

Peacebuilding Is Social Work: From Political Science to Social Psychology

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For the longest time, peacemaking and peacekeeping were the only post-factum interventions to resolve armed conflicts usually related to a nation-state's borders or territory. Peacebuilding has its origins in sociology (Galtung, 1969; 1975) and is used today as a preferred concept in matters of conflict. However, this paper explores why peacebuilding, as the Secretary General of the United Nations advocates in *A New Agenda for Peace*, must become a nonlinear and contextual process that promotes the prevention of conflict and invites a transformative approach to addressing the linkages between peace, security, and climate. Furthermore, this paper advocates that peacebuilding grounded in social psychology and social anthropology will bring about transformative outcomes as it will build relationships at the community level and become a preventive tool to address incipient tensions within the community. Peacebuilding as social work will benefit the community and lay the necessary foundations for a sustainable future. Social workers are equipped to assess, analyze, and solve problems. Their capacity to do ongoing social diagnosis is a critical tool to prevent skirmishes degenerating into conflicts. Social work could be the much-needed resource to further develop theory and practice that contributes to active peacebuilding.

Keywords: peacebuilding, peacekeeping, social work, conflict prevention, reconciliation

Introduction

The linear peacemaking and peacekeeping approaches developed by political scientists specializing in international relations is a liberal peace paradigm. Conflicts today are of drastically different dynamics and far more complex given that most are intra-nations with multiple warring parties. While deaths from war have decreased over the years, conflicts and violence have risen (United Nations, n.d.; Herre et al., 2023). In our very troubled world, smaller acts of positive relationships and reconciliation are essential components of peacebuilding.

Peacebuilding and social work share the same foundational theories. Social work is an art, a science, and a profession that helps people to solve personal, group, and community problems and attain satisfying relationships through social work practice. Thus, social work is worth considering in innovative, multi-sectoral peacebuilding strategies.

Peacebuilding's Roots in Political Science

The Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies currently defines peacebuilding as:

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The development of constructive personal, group, and political relationships across ethnic, religious, class, national, and racial boundaries. It aims to resolve injustice in nonviolent ways and to transform the structural conditions that generate deadly conflict. Peacebuilding can include conflict prevention; conflict management; conflict resolution and transformation, and post-conflict reconciliation. (Kroc Institute, n.d.)

Peacebuilding is an approach to an overarching concept with many interrelated efforts that either directly drive conflict mitigation or establish the necessary relationships or channels to develop comprehensive, multi-level, and multi-sectoral peacebuilding strategies.

Political scientists such as Johan Galtung (1969; 1975) developed linear peacemaking frameworks used when nations experience minor or intermediate armed conflict or war. Galtung (1969) defined six characteristics of violence to help understand peace, or what he described as the absence of violence: distinction between physical and psychological violence; distinction between the negative and positive approach to influence; whether or not there is an object that is hurt; whether or not there is a subject (person) who acts; distinction between violence that is intended or unintended; and the traditional distinction between two levels of violence: the manifest and the latent. In his seminal work, *Peace Studies*, Galtung (1975) argued that in addition to the absence of violence, peace also involves community justice, equality, and harmony. To achieve this, structural changes ought to be made to address the root causes of conflicts and instability and to reframe harmful power dynamics (Galtung, 1975).

More recently, in July 2023, the United Nations (UN) Secretary General António Guterres released *A New Agenda for Peace* in which he called for the Security Council and the General Assembly to consider the “limits and future of peacekeeping in light of the evolving nature of conflict...” of “complex, domestic, geopolitical, and transnational factors” (United Nations, 2023; Security Council, 2023). Conflicts are evolving; many modern conflicts are intra-nation with multiple warring parties instead of inter-nation over border security and territories (United Nations, n.d.; Herre et al., 2023). The UN reports that the number of war deaths has been declining since 1946, but conflict and violence are on the rise (United Nations, n.d.; Herre et al., 2023). This is largely from non-state actors who have caused regional tensions, breakdown in the rule of law, and resource scarcity further exacerbated by climate change, amongst other things (United Nations, n.d.). The former political science approach to peacebuilding does not consider people’s unresolved and long-term grievances, how to rebuild relationships, or climate stressors, which are key to changing beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors that in turn, can shift dynamics between individuals and groups in conflict. Thus, a new approach is needed.

Specifically, the Secretary General advocated for more nimble, adaptable, and effective peacekeeping models and to adjust peacebuilding strategies to address climate issues (United Nations, 2023; Security Council, 2023). We know that today’s conflicts are increasingly complex, drawn-out, and made worse by climate-related factors. Many conflicts can be categorized by deep-rooted animosity and severe stereotyping and are driven by real-life experiences, subjective perceptions, and emotion. Climate change is also exacerbating conflict in conflict-affected countries around the world, with half of the world’s most climate-fragile countries also in conflict (Moshiri et al., 2022; Eberle, n.d.). Now, more than ever, we need to shift our focus from concern over security issues to restoration and rebuilding relationships.

Case Study on a Modern Conflict: The Farmer-Herder Conflict in Nigeria

To demonstrate the complexity of intra-nation and climate-driven conflicts, as well as the need for reconciliation, we will examine the case study of the farmer-herder conflict in Nigeria.

Nigeria is Africa's most populous country with over 250 diverse ethnic groups (Federal Republic of Nigeria, n.d.; Campbell, 2011). Ethnicities often differ by region and/or state, religion, and way of life. For example, in the north, the Fulani people are herders, or pastoralists, and predominantly Muslim, whereas farmers live in southern and central Nigeria, or the Middlebelt, and are predominantly Christian from various ethnic groups (Eberle, 2020; Ojo, 2023). Despite the north's political dominance, the north and south have a notable poverty divide with the poverty rate growing more rapidly in the north (Campbell, 2011; Dapel, 2018). Some hypotheses on why include the north's dependence on gas exports, population growth, lack of education, and the Boko Haram insurgency (Husted, 2022; Dapel, 2018; Eberle, 2020; United Nations Trust Fund for Human Security, 2022).

About two thirds of Nigeria's labor force's livelihood is dependent on farming or herding (Eberle, 2020). As there's limited irrigated land in the country, the productivity of the land is highly dependent on natural resources and weather patterns (Eberle, 2020). Therefore, extreme temperatures and volatile rainfall patterns can put food and livelihood security at risk. What's more, the effects of global warming, such as severe drought and desertification, are significant in the north—over 75% of farmland in northern-central Nigeria is deserted (Ojo, 2023). Thus, Fulani herders have migrated to the Middlebelt in search of pasture and water, which in turn, has caused tensions with the farmers over scarce resources (Eberle, 2020; Husted, 2022).

Conflicts between the migratory herders and local communities of farmers have claimed thousands of lives (Matfess, 2018). Ethno-religious violence, abductions for ransom, cattle rustling, and armed criminality are among the top issues (Husted, 2022). Research has shown that land competition is a driving factor of the farmer-herder conflict. The International Crisis Group performed an analysis in which they found that deadly farmer-herder violence is concentrated in the grasslands and along the agricultural fringe of Nigeria and violence increases when land productivity is low (Eberle, n.d.; 2020).

There are several peacebuilding efforts that aim to address the farmer-herder conflict in Nigeria. The Rural Grazing Area (RUGA) settlement policy, proposed in May 2019, set out to acquire and develop agricultural land and to help settle herders by providing basic amenities, such as housing, veterinary clinics, schools, electricity, and security (Ojo, 2023). While RUGA was suspended shortly after implementation, the federal government then developed a robust 10-year National Livestock Transformation Plan that aims to shift the country's livestock from free-roaming herding to concentrated cattle ranches and grazing reserves (Ojo, 2023; Eberle, 2020; International Crisis Group, 2021).

Many peacebuilding efforts, namely the government's responses to the conflict, have been met with resistance, anger, and doubt. Qualitative research on communities' resistance to the failed RUGA settlement policy found that the approach was too top-down as it did not include the local communities or consider people's past experiences and ethnic differences (Ojo, 2023). The National Livestock Transformation Plan, which has been slow to get started, has similar challenges. The ethnic Fulani herders perceive injustice as they believe the plan will require them to change a "centuries-old nomadic lifestyle" (International Crisis Group, 2021). On the other hand, farmers resent how the plan benefits the Fulani herders, and both groups distrust the government's objectives (International Crisis Group, 2021). Therefore, lack of acceptance at the community-level, in addition to poor political awareness, caused the RUGA settlement policy to fail and is putting a new plan to curb herders' migration at risk.

It should also be noted that there have been other laws and military peacemaking efforts dating from 1965 to today. Some examples include proposed grazing reserve and cattle ranching systems, military deployments,

tree planting initiatives to address desertification, and more recently, support from three United Nations agencies to mitigate violence in conflict-prone states (ACCORD, 2018; United Nations Trust Fund for Human Security, 2022). Military involvement has helped reduce bloodshed, but many other initiatives were quickly abandoned or not effective (International Crisis Group, 2021; Ojo, 2023).

Both farmers and herders need to make a living despite their limited resources. They also need to find ways to live in harmony with each other while the Fulani herders are temporarily settled in the Middlebelt. In the past, the government's poor communication and lack of engagement with community members caused community resistance and policies to be abandoned. Thus, inclusive peacebuilding strategies with a focus on reconciliation amongst the farmers and herders that respects climate migration, resource competition, and ethnic diversity are needed.

Peacebuilding: Today's Conflicts Require Reconciliation

Peacebuilding grounded in social psychology and social anthropology will bring about transformative outcomes as it will focus on building relationships at the community level and become a preventive tool to address any incipient tensions within the community. John Paul Lederach (1999) recognized that people in conflict need the opportunity to express their anger and grief in the reconciliation process. The primary goal of reconciliation is to seek innovative ways to create a time and a place to address, integrate, and embrace the painful past and the necessary shared future as a means of dealing with the present (Lederach, 1999).

Therefore, reconciliation often happens in an "encounter" (Lederach, 1999). It involves the creation of a social space where truth and forgiveness are validated and joined together. This differs greatly from being forced into a meeting where one group wins, and one loses. This type of encounter encourages vulnerability, truth, and mercy; a space where people listen to each other and feel heard, validated, and respected and address the past without repeating the cycle. Following reconciliation, groups can pursue justice. By acknowledging the groups' interdependence, they will support justice and peace for the community and lay the necessary foundations to move forward from the past. And as groups keep practicing reconciliation, it helps them reframe the conflict.

Various attempts and examples to exercise reconciliation as effective means to solve conflict and build a harmonious society are worth examining. The case of South Africa post-apartheid under the leadership of Archbishop Desmond Tutu and Nelson Mandela set a viable basis for the reconciliation model. The efforts to replicate this reconciliation model, *mutatis mutandis*, in Rwanda, also opened opportunities to explore reconciliation as a viable model for peacebuilding. One cornerstone of the reconciliation model is recognizing human dignity of all involved on every side, and proactive ongoing engagement. Taking care of the "client" is a lifetime project grounded in human dignity and a key characteristic of social work.

Peacebuilding as Social Work

The principles and practices of social work have a distinct capability to build social cohesion, to heal personal and communal wounds that obstruct reconciliation, to support collaboration, and to strengthen and transform systems. Social work and social workers build individual efficacies and healthy relationships and supportive institutions. They "help individuals, families, groups, and communities solve problems and enhance wellbeing by building their strengths, developing skills, maximizing access to available resources, and improving the systems that affect their lives" (Bolton et al., 2018).

Peacebuilding is a long-term process of building stable communities while addressing root causes of conflict and establishing ongoing reconciliation. Social work and peacebuilding share foundational values of recognizing and promoting human rights and obligations grounded in human dignity. Social work adopts a multi-dimensional and holistic paradigm acknowledging the effects of conflict as “positive peace”, resulting in sustainable and harmonious societies (Yesufu, 2006).

Over the past few years, Catholic Relief Services (CRS) has made a significant contribution in integrating social work practices and peacebuilding. The 3-Bs approach developed by CRS (2017) lays critical groundwork to productively integrate social work and peacebuilding. The 3-Bs are binding, bonding, and bridging. Binding deals with trauma awareness and helps to build resilience; bonding focuses on intra-group strengthening and consensus building; bridging encourages inter-group engagement and collaboration. The 3-Bs approach is key to building social cohesion and requires ongoing, long-term nurturing. This socio-ecological model generates “people-to-people peacebuilding and strengthens horizontal social cohesion—building healthy relationships across groups from different races, religions, ethnicities, while also transforming vertical social cohesion by improving relationships between people and their governments” (Bolton et al., 2018).

The symbiosis between social work and peacebuilding as conflict resolution instead of international relations is a fertile ground to build lasting harmonious communities. Conflict resolution calls for a lifetime project without entangling itself in a power paradigm. This symbiosis demands innovation which leads to probe generationally accumulated perceptions and deep-rooted hatred and fears (Lederach, 1999). Social work and reconciliatory peacebuilding create social spaces for an encounter to deal with deep-rooted animosity and pain, and to rebuild human dignity (Lederach, 1999).

The age-old saying of Cicero “*Si vis pacem, para bellum*” has guided the statecraft to build a standing army with perennial dedicated support; in the same manner, peacebuilding ought to be nurtured at micro, mezzo, and macro levels. The nurturing of the society to peaceful co-living—not just co-existence—is ongoing and intentional social work as per the aspirations of Jeffrey R. Brackett, the founder of the profession of social work, which depicts the focus on people’s interactions with important forces that shape their lives. It is work as it is orderly, responsible, and disciplined exercise to foster well-being. The systemic pattern of the eruption of conflicts is an expression of accumulated pain, with marked emotional and psychological outbursts of profound hatred that cannot be resolved with international relation systems, but demand the intervention of social work, which reframes the conflict and gradually leads to relationship building.

Conclusions

Social workers are well equipped to engage vulnerable populations to bring about needed change in themselves, the people around them, and related institutions, so that they can meet their social needs and contribute to society. Social workers’ attention to both the person and the person’s environment makes social work a symbiotic ally of peacebuilding. Reconciliation grounded peacebuilding is a process oriented rather than systems embroiled as international relations-based peacebuilding tends to be. Social work and reconciliation-based peacebuilding

endeavor(s) to reframe the conflict so that parties are no longer preoccupied with focusing on the issues in a direct, cognitive manner. Its primary goal and key contribution is to seek innovative ways to create a time and a place, within various levels of the affected population, to address, integrate, and embrace the painful past and the necessary shared future as a means of dealing with the present. (Lederach, 1999, p. 35)

Social workers have historically helped people resolve problems in social functioning and guided social change. Peacebuilders strive to build a long-term harmonious society.

For a better future social workers and peacebuilders must join hands and find a common purpose to build and nurture the good fortunes of human destiny perennially struggling between peace and conflict.

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