and Wyeth, 2008), and the perfecting, reform and downsizing of institutions, there have been multiple opportunities for technocratic-led approaches. In classic epistemic closure, the state becomes both the problem and the solution, and alternative explanations of conflict and dysfunction are often overlooked.

Whether through country desks, country reports or standardised conflict analysis models, many other international organisations and international financial organisations are attuned, through their information collection systems, to view a world constructed of states. Such an approach normalises one unit of political organisation and, by default, assumes that other units of political organisation are less important.

The dominance of technocracy in relation to peacebuilding and statebuilding narratives is significant in that it influences how information is collected and how contexts are described. Crucially, the standardisation of conflict analysis models has resulted in a standardisation of narratives and descriptions (Causton, 2009; Conflict Sensitivity Consortium, 2009; Furlong, 2005). There are good arguments in favour of the standardisation mechanisms for analysis: it allows for comparison between cases, and the development of a cadre of personnel who speak the same professional language. Yet standardisation has a potentially insidious quality too in that it crowds out the space for alternative explanations (Mac Ginty, 2012: 299). Some of these explanations might be bottom-up and contradict the dominant hegemonic explanations provided by leading states or international organisations. The rise of technocracy in the peacebuilding and stabilisation spheres contributes to the similarity of the analyses, prescriptions, programmes and projects that comprise intervention.

### *Academic strictures*

While technocracy explains much of the standardised ways of reporting and categorising conflicts and security incidents in the policy world, the academic world also has ways standardising the collection and reporting of information. In large part, the social sciences can be seen as an exercise that seeks the universal and general (Feagan, 2007: 30). Influenced by the natural sciences, the social sciences can be seen as an attempt to find the universal and the general. Many of the social sciences (e.g. much of economics, psychology, political science and economics) are based on the gathering and screening of large amounts of data in the hope of identifying regularities and trends. The social sciences rely on standardised units of measurement, agreed protocols for research, and a shared vernacular. In the words of Regan (2013),

... we are best served by looking for general patterns in the data across a large sample of cross-national or cross-cultural environments, and to use those observed patterns to draw inference about what works, under what types of conditions, and in what time-frames. (p. 183)

Quantitative and econometric research is popular in both academic and policy approaches to understanding conflict and its advantages are many, not least the broadly shared methodological assumptions that make professional conversations possible.

Yet, it is worth interrogating the origins and consequences of the standardisation within academia. This standardisation applies to both quantitative and qualitative research. It has evolved over time through debate and usage within academic disciplines. But, crucially, it is also enforced by often self-appointed 'leading lights' in disciplines, professional associations, and by the social construction of rules of scholarship. It is no accident that academic subject areas are called 'disciplines': they are rule-bound communities that are policed through the strictures of 'good' or 'approved' scholarship. The essential point is that academia has developed 'approved' ways of categorising and analysing conflict.

Given the predominance of the global north in the gathering, curating and dissemination of academic knowledge, and the generally elitist nature of academia, academic strictures can be seen as another way of stripping agency from those experiencing conflict on the ground.

It is important to stress that this is not an anti-intellectual argument. There is space for the organised and systematic collection of information. Indeed, as De Waal et al. (2014) note, '[c]areful analysis of the spatial and temporal pattern of violence, can guide the deployment of peacekeeping forces' (p. 8). Yet, the implications of how we organise knowledge are profound and are inflected with power.

Much of academia seems unreflective of how the categorisation and coding of types of violence are political acts that reflect the assumptions and positionality of those engaged in the coding. In an obvious case, the word 'terrorism' is used in many studies without any curiosity as to the politics behind deploying such a term (e.g. Feste, 2010) or anything other than a cursory nod to the significant definition range that attends studies of 'terrorism' (Schmid, 2011: 86–87). More generally, however, there is the uncritical acceptance of key sources such as data from Freedom House or the Uppsala Conflict Data Program. This is not to impugn, in any way, the integrity of these data sources. Those involved in these datasets have been very honest in discussing their methodologies and the rationale behind categorisations. It is, instead, to point out that many academic studies simply use off-the-shelf data without interrogating its veracity. As Schrodtt (2013) observes, 'We largely see the reanalysis of a small number of canonical datasets'.

The key point from this section is that a concert of factors (the material power of the liberal peace, technocracy in peacebuilding and academic strictures) mean that top-down actors are often empowered in writing the narrative of conflicts and transitions. Crucially, these top-down narratives (from media sources, academics, policy makers, national elites, military and humanitarian spokespeople, and the like) can over-write the everyday narratives that people in conflict-affected areas use to describe their own reality. These narratives may have the benefit of allowing us to compare between conflicts and have a near universal language of conflict. The disadvantages, however, are many. Primarily, they stem from the rendering of someone else's experiences by a third or fourth party. Particularity, detail, personality and context may be ironed out in order to convey a narrative that is generalisable and understandable. But in so doing, the narrative may be stripped of meanings that are locally significant and full of politics.

This article now makes a step change in introducing the EPI project, an attempt to gauge bottom-up perceptions on change in everyday language. After outlining the project, the article will present and examine some of the project findings using the transcripts of the project participants. What emerge are crowd-sourced stories of precariousness and existence that are different, in some respects, to the top-down stories. The conclusion discusses these differences and the implications of multiple narratives of the same event.

## The EPI project

A caricature of a standard academic peace indicators project may look something like the following. A team of academics in a university in the global north come together to develop a list of indicators of peace and related social change. They derive their list of indicators from academic and policy sources. Since many of these indicators are already in existence, and perhaps used by international organisations and international financial institutions, this is a straightforward task. They then take the indicators to 'the field' and

proceed to ask people in a conflict-affected country to identify with the list of indicators. This would be done in conformity with ethical and methodological best practice. The exercise might be repeated, with the same indicators, so that a picture is built up of attitudes over time. Such an approach would doubtless garner interesting results, but it is also based on troubling assumptions: that a group of outsiders could decide on a list of indicators to apply to other peoples' lives.

The EPI project takes a different approach. It begins with wariness that outside actors can ever fully understand the experiences of others. Inspired by Patrick Chabal's (2012) warnings on the 'conceit' of understanding other people's realities, and by work from critical environmental studies that advocated a civic and plural epistemology (Miller, 2005), the EPI project does not seek to impose indicators on other peoples. Instead, it seeks to encourage communities to develop their own set of indicators of peace and change.

The project is operational in local communities in sub-Saharan Africa: South Africa, South Sudan, Uganda and Zimbabwe, with the funder, the Carnegie Corporation of New York, responsible for specifying the focus on sub-Saharan Africa. Reasons of space forbid a lengthy exposition on the rationale for choosing the case study countries and, in any case, our level of analysis is local rather than national. All four have been affected by violence and conflict and have experienced varying degrees of international or domestic ministration to deal with the affects of conflict. In all four cases, the post-authoritarian or post-conflict contexts have been contested. And in all four cases, considerable variance is to be expected. A mix of localities were chosen: urban and rural, recently affected by conflict and not recently affected by conflict, and the recipient of significant international statebuilding or governance assistance or the recipient of little assistance.

The project operates through partner non-governmental organisations (NGOs) who have the networks and cultural sensitivity to conduct research at the very local level. Indicators were identified through focus group meetings in each locality, with separate meetings for men, women and youth followed by a verification focus group whereby a joint community indicator list is decided. It was felt that focus groups would be a way for community members to identify common concerns and indicators through discussion. The decision to hold separate groups for men, women and youth was made in consultation with our partner NGOs who agreed that such formats would maximise free discussion. Incentives for attending focus groups varied depending on location and our partner NGOs' past experience; in some cases participants were offered refreshments, and in others they were reimbursed for travel expenses.

Once the list of indicators was chosen for each locality, it was then rendered into a survey format and put to the wider community, sometimes via a face-to-face survey, and sometimes via a mobile phone survey. The exercise is being repeated to see if there will be any longitudinal change. The survey results will be shared with the local community.

The list of indicators that emerged is different from the standard indicators that international organisations and INGOs often use. In a sense, it tells its own narrative. By way of illustration, the list below comes from one community in rural Zimbabwe:

1. Having adequate food and intimacy between husband and wife;
2. Young people being included in community meetings;
3. Being able to afford to send children to school;
4. Being able to walk freely at any time, even at night without being robbed, raped and so on;

5. People can worship whatever religion they want;
6. Activities in (name of locality) implemented without discrimination on political lines/affiliation, for example, food aid is distributed fairly;
7. Plenty of farming land and farming resources;
8. People can approach the chief or headman to resolve their differences;
9. Being able to live in the community without conflicts among people;
10. Being able to access medical care.

The list of indicators is an agreed amalgam following separate focus groups by women, men and youth in the same locality. While the indicators touch on areas covered by major top-down indicator systems, the latter often use a very different language and in their effort for cross-case comparability they may squeeze local experiences into generic categories.

The instructions given to focus group participants were deliberately vague. They were encouraged to think of what peace means to them in their own community and what sort of local-level indicators they might look for to signal changes. As the section below will show, this open-ended inquiry took the project in directions that were not anticipated and produced a narrative that was not typical of the narratives suggested by orthodox indicators.

While it seeks to elicit crowd-sourced and bottom-up perspectives it must be stressed that it was initiated by academics based in the global north and that its primary purpose has been academic in the road testing of a methodology. Spivak's (1988) warning of attempting to speak on behalf of the subaltern cannot be lightly dismissed. The project sought to give space for individuals and communities to tell their stories, yet despite attempts to be as sensitive and non-directive as possible, it is worth noting that all research has a footprint. For example, the focus group narratives (some of which are quoted below) have been translated into English. This process undoubtedly involved the flattening out of the vernacular and the melding of a partly indigenous way of telling the story with the tropes and idioms commonly used in English. The key point is that all research of human subjects involves some kind of interlocutor (e.g. a researcher, a focus group leader, a translator) who risks distorting (consciously or unconsciously) the expressions, motivations or feelings of the researched.

The researchers' relatively brief interaction with the researched communities is worth noting. Although the partner NGOs were familiar with the localities, this was short-duration research that cannot be said to approximate to ethnography or immersive research techniques. In its survey phase, researcher-researched interactions became shallower in an attempt to capture breadth across a wider population. So this research is a snapshot that captures moments and remembrances of processes and dynamics that often have a very long gestation. The research took place in localities that were often great distances apart (Cape Town and Juba are almost 6000 km from each other) and so we must be careful not to try to represent some sort of generalised 'African' experience. Communities may report similar experiences, but it is not necessarily the case that such experiences had the same genesis or impact.

With the caveat that no research can be the perfect mirror in mind, this article now moves on to examine some of the narratives that emerged from the focus group conversations. What is interesting from the perspective of this article is the extent to which these bottom-up narratives conform to, or diverge from, the narratives employed by top-down sources.



## Bottom-up narratives

The focus group transcripts from the localities in South Africa, South Sudan, Uganda and Zimbabwe are revealing in terms of what was discussed (in relation to peace and social change), what was not discussed, and how issues were discussed. Issues are raised, and raised in ways, that often do not resonate with dominant narratives from international organisations, donors and the mainstream news media. Certainly, the focus group transcripts reveal a much more textured picture.

Five issue areas are chosen by way of illustration: the absence of international organisations from everyday narratives; the apolitical nature of everyday narratives; the highly gendered nature of life; the precariousness of life in the context of crime; the precariousness of life in a neoliberal context. The choice of these issues (rather than other issues) deserves comment. First, the identification of the five issue areas is largely a presentational issue. We realise that generalising across multiple and very different research contexts risks contradicting this article's focus on the richness of local detail. By grouping the research findings into five categories we hope that we can show how bottom-up narratives conform to, and contradict, top-down narratives. But it is worth stressing that there is variation within local contexts that defy easy categorisation. Moreover, just because two localities report similar findings or indicators, this does not mean that the causal factors are necessarily the same.

Second, while the five issue areas struck the authors as prominent and notable issues, doubtless there is bias in why the authors chose these issues and not others. In other words, the authors of this article may be guilty of imposing their own narrative on, and through, the words of others. The issues were chosen because they were prominent (by their presence or absence) and because of their connection with on-going debates in the study of peace and conflict. Yet, we cannot escape the inevitable positionality of author choices and that 'white folks from the global north' are making political editorial decisions that seek to voice, or re-voice, the views of people who live in very different circumstances. Most research involving respondents is mediated, with the researcher acting as the representative or proxy for the researched. This research, while attempting to be sensitive, cannot escape the power relations that mean that those who are experiencing events do not directly tell them.

### *The near absence of international organisations*

The transcripts from focus group meetings in multiple contexts in four different countries do not mention international organisations and only very rarely mention INGOs and NGOs (the latter often funded by international actors). This absence seems notable given the centrality of international organisations to the narratives that international organisations tell. In many of these narratives, international organisations are painted as the indispensable actors that bring much needed expertise, personnel and material to conflict and disaster-affected areas. In an updating of the 'white man's burden', there is a sense from much of the literature from international organisations that liberal internationalism has the capacities and answers that societies emerging from conflict need. International organisations often place themselves at the centre of the narrative (as enablers, as resource providers, as focal points for legitimacy). One commentator referred to it as the 'white-saviour industrial complex' (Cole, 2012). At the time of writing (spring 2015), the Ebola virus is causing mass casualties in West Africa. A cursory glance at the websites of some

aid organisations gives the picture that these organisations, and what they bring into West Africa, are vital. This is not to diminish the very real, and brave, efforts of these INGOs and international organisations. It is, instead, to point to how narratives stress the utility and helpfulness of interventions.

Yet these international organisations do not feature in the everyday narratives found in the transcripts of the EPI project. NGOs are mentioned in some locations in passing. There are a number of possible explanations for this absence. One might be that the localities that were chosen for the project did not witness or benefit from international attention, although, international donors were active in some of the areas that the authors of this article visited. It could be that international organisations were only present during acute phases of the conflict, and that respondents have short memories. It could be that international donors worked through local partners and so the international dimension of any assistance was not immediately visible. Whatever the reason, it is noticeable that people in multiple localities in conflict-affected areas did not discuss the international dimension in the form of peace-support interventions. This is certainly a very different narrative than the one from many international actors in which the international 'saves' or enables the local.

### *Apolitical*

A second notable absence from the transcripts was that they were apolitical in the sense of largely being non-partisan or party political. The focus group transcripts were highly political given their focus on issues of peace, conflict and everyday living, yet they largely avoided large 'P' politics in the form of overt support for particular parties or leaders. This is surprising in that they come from conflict-affected societies in which governments, political parties, and militant groups often have had a long-term and significant input into how society is organised. The one exception to this was some focus group transcripts from Zimbabwe in which respondents mentioned independence rallies and commemorations:

People are forced to attend political rallies and funerals of National Heroes. The big local flea market is forced to close whenever there is a big political event. Vendors are threatened – they are at risk of losing their vending stalls if they fail to attend the rallies and funerals. (Male, Zimbabwe)

Attendance and non-attendance was regarded as an indicator of support or dissent from the regime. In many other Zimbabwean focus groups, and all of those held in South Sudan, South Africa and Uganda, party politics was not mentioned. One of the fears that we had when we began the project was that apparently 'local narratives' would simply reflect party political or elite political narratives that people would repeat lines heard on the media or from political elites. The fear was that we would get, in JC Scott's (1990) term, a 'public transcript'.

Yet this does not seem to be the case. When given space to talk about their own attitudes to, and experiences of, peace, conflict and safety, people do not seem to fall back on overtly political narratives that come from political leaders or party political media. Instead, they describe their situation in a vernacular of the everyday. These vernacular narratives are highly political in the sense that they connect with issues of power and inequality. But they are apolitical in the sense that very rarely do people seek to use or repeat elite narratives.

Of course, one reason for this might be that people do not feel comfortable using such language in front of strangers (whether out-of-town fellow nationals who acted as project partners and translators, or overseas academics). Certainly, the transcripts from Zimbabwe reveal a guardedness whereby focus group participants seem reticent in saying anything that could be interpreted as criticism of the regime. This may be because focus group participants were regime supporters, or fearful of regime supporters. Another reason may have been a self-awareness among focus group participants that they inhabit societies with deep divisions and so to raise overtly political issues in focus group discussions may have led to social awkwardness. A further reason for the non-appearance of overtly political issues in the focus group transcripts was because the fieldwork did not coincide with elections in the research areas. Election campaigns may have led to a politicisation of opinion and a greater willingness by focus group respondents to speak about overtly political issues. It was not the case, however, that the localities in which the focus groups took place were removed from the means through which elite political narratives were aired. Even seemingly geographically 'remote' areas were connected via mobile phones, television and buses. In other words, we do not want to convey a picture of somehow 'pristine' and isolated communities that are not saturated by media. Instead, the lack of Political discourse seems to be an act of agency by respondents.

## Gender

A third issue that was very noticeable in the transcripts (by its presence rather than its absence) was gender. Many standard top-down accounts of conflict tend to be gender-insensitive, universalising the experiences of men, or placing women into a compartmentalised and separate unit, sometimes compressed as 'women-and-children'. The EPI project focus group transcripts show that people live in highly gendered contexts. This is hardly a revelation, but it is notable in the sense that the gendered aspects of conflict and transitions towards peace are often underplayed. The focus group meetings were split into men and women's groups and gender differences were very obvious. The following excerpts give a flavour of some of the gender-related statements:

... The women in Kanyagoga are so hard to deal with that's why most men in Kanyagoga are either single, divorced or in bad relationships because of the behaviors women. Women have become so materialistic, disrespectful and they do not appreciate what their husbands give them. (Man, Uganda)

Men are oppressive in meetings. When there aren't enough benches, men will make sure that women sit on the floor while they sit on the benches. They even insult us when our children perform badly at school and can beat their wives when their daughters fall pregnant. When it's the farming season men are nowhere to be found, I do everything with the children. When we harvest and sell the produce that's when he features demanding the money bragging that he owns me and that I have used his land to get the money. (Woman, Zimbabwe)

When I go to the trading Centre to drink and the people we are drinking with start a fight I will leave immediately. If I go home to rest and my wife disturbs me I may beat her ... (Man, Uganda)

There is a problem, my husband can go out and come back late at night and you cannot ask him but if I go out and am not home by 6pm or 7pm there will be a problem in the home. We then

start fighting as my husband will be questioning where I had gone to. The sun cannot set with me being out of the home but my husband can come in his own time. (Woman, Zimbabwe)

What is striking about these everyday narratives, and others like them that are not cited here, is the casualness with which the highly gendered nature of society is discussed. Issues of the embeddedness of patriarchy, and even domestic violence, are discussed with a routineness that suggests that these gender roles and behaviours are deeply ingrained and reflective of a conflict-affected society. They also suggest that the ending of war (in Uganda) or national liberation (in Zimbabwe) have not ushered in a significant recalibration of gender roles.

### *Precariousness and crime*

One of the most prominent tropes from the focus group transcripts was crime and the fear of crime. References to crime – house breaking, muggings, sexual violence and police corruption – abound in the local narratives. In many localities, a picture is painted of a precarious life: houses are secured against robbers; possessions are hidden daily routines are organised around security; lives are lived in fear; and in many locations there is little expectation that the state – in the form of the police – will provide security. Indeed, in a number of locations participants noted a reticence in reporting crime to the police lest they are accused of being the perpetrator. The narratives suggest that the ‘peace’ or post-transition phase is often as precarious as the war or authoritarianism that preceded it. They puncture the notion that an end to overt violence or repression signals an improvement in quality of life:

I have a son and daughter on drugs and they [drug gangs] come and look for my son and they knock on my door and then they come in and shoot. So it isn’t safe in your house either. (Woman, South Africa)

It’s not safe to get off the bus during night time because thieves/thugs will be waiting to attack. People avoid dropping off there [Mfiri bus stop] during the night. They would rather drop off at a distance away from the bus stop. There are so many thugs, they first beat you and then take your belongings. Even when you don’t have anything you will still be beaten up. (Woman, Zimbabwe)

[I] am unable even to go out for urinating. A man must urinate in containers within his room and stay alert in his room until morning protecting his own properties. (Man, South Sudan)

They have broken into my car 7 times. I didn’t even lay a charge, because the law is hopeless. As a matter of fact as a community project we got a whole lot of bicycles and the kids ... the same day the bikes were taken from these boys. We know where the criminals are. We lay a charge and the police don’t want to investigate. (Man, South Africa)

### *Precariousness and neoliberal life*

Again and again the transcripts – from all communities in all four countries – reveal the precarious nature of economic life in post-conflict states. A repeated theme is the need to pay for basic public services such as health and education. Narratives of poverty are not new and are picked up by many other ways of gathering information. What becomes clear

from the focus group transcripts, however, are the deficiencies of the state and how public expectations of the state – as a service provider – are left unsatisfied. Despite the neoliberal reworking of state (under the guise of readjustment, good governance, privatisation, the discouragement of welfare), people still have expectations of the state as a provider, even at the most basic levels. Or they share their disappointment that the most basic of services (primary school education) must be paid for:

In Kanyagoga, we send our children to school but there are no jobs for them. These children especially the boys end up becoming thieves and the girls leave home in search of jobs and when they fail to find one they either elope with men to take care of them or some become prostitutes. (Man, Uganda)

## **Concluding discussion**

In the EPI project, the focus group meetings are used to identify community indicators of peace or threats to peace. Two indicators have been chosen repeatedly by communities that are diverse (in terms of their location, demography and experiences of conflict). These two indicators are very revealing, as they illustrate the gap between elite top-down narratives and bottom-up narratives.

The first indicator is the barking of dogs and the second is being able to urinate outside at night. Barking dogs are seen as an indicator of prowlers at night and thus of insecurity: if dogs bark then it is likely that burglars or potential muggers are around and thus people stay indoors. The second indicator, the ability to urinate outside, is again seen as an indicator of safety. Most houses use outside latrines as their toilets, so at night time people have to go outside to use the toilet. But if people feel insecure they will use a container indoors and empty it in the morning. These unprompted, community indicators are revealing about the immediacy of people's security hinterland. They think of security primarily in terms of the personal and family and use indicators that are close to hand. These indicators, and the transcripts of the discussions around them, tended not to invoke overtly political narratives that saw security in terms of party politics or ethnic groups – ideas that might be exploited by ethnic or political entrepreneurs or those who would want to exploit inter-group tensions. Moreover, it is notable that these indicators are not to be found in official indicators of (in)security whether collated by states, international organisations or donors.

The chief point of this article is that a different kind of narrative emerges if one employs ascriptive, bottom-up and community-orientated research techniques. The narrative is different certainly in terms of style and texture. It allows thick description, idiom and locality to emerge. But are these bottom-up narratives really different in terms of content? Certainly, the narratives constructed by top-down actors such as international organisations and INGOs contain many of the issues that are raised by the focus group transcripts. Issues of crime and police corruption, gender inequality and poverty are to be found in the reports and grey material of top-down actors. It may be expressed differently, for example, in terms of statistics or generalisations but it is present. What is different, however, are the politics of the narratives.

Before proceeding with this concluding point, it is worth flagging a note of caution. By highlighting the different political contexts of the top-down and bottom-up narratives, there is a danger that we – as authors – are engaged in yet another external over-writing of local voices. It is difficult to avoid wielding the framing and discursive power that the

researcher can have. Yet if (and it is a substantial if) we can transcend the post-colonial angst that should attend context-sensitive research, then it is hard to avoid the politics of the bottom-up narratives and how they do not fit easily with orthodox top-down narratives. In particular, while top-down narratives might seek to normalise a number of discursive and explanatory tropes, many of the bottom-up narratives do not tend to go in this direction. For example, orthodox, top-down narratives from states or international organisations may often normalise the legitimacy of the state, the need for the state to be 'efficient' (i.e. with minimal public service obligations), or the utility of international organisations (Cobb, 2013). Such narratives tend to reflect a particular political worldview. The fact that this worldview is not readily shared by the narratives that have emerged from the EPI project is revealing and suggests that the starting points of the everyday and the local might ultimately bring us to different places than if we start from official narratives.

It is worth considering the extent to which top-down and bottom-up narratives take place in specialised eco-systems that often use a specific vernacular that is not necessarily shared by those further up or down a communication chain. These eco-systems are unlikely to be hermetically sealed and will likely have some overlap, yet they are held in place by structures and systems that often have considerable inertia. There are multiple 'everyday narratives'. We must be careful, however, not to associate the 'everyday' solely with the bottom-up and the grassroots. Different narratives are normalised in different circumstances. The danger is that these narratives are unable to relate with one another.

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