

# New Trends in Peace and Conflict Impact Assessment (PCIA)

## Introduction

Beatrix Schmelzle

<http://www.berghof-handbook.net>

1

## Background

When the Berghof Research Center and its Handbook team facilitated the first scholar-practitioner dialogue on PCIA<sup>1</sup> between the years 2000 and 2003, the editors located PCIA in the following context:

“Over the last ten years, interest in conflict prevention and peacebuilding activities has increased significantly. Relief and development organisations working in places of civil war have raised awareness of conflict-sensitive planning and are seeking to integrate peacebuilding activities into their work. They have learned from recent experiences in war-torn societies that well-intended activities might have unintended outcomes and that development cooperation is never neutral in conflict situations. Under unfavourable conditions it may further entrench unjust power structures and prolong situations of war. This is also true of humanitarian aid. A series of problematic side-effects has been identified, showing that the influx of resources can induce dramatic changes in the political and economic situation on the ground and can cause turmoil in local markets. Equally dangerous are implicit messages conveyed by development or relief agencies and inappropriate or ill-reflected behaviour of the project staff which, often unintentionally, can fuel conflicts.

Whereas some humanitarian and relief agencies are interested in avoiding unintended negative impacts, others have engaged intensively in reflecting on the impact of their

<sup>1</sup> Alex Austin, Martina Fischer and Oliver Wils (eds.) 2003. *Peace and Conflict Impact Assessment. Critical Views on Theory and Practice*. Berlin: Berghof Research Center for Constructive Conflict Management.

strategies. They want to contribute actively to peace processes and overcome structures of violence. State and non-state actors in these fields started to discuss how to combine strategies, methods and instruments of conflict resolution and transformation with their traditional approaches and working programmes. Moreover, in the late 1990s, organisations and institutions, which have gained experience in peace work and conflict resolution, began to reflect on the impact of their work. The question of how to evaluate activities aimed at peacebuilding and conflict transformation gained importance not only for researchers and scholars but also for practitioners. They wanted and still want to know which strategies work under which conditions, and they are asking themselves: Are we doing the right thing at the right moment? Could we do other things which could be more useful instead?

Finally, donor organisations which have opened new budget lines earmarked for conflict resolution and transformation activities are also interested in improving practices and evaluation methods for serious assessment of programmes and projects. Some donors even oblige their partners to deliver evaluation reports on their interventions. Others have become actively involved in discussions on the conceptualisation of evaluation.

As a result of this interest, there is a high demand for “model” projects, good practices and “lessons learned” which are transferable to other projects and regions. At the same time, however, supply does not match this demand. There are still no quick and easy answers to the question of how to best assess, monitor and evaluate peace practices. On the contrary, experience shows that assessing and measuring the impact and outcomes of peacebuilding activities is actually a very complicated task. There are at least three major reasons for this: First, conflicts are by nature highly complex and dynamic. Second, the field of peacebuilding is a relatively young one as many organisations only emerged in the 1980s and 1990s. It is therefore not surprising that many strategies, methods and instruments still remain in a test phase and therefore need further elaboration and investigation. Third, under the label PCIA, we find quite different concepts and approaches. For some users, PCIA is a toolset that is applied for programme planning, while others regard it as a framework for evaluation and cross-country comparison. Similarly, some view it as a method to contribute and monitor the contribution of an intervention to peacebuilding, while others use PCIA for screening the impact of a conflict on the project itself.”

## Recent developments

Two years later, this analysis is as accurate as before. If anything, evaluation and impact assessment initiatives have become more widespread, increasingly focussing on overt peacebuilding and conflict resolution/transformation projects and programmes. At the same time, there is continued need to assess positive and negative, intended and unintended consequences of development and humanitarian projects on the structures and processes of violence or peace.

Among the most notable recent attempts to improve the understanding and methodology of peace-and-conflict-related assessment and evaluation we find the following:

- Kenneth Bush’s 2003 publication *Hands-On PCIA: A Handbook for Peace and Conflict Impact Assessment*, which he describes as “a reader-friendly, user-friendly ‘manual’ containing quick check lists, diagrammes, examples, question-answer boxes, and worksheets” and which is regularly revised “in response to experiences and on-going learning”.

- The project on *Conflict-sensitive approaches to development, humanitarian assistance and peacebuilding* – undertaken by a consortium of six southern and northern NGOs (Africa Peace Forum, Kenya; Center for Conflict Resolution, Uganda; Consortium of Humanitarian Agencies, Sri Lanka; Forum on Early Warning and Early Response, International Alert, and Saferworld, all UK) – and the related 2004 publication of *Conflict-sensitive approaches to development, humanitarian assistance and peacebuilding: A Resource Pack*.
- Thania Paffenholz and Luc Reyhler's forthcoming *Aid for Peace* Approach (to be published in 2006), delineating a step-by-step "multi-purpose, multi-level process" of, respectively, planning, assessing and evaluating development, aid or peace interventions.

These authors' have contributed to this issue of the *Berghof Handbook Dialogue Series*. All three undertake to (re-)develop – in participatory, inclusive or consultative processes – more user-friendly or efficient *tools and methods* for understanding the consequences of *projects, programmes and policies* on structures and processes of peace or violence. Peacebuilding as well as development/humanitarian activities are to benefit. While some of the self-declared guiding principles of the approaches are similar, the priorities, target groups, formats and language vary considerably.

*Kenneth Bush's* recent work puts very strong emphasis on developing practically useful tools for practitioners in the midst of zones of violent conflict. He stresses southern wisdom and empowerment over the improvement of northern agency or consultancy services and refinement of logical frameworks.

The researcher-practitioners involved in developing the Resource Pack (*Adam Barbolet, Rachel Goldwyn, Hesta Groenewald and Andrew Sherriff*) report from a process that was designed to strengthen local capacities and improve the awareness and skill of project staff. This group of authors stresses the need to sensitise organisations and individuals for the conflict-related consequences and ramifications of their work over the fixation on infinitely refining assessment tool kits.

*Thania Paffenholz* (with her co-author, Luc Reyhler) chooses a different focus. Here, standardized process-steps are formulated for planning, assessment and evaluation, to be used by a wide range of actors – from field staff to headquarters. Terminology and methodology of the approach show stronger roots in the western/northern scientific discourse than the other approaches, and render it most applicable for donors and larger agencies. A special emphasis on planning, and the import of methods from related fields in social science further distinguish the approach.

There have been other processes and outputs with respect to impact assessment and evaluation in peacebuilding and development cooperation in recent years, which are worth mentioning here:

- The third phase of the *Reflecting on Peace Practices* (RPP) Project, initiated and sustained by the Collaborative for Development Action (CDA) based in Cambridge, USA

This ongoing and carefully facilitated experience-based learning process continues to search for lessons learned by actors in peacebuilding through joint workshops and application. The process includes a broad range of implementing agencies – the level of analysis is the programme and project level. The first and second phase of RPP have identified tentative criteria for success as well as good practice, which can be used as signposts in evaluating the contribution of programmes to peacebuilding, or violence reduction. The third phase, which will be documented on CDA's website ([www.cdainc.com](http://www.cdainc.com)), consists of utilization programmes in four focus regions around the world. Local staff and CDA staff/consultants work together on devising RPP-informed strategies, and on

monitoring, assessing and adjusting them in light of the RPP results and practical experiences. RPP's co-directors Diana Chigas and Peter Woodrow hope to "publish a variety of materials to help field practitioners in peace work to use RPP findings – in the form of application cases, training exercises, compendiums of lessons learned" at the end of the two-year project period (2003-2005).

- The European Centre for Conflict Prevention (ECCP)'s series of conferences to collect and compare lessons learned in the field of peacebuilding has led, as an interim-result, to the publication (2002) *Towards Better Peacebuilding Practice. On Lessons Learned, Evaluation Practices and Aid & Conflict*.

ECCP and its director, Paul van Tongeren, have since focused their energies on advocating a stronger role for peacebuilding NGOs, acting on the conviction that the young field of conflict resolution has indeed learned many lessons and now needs to be more collectively assertive of its knowledge. The *Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict* ([www.gppac.net](http://www.gppac.net)) is the chosen platform "to increase the effectiveness of conflict prevention efforts, and to highlight the role of civil society in peacebuilding and preventing armed conflict". An international conference at UN headquarters in July 2005 is to form the peak of a series of regional conferences.

- Cheyanne Church and Julie Shouldice's INCORE-based *The Evaluation of Conflict Resolution Interventions. Part I: Framing the State of Play* (2002) and *Part II: Emerging Practice and Theory* (2003).

Here, a very useful effort is made to sift through the current knowledge and practice of how to evaluate. The reports clarify terminology, approaches and methods with a clear conflict resolution focus, trying to level the evaluation field. The main focus is once more the project/programme level. The study analyses important aspects of evaluation and points to necessary next steps in improving the practice (and theory) of evaluation and peacebuilding. It specifically names clarification of evaluator roles, micro-macro linkages and an examination of assumptions and theories.

- The comparative *Utstein Study of Peacebuilding* (and Dan Smith's 2004 overview report *Towards a Strategic Framework for Peacebuilding: Getting their Act Together*).

A government-driven, donor-inspired comparative evaluation of peacebuilding projects points to the need for acquiring more comparative knowledge – echoing numerous actors in the field. The overview report asserts that currently, "there is no known way of reliably assessing the impact of peacebuilding projects". It does call for more strategic cooperation by agencies engaged in peacebuilding in a given country or region on all levels. *Impact* assessment, argues the stark conclusion of the report, is quite useless on the level of projects or even programmes. Instead, the impact of strategically linked interventions across the peacebuilding palette, carried out by governmental or non-governmental actors over a significant period of time, needs to be evaluated. The report acknowledges that the international evaluation and peacebuilding community at present lacks strategic coherence as well as promising evaluation mechanisms. It devises ways to address "the strategic deficit" with respect to policy, evaluation and research.

Beyond these milestones, a myriad of organisations – development agencies, government departments, conflict resolution organisations – are engaged, albeit at different levels and with varying commitment to "mainstreaming", in activities to identify appropriate ways to evaluate and improve their work.

## Berghof Handbook Dialogue revisited: “New Trends in PCIA”

The past two years have obviously seen a flurry of activities (conceptual as well as strategic, with respect to tools, theory and terminology as well as with respect to politics). Consequently, the Berghof Handbook editorial team renewed its invitation to experts in the field of PCIA and related methodologies to reflect on new trends and progress of the field. We asked them to map the field as they currently perceive it and to critically discuss the methods that have been designed, or refined, in light of the developing demand.

We invited the contributing authors to this dialogue on “New Trends in PCIA” to explore the following questions:

- What do they see as notable recent developments and modifications of the concepts and methodology referred to, sometimes rather loosely, as “PCIA”?
- What are areas and organisations in which PCIA has been tested or applied in the last years?
- What were the difficulties encountered in implementing the concept? What ways were devised to overcome such difficulties?
- What are the personal experiences and lessons learned concerning the authors’ own approaches to PCIA or related methodologies?
- Where do they think the field should focus its attention in the coming years?

In order to fully capture the expected richness of experience and opinion, the following format was chosen for this Berghof Handbook Dialogue: First, each author/author-team wrote an independent contribution. In a second round, everyone contributed a short response paper to the most central issues raised in the initial contributions. Links/references to the fully developed approaches complement the picture and allow the reader to see for herself the “meat” behind the arguments.

### Issues and themes

The 2003 round of dialogue on PCIA hosted by the Berghof Handbook had identified the following clusters of issues that all authors, scholars and practitioners, had grappled with:

- The question of **ownership** of evaluation processes by various **stakeholders**
- The related question regarding the **level and quality of participation** in evaluation and assessment processes
- The difficulty of **linking** project outputs and outcomes on the **micro level** to changes and thus impact on the **macro level** of politics and society (an often-cited *influence gap* as well as an *attribution gap*)
- An agreement that assessment and evaluation need **indicators**, yet disagreement over a standard set of indicators (the spectrum ranging from a call for clear, standardised indicators to a call for a context-specific, open and flexible process of jointly defining appropriate indicators)
- A general recognition of a lack of theoretical coherence and a lack of explicitness of hypotheses and assumptions, in particular with respect to theories of change, yet a disagreement over whether more **theory-building** was to be the top priority of the field at present

In light of the contributions to this dialogue on “New Trends in PCIA”, it seems fair to say that none of these issues has ‘gone away’ in the meantime.

Especially the **questions of ownership and participation** are passionately, sometimes hotly, debated by Kenneth Bush and the others. While, in principle, all contributors agree on the importance of conducting assessments and evaluations by carefully designed and integrative processes, Kenneth Bush admonishes the many instances in which practice falls short of these principles. At the same time, all contributions paint a clear picture of how difficult it can be to devise and implement such processes on a case-by-case basis even given the best intentions.

Good analysis and planning certainly are a necessity. One needs to carefully look at what the relevant purposes, the appropriate actors and methods are – the contributing authors do share inside stories of what to do and what not to do.

But at least three dilemmas remain: Reality on the ground knows shortage of funds as well as occasional over-abundance of funds (as currently witnessed in the post-tsunami countries), knows big egos and smaller ones, knows crisis-mode employment as well as long-term, carefully accompanied and reflected processes. It will, to a certain degree, see better and worse practice in sharing ownership and achieving empowerment. A certain humility is needed in what we can expect to achieve and what we ask others to achieve. In some cases, it might be nothing more than what Samuel Beckett once described as “try again, fail better”.

The second dilemma is more fundamental than pragmatic in nature: A radical reversal of ownership, as envisioned by Kenneth Bush, challenges power as well as cultural balances. It entails a quite radical notion of social change which many, even in the peacebuilding and development field, may not be ready for at all, as it would topple certainties they rely on. Peace and Conflict Impact Assessment, as a set of tools and a space for reflective encounter, will be overburdened by the demand that it should act as catalyst for such deep social change. A joint learning process on the theories and notions of social change would be the more appropriate place for such debate.

Finally, there is an inherent dilemma in the idea of local ownership that has become such a token for development and peacebuilding projects in recent years. Andy Carl, in a 2003 occasional paper, warns “we should avoid the tendency to romanticise local and indigenous capacities for peacebuilding. While they are vitally important, it is often overlooked that traditional capacities for conflict management have failed [...]” Dan Smith in the Utstein report also argues “that in the context of violent conflict, local ownership becomes a more complex concept and needs to be handled with care. Local ownership can unintentionally come to mean ownership by conflict parties, or by the most powerful sectors of society”. Thania Paffenholz reminds Kenneth Bush of this in her comment, as Manuela Leonhardt had done in the 2003 dialogue. There is no shortcut way to deal with these complexities but to engage the reality one intervenes in carefully, critically and openly.

The issue of **linking micro, meso and macro levels** of interventions is discussed most prominently by Thania Paffenholz on the one hand, and Adam Barbolet et al. on the other. Thania Paffenholz in particular offers a model of relating macro, meso and micro levels by formulating so-called result-chains that run from input to impact. The London-based team of authors echoes the need for better strategy formulation and strategic coordination by agencies, in order to increase coherent, inter-linked and, ideally, more powerful and efficient interventions. These propositions underline that concrete efforts are being made to tackle this issue, while, again, many obstacles remain (lack of information, competing realities between headquarters and field offices, competition for funds and influence between agencies and departments, a ‘culture of success’ rather than acceptance of occasional failure and an associated reward system). Such obstacles make the neat formulation of result-chains, as well as the cooperation between agencies, far from easy to put into practice.

Thania Paffenholz (in her comment) and Adam Barbolet et al. relate examples of **good practice in developing indicators**. The general debate – whether there can be a set of standardised

indicators (as suggested by Thania Paffenholz's idea to develop a set of standardised result-chains) or whether indicators need to be context-specific and custom developed, ideally in a participatory process of joint analysis – seems to tip slightly in favour of, at a minimum, context-adjusted indicators. It will be interesting to see what the joint reflection on the initial set of indicators and criteria of success from the RPP project will yield.

The **role and importance of theory** is judged in similar ways between Kenneth Bush, Adam Barbolet et al. and Thania Paffenholz: Kenneth Bush sees theory as an “either useful or useless” resource in peacebuilding and development work – and theory development of rather secondary importance. The authors from London call for more pragmatic realism in assessment and evaluation, acknowledging in particular that no one theory would be able to explain all relevant aspects of a peace process in its complexity. Thania Paffenholz underlines that there already exist many theories in related fields (development cooperation, political science, management science, sociology, etc.) that hold insights for the theory and practice of evaluating both peacebuilding and development or humanitarian interventions. Theory thus seems to be available in sufficient measures for these authors not to make the further development of theory a priority. These assessments contradict the findings of the Utstein study as well as the INCORE reports.

A last issue that was prominent during the 2003 round of dialogue is still causing debate this time around: it is the questions of the **politics of PCIA**. Kenneth Bush has consistently argued that PCIA is political, rather than a mere toolbox of methods. While there seems to be no disagreement from Thania Paffenholz or from Adam Barbolet et al. – all acknowledge the importance of politics and influencing politics in order to induce peaceful relations and development – it seems to me that there is a subtle difference in the meaning of “political” that is generally overlooked: On one level, all assessment and evaluation can (and must) be applied to policies and political processes, and influence politics. Thus, PCIA is “political”. On another level, though, all assessment and evaluation carries in it another political component – by using methods or processes that are scientific, verbal, logical and linear, we have to be aware that we are opting for one system of meaning, power, and culture, and not another. By opening our set of methods or processes, we may contribute to shifting meaning, power and culture. PCIA becomes “political” in a different sense. Such openness, though, runs counter to calls for common frameworks, comparable results and strategic coherence.

## What will be next – challenges and ways forward

Judging from this new round of dialogue, an assessment from the first round certainly has come true: “The variety of concepts and methodologies of assessing and measuring impacts makes it unlikely that a single concept of PCIA will emerge soon.” Peace and Conflict Impact Assessment (PCIA); conflict-sensitive approaches (CSA); Aid for Peace – there has been a further proliferation of names and concepts for knowing whether we are doing the ‘right’ thing (and with what consequences) and whether we are doing it the ‘right’ way (and with what consequences). In part, this is a ‘natural’ development in the process of mainstreaming, as naming something goes some length in appropriating it. The debate about “branding”, “labelling” and naming that Kenneth Bush and Adam Barbolet and his colleagues engage in should make us aware, though, that the issue is by no means inconsequential or superficial. While it is advisable to let different flowers bloom, it is also true that names and words convey intentions, power relations and other connotations. It does us no harm to reflect on these critically and regularly. I believe that the energy of those engaged with the single concepts will be best used if they make sure that their particular concept transparently

conveys what it aims for and entails, and to whom it owes thanks. It also seems clear that one major source of confusion springs from the fact that PCIA has come to be used both to describe a single approach and as a shortcut phrase for the general idea of assessing what works and what does not work in peacebuilding and development cooperation. More linguistic discipline by all is called for.

Other challenges remain:

- Questions relating to ownership – including issues of relationship and power, partnership, gender, control, empowerment, efficiency or quality, and accountability – have not and cannot be solved once and for all, but need to be mindfully engaged in every case.
- Mainstreaming conflict-sensitive approaches into operating procedures and agencies will likely cause more terminological confusion as well as more attempts to standardise and make comparable monitoring, assessment and evaluation tools. There is a danger that this will result in a general assessment and evaluation weariness. In my experience, focussing on designing well-balanced evaluations that combine reflecting, acting and supervision, as well as reasonable institutional (financial and other) support, best counter such weariness.
- Theory-building may, at this juncture, not be central to Peace and Conflict Impact Assessment, Conflict-Sensitive Approaches or the *Aid for Peace* Approach, but thinking through and making explicit hypotheses and assumptions about social change, thus laying open theories in use, will be an important task for the understanding of peace and development interventions. It is also likely to further our understanding of impact, both intended and unintended.

All the authors who have contributed to this dialogue on “New Trends in PCIA” agree on one necessary next step in further developing the practice of impact assessment: engaging in processes of joint learning and open sharing of findings (whether through a network of practitioners, a “PCIA facility”, or a web-based joint learning platform). This seems to echo another assessment from the first round of dialogue on PCIA: “In order to develop PCIA further, it is necessary to use it as a learning tool from the outset, not as a means of control. A culture of transparency and a willingness to share results would greatly enhance this prospect. Donors should motivate this process and create positive incentives for agencies, encouraging them to reflect critically on their peacebuilding activities. As long as projects are rewarded for good practices [outcomes] only, the willingness to discuss ‘failure’ or negative consequences is reduced – and a learning opportunity missed. Funding criteria and ‘fashions’ set up by donor agencies often contribute to inflexible or harmful practices as agencies are often reluctant to admit if conditions have changed and strategies they once suggested are no longer practicable. In order to create space for learning processes, donors therefore need to establish more flexible mechanisms and criteria.” The peacebuilding and evaluation field, at the same time, needs to develop a shared understanding of what we most need to learn about and how this is best to be done.

There is one major lesson for those engaged in any form of impact assessment. The concept of PCIA – and the idea of evaluation in general – are in danger of becoming a cure-all for negative impacts, lack of peacefulness, exploitative relationships, etc. I believe that we will need to develop a new humility and pragmatism in acknowledging what PCIA and related methodologies can and cannot achieve. We will also, as the Utstein study recommends, need to find a new division of labour. Many practitioners have found the academically- or conceptually-laden assessment methodologies impractically complicated and too burdensome to implement given shortages of staff, time and money, as well as a remarkable confusion of terms. They will not become any more secure or efficient in their work if they are asked to do assessments not only on the project level, but comparatively and across levels. Not surprisingly, both Adam Barbolet and his colleagues and

Thania Paffenholz remind us that some projects simply are not designed to have a nationwide impact on “peace-writ-large” yet may still be very useful interventions if done mindfully of increasing peaceful processes and structures, and diminishing violent processes and structures. While any intervention should be carefully planned and assessed by those involved and affected, the task of drawing comparisons and distilling theories of peace-supporting interventions or processes of social change may be better placed with interdisciplinary teams of action researchers. The task of promoting transformative policies and devising strategies for peace will need to engage an even wider range of actors, experts and stakeholders.

Thus, four paths lead onwards from here

- Strategic planning, evaluation and impact assessment
- Comparative studies of interventions and evaluations, informed by learning from practice and answering to a common framework of guiding questions
- Empowerment of local actors through participatory evaluation practice, among other things
- Global cooperation in learning, advocacy and strategy development for effective peacebuilding

As is usually the case with the Berghof Handbook Dialogues, we do not end with certainties or recipes but rather with a new and refined set of questions and ideas of where to focus our attention. After all, the *Berghof Handbook for Conflict Transformation* aims to provide a platform for exchange between different experiences, cultures and organisations, to present various perspectives and to contribute to bridging the gap between theory and practice. As this round of dialogue has seen contributions by scholar-practitioners rather than by those fully engaged on the operational side of peacebuilding work, development and humanitarian cooperation, we specifically extend our standing invitation to further contribute to this dialogue to the latter. We do thank all those who have so far shared their thoughts, ideas and experiences and look forward to your reactions and reflections.

Vienna, July 2005  
**Beatrix Schmelzle**