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## Revisiting the local turn in peacebuilding – through the emerging urban approach

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### ABSTRACT

In this article, we revisit the ‘local turn’ debate in the peacebuilding literature, and explore its most recent and promising approach to ‘the local’, focussing on post-war cities and on urban dimensions of peacebuilding. There is still substantive contestation and frustration in the peacebuilding research field with regards to the conceptual fuzziness of ‘the local’, and with the continual failures of international interventions to actually take into account local perspectives, promote local agency and establish local ownership. In this article, we explore to what extent recent urban approaches to peacebuilding can help alleviate some of the conceptual problems that has persisted in the literature. We reflect on and raise questions about what a focus on cities and urban perspectives is contributing to the study of local peacebuilding more specifically. We suggest three facets of analytical added value: (1) an increased understanding of how the particularities of urban and rural space affects peacebuilding locally and potentially beyond; (2) how cities and urban space are interrelated with traditional territoriality; and (3) the methodological benefits of the city/urban as (local) analytical entry point. We also discuss potential pitfalls and limitations of urban approaches to peacebuilding, and identify prospective pathways for further research.

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## Introduction

The metaphor of ‘turns’ in the social sciences, including the peacebuilding literature, has often been used to call attention to some important theoretical development that is on the rise (eg the practice turn, the material turn). One of the most significant turns in the peacebuilding literature has been the ‘local turn’, stemming from criticism of the liberal peace project and the emphasised role of local communities, local actors and civil society in peacebuilding and democratisation efforts in conflict-affected societies (see eg special issue of *Third World Quarterly* 2015; Mac Ginty and Richmond 2013).<sup>1</sup> Practitioners and academic scholars alike have emphasised the local as imperative for over three decades now.

Yet even though the local turn may have long been considered a *fait accompli*, there is still substantive frustration with regards to the conceptual fuzziness of ‘the local’, and with the continual failures of international interventions in actually taking into account local

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perspectives, promoting local agency and establishing local ownership. Who, what and where is the local? Many scholars have pointed out and discussed this conceptual confusion (see in particular Mac Ginty 2015; Paffenholz 2015; Hirblinger and Simons 2015; Mac Ginty and Richmond 2013; Höglund and Fjelde 2011). In this rather vexed context, a novel and promising approach to 'the local' has emerged that focusses specifically on post-war cities and on urban dimensions of peacebuilding (see eg the special issue of *Third World Thematics: The Spatiality of Violence in Post-War Cities*, 2019).

In this article, we revisit the local turn debate and explore its most recent and promising addition focussing on cities and urban dimensions of peacebuilding. Urban perspectives on peacebuilding certainly do not offer a unified approach, but involve a multitude of interdisciplinary perspectives, aims and methodologies. However, at its core we find arguments for placing the city at centre stage in the analysis of the dynamics of successful peacebuilding. A central claim is that urban dimensions in one way or another are essential to successful conflict resolution and peacebuilding. In the following, we reflect on and raise questions about what a focus on cities and urban perspectives is contributing to the study of local peacebuilding and post-war reconstruction more specifically.

We start by briefly discussing the local turn debate, followed by a review of urban peacebuilding perspectives. We then turn our focus to discussing in more detail what urban approaches entail in terms of increased conceptual clarity and analytical value added to the study of local peacebuilding. We focus our discussion on the ways in which urban perspectives might aid us in furthering our understanding and explaining outcomes of peacebuilding. We also discuss potential pitfalls and limitations, and identify prospective pathways for further research.

## The local turn in peacebuilding

After the end of the Cold War, hopes were raised of bringing an end to armed conflicts. The United Nations (UN) Agenda for Peace (1992) became the main reference document, defining peacebuilding as an outside intervention in support of national peace processes in conflict countries, with the objective of ending violence and rebuilding states after wars. The local turn debate primarily grew out of a dissatisfaction with the results of the peacebuilding operations that followed. After a short period of successful UN peacekeeping missions in the early 1990s, the UN and the international community failed considerably in places like Rwanda, Somalia and the Balkans (Paffenholz 2015).

These failures were increasingly explained by peace being too centralised or because the local context was neglected (Leonardsson and Rudd 2015; Höglund and Fjelde 2011). As a result, a new generation of international peace operations started to emerge in the early 2000s, based on an approach that more clearly emphasised the importance of building *local* capacity and ownership. An often recurring argument was that international peacebuilding efforts would become more efficient and sustainable by 'going local', through for example engaging with subnational levels of governance, as well as by promoting local ownership (Leonardsson and Rudd 2015; Mac Ginty and Richmond 2013; Brinkerhoff 2011; Schou and Haug 2005).

There is by now wide recognition by practitioners and academics alike that international peace-support efforts involving only national elites have little chance of being sustained.

Local ownership has emerged as a key prescription for obtaining legitimate and authentic peacebuilding. Engagement with local communities is seen as a way of embedding the intervention locally, and thereby tailoring it to local needs and cultural expectations. This also implies an important opportunity for emancipation through attentiveness to local particularism and support of local agency (Leonardsson and Rudd 2015; Mac Ginty and Richmond 2013).

However, it has not been particularly clear what, where and who the local is. In its widest sense, the local has been used as a concept to distinguish between international interveners, on the one hand, and domestic actors in the country intervened upon, on the other. For example, in debates on 'local ownership' in peacebuilding, a central issue concerns the question of how sovereign responsibility eventually can be turned over to local authorities (Donais 2009, 7; Höglund and Fjelde 2011, 21). In this understanding of local ownership, the recipient state is seen as the guarantor of peace in its territory, and peacebuilding is largely seen as a top-down process. Sometimes, the local instead refers to public institutions residing further down the state hierarchy in the intervened-upon country (eg municipalities). A prominent idea is that successful post-conflict reconstruction and state-building will require decentralisation (see eg Kumar Sharma 2005; Wall 2016). At the same time, it has been shown that international actors often avoid local government structures entirely and instead rely on non-governmental organisations (NGOs; Jackson 2016, 748).

Yet another meaning of the local instead refers to non-elite and non-state actors, such as NGOs, civil society, Diasporas or local communities, or even to citizens at large (Demmers 2002; Pouligny 2005; Paffenholz 2010). In this understanding, the idea is that peace must be built on the general will of, and be owned by, the demos. The people must be the ones determining the common good, and peacebuilding is largely seen as a process that must be pursued from the bottom up (Olsson and Jarstad 2011).

Many scholars have pointed to this conceptual confusion (Mac Ginty 2015; Paffenholz 2015; Hirblinger and Simons 2015; Mac Ginty and Richmond 2013; Höglund and Fjelde 2011). Critical scholars have argued that the way in which the local has been understood by many international organisations and donor states entail the risk of local agents being dominated by the soft power inherent in the international peace builder's interventionist logic of training and that local agents are thereby deprived of their agency (Paffenholz 2010; Mac Ginty 2010). Roger Mac Ginty (2015, 841) has argued, for example, that the local is typically represented as 'traditional', 'authentic' and 'legitimate'. Yet, at the same time, local actors and institutions are seen as incapable and in need of being civilised and shown how to be 'properly' governed. Mac Ginty and Richmond (2013, 775–776) suggest that there is often an expectation that local communities embrace western norms and values (eg individualism, secularism, neo-liberal marketisation, etc). In other words, local communities are expected to move away from their own local approaches. This subsequently undermines the notion of local ownership, as well as local constructions of legitimate authority.

Thania Paffenholz (2015) suggests a core problem is the construction of the local and the international as binary opposites. Indeed, when the concept of the local is applied to globally interlinked NGOs or diasporas, it is not always easy to see where the local ends and the global begins (see also Rock 2021). Diasporas and NGOs can, due to their networked nature, simultaneously be local and global. According to Paffenholz, the local tends to be defined in opposition to the international, and local agency as resistance to the liberal peacebuilding

project. A binary understanding of the international and the local, according to Paffenholz, does not account for the agency of actors in either category.

A central concern for many peacebuilding scholars has been how to move forward and reduce this conceptual deviousness of the local. One suggestion has to do with moving away from territoriality. For example, Terry Macdonald views modern citizens as separated from territoriality and instead organised around interests. In a 'global stakeholder democracy', she envisages a hybrid model where parliamentary democracy is combined with a stronger dependence on the support of NGOs beyond territorial boundaries. Those most affected – rather than geographically defined citizens – should have power to influence politics (Macdonald 2008). In a similar vein, Mac Ginty suggest that we move away from understanding the local primarily in terms of geography, and instead as *de*-territorialised, networked and constituted by people and activity rather than by place (Mac Ginty 2015, 841). Mac Ginty acknowledges that the materiality of territory may play a role, but argues that in a post-territorial view we should, rather, regard the local as *activity* and interpret it according to its deeds, actions and capabilities (Mac Ginty 2015, 848). Others argue instead that contemporary globalisation processes do not deem territory less relevant – quite the opposite. Therefore, we need to acquire a deeper understanding of how different geographic localities have different dynamics (see eg Höglund et al. 2016).

The local turn has certainly brought about significant progression in peacebuilding research. Very much in the way Bueger and Gadinger (2014, 9) describe the meaning of a turn in the social sciences, the local turn debate has implied a shift in how we think about and do peacebuilding research. According to Bueger and Gadinger (2014, 9) a turn involves 'quite substantial shifts in thinking about the world and the nature and purpose of social science. These shifts involve epistemology, ontology, methodology, methods and indeed also to rethink how social science [...] relates to and is situated in the world'. The local turn has perhaps been most successful in its call for a shift in thinking about 'the nature and purpose of social science', ie the role of peacebuilding scholarship in relation to peacebuilding practices. While there has been a long-term tradition in this literature to be primarily driven by what is deemed policy relevant, a central argument has been that peacebuilding as an academic field can and should primarily strive to help emancipate local peacebuilding agents, rather than (or just) informing external peacebuilding interventions (see eg Leonardsson and Rudd 2015; Mac Ginty and Richmond 2013).

And yet, frustration with regards to the conceptual fuzziness of the local still lingers. Its meaning as a central bearing concept in this discourse is still vague, sometimes even contradictory. The local turn has left us with some conceptual confusion, for example in terms of ontology (ie who, what or where is the local in peacebuilding?) and in epistemology (ie how do we know the local and its relation to peacebuilding?). In terms of rethinking methodology, or how to go about studying the practices, effectiveness and outcomes of local peacebuilding initiatives, the local turn might not have involved much rethinking at all. It has surely pushed peace and conflict studies towards more ethnographic research, but neither the study of micro perspectives nor the search for everyday lived experiences of peace and conflict is something that specifically grew out of the local turn debate (see Bräuchler and Naucke 2017).

In the remainder of this article, we will explore the ways in which the focus on cities and urban dimensions of peacebuilding have the potential to clarify or alleviate some of the

conceptual problems that have lingered in this debate, and discuss the analytical added value of urban approaches. But first we will briefly review the urban peacebuilding literature.

## The turn to urban perspectives in peacebuilding studies

A recent strand in the peacebuilding literature places the city at the heart of reflections. Many urban peacebuilding studies will rationalise their approach by simply referring to urbanisation. The argument is simple: the future of humanity is urban. If we want to prevent future conflict, we had better prioritise preventing future urban conflict. Indeed, contemporary urbanisation is a powerful trend, and the speed of the ongoing demographic shift is without precedent in human history. Currently, about 55% of the world's people are city dwellers. The UN forecasts that by 2050, almost 70% of all people will live in cities (UN 2019). Contemporary armed conflicts are often concentrated in urban areas, as we have seen in for example Syria, Afghanistan, Yemen and Iraq.

Many scholars in this new urban vein further illustrate the frustration with the continual failures of international interventions in establishing local ownership. For example, Daniel Esser (2013) shows that while Kabul became a symbolic centre for international endeavours of post-war reconstruction and peacebuilding in Afghanistan, the international community failed miserably at establishing a bottom-up approach, especially in the city of Kabul itself. International decision makers have even marginalised city-level actors in Kabul by continually operating over the heads of local actors. The international community have thereby even undermined the legitimacy of local stakeholders in the city (Esser 2013). Similar outcomes have been studied in other post-war cities, such as Freetown in Sierra Leone (Esser 2012) and Goma in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (Büscher and Vlassenroot 2010).

As mentioned above, urban perspectives on peacebuilding do not offer a unified approach, but involve a multitude of interdisciplinary perspectives, aims and methodologies. We are here primarily interested in reviewing studies that do more than just use the city as a unit of analysis, or simply study peacebuilding taking place in cities. Instead, we zoom in on studies that embrace and incorporate an urban perspective more specifically.<sup>2</sup> We find that there are two broad orientations in the study of urban dimensions of peacebuilding. The first focusses on urban peacebuilding responses, and the second on how urban environments condition peacebuilding efforts. Both of these orientations clearly draw on theoretical insights coming from the field of urban studies.

In the first line of thought, a common central argument is that the city represents a rational entry point for policy interventions (see eg Björkdahl and Strömbom 2015; Wennmann and Jütersonke 2019). The local thus becomes represented by and specified in terms of urban policies and their relevance for establishing bottom-up peacebuilding. This discourse typically draws on the urban planning and urban governance literature and looks into how various aspects of urban and local governance can play a key role in the practical content and meaning of peace (see eg Bollens 2006; Cunningham and Byrne 2006; Beall 2009; Fox and Beall 2012; Erfan 2017; Björkdahl and Strömbom 2015). Björkdahl and Strömbom (2015, 16) argue, for example, that even though it is certainly a challenge for urban policymakers to deal with (violent) conflict, urban policymaking as an arena holds much potential when it comes to creating the preconditions necessary for peacebuilding. According to Bollens (2006, 83), urban policies (eg land-use planning, housing development, refugee relocation, social service delivery, community planning and participation, and municipal government

organisation) can have direct and tangible impact on issues relating to inter-group stability or volatility. Bollens also suggests that cities represent a form of policy laboratory where various peacebuilding strategies can be assessed (Bollens 2006, 67).

Erfan (2017) similarly argues that city planning is a valuable forum for peacebuilding and for dealing with collective traumas stemming from conflicts and war. The planning process of cities often link these types of traumas to very concrete things that are relevant to the everyday life of citizens. This can be the case in places where the original conflict issues related to territory is not solved. For example, negotiations are taking place between Serbia and Kosovo on a land swap which would result in an international border dividing the city of Mitrovica between the two states (Jarstad and Segall 2019). In such situations, urban planning plays an important role in providing joint political forums where people can interact locally across ethnic divides. Other urban matters such as housing prices can also be drivers of post-war violence and insecurity. For example, the housing market in Afghanistan's capital Kabul collapsed as the international presence was winding down, resulting in a rise of different forms of crime and victimisation related to the housing sector (Altpeter 2016).

A recent volume edited by Wennmann and Jütersonke (2019) focusses on various aspects of the practicalities of the urban level as an entry point for peacebuilding policy responses.<sup>3</sup> For example, Homel and Masson (2019) shows how community-based approaches to crime prevention in Palestine have been able to build effective partnerships between formal actors such as security forces and local authorities on the one hand, and informal actors such as civil society, media and local business leaders on the other, to create safer communities with resilient local leadership. Another example comes from Salahub and Zaaroura (2019), who show that the provision of safe and inclusive spaces through upgrading urban infrastructures such as paved roads and lightning of public spaces can help in preventing violence – often especially relevant for the safety of women. Similar findings come from recent fieldwork by one of the authors, which has shown that in Johannesburg, the difference in access to basic goods such as running water, electricity and sanitation between different parts of informal settlements is striking. On one side of a paved street there are shacks that have electricity, water taps and toilets, whereas on the other side there are no tarred streets and no electricity or water. This uneven urban planning causes a lot of distrust, jealousy and conflict and often spurs violence.<sup>4</sup>

The second analytical strand turns its attention to how urban environments condition conflicts and peacebuilding efforts. This strand not only finds inspiration in the urban studies field, but draws on the 'spatial turn' more broadly, where the concept of space as well as state-centrism has been problematised (see eg Walker 1993; Agnew 1994; Rosenau 1997). The spatiality of conflicts and peacebuilding has gained increasing attention (see eg Pullan and Baillie 2013; Sandstrom 2014; Björkdahl and Buckley-Zistel 2016; Björkdahl and Kappler 2017; Elfversson, Gusic, and Höglund 2019; Danielsson 2020). By using notions of (urban) place and space as principal analytical categories, a central assumption is that the specificities of urban environments entail that conflicts and peacebuilding efforts cannot be seen as simply unfolding in cities, but must be analysed in terms of how urban spatiality actually shapes them.<sup>5</sup> For example, Annika Björkdahl (2013) suggests that by looking into the specificities of peacebuilding processes that take place in cities, we can understand the ways in which urban space affects the peacebuilding process. This, she argues, helps us understand why divided cities such as Mostar, Nicosia, Sarajevo and Belfast have proved to be so resistant to traditional peacebuilding endeavours.

Physical separation of communities in ethno-nationally divided cities demonstrates the importance of urban space in conflicts and peacebuilding and shows how urban conditions can affect the ability to construct, maintain or resist efforts at peacebuilding (Pullan and Baillie 2013; Björkdahl and Strömbom 2015). Elfversson, Gusic, and Höglund (2019, 82) argue that we need to better understand the spatiality of violence in post-war cities for a number of reasons. One reason is because 'violence reduction strategies required will also be different in cities than in non-urban sites, since cities tend to be more diverse in their demographic set-up and because urban spaces are characterized by intimate contact' (Elfversson, Gusic, and Höglund 2019, 82). They also argue that urban violence differs from rural forms and that urban forms of violence tend to play out differently than in non-urban settings. Other authors have demonstrated that there has been a shift in the locus and mode of violence, from rural-based rebellion to urban riots, in countries such as Uganda and Burundi (Golooba-Mutebi and Sjögren 2017; Van Acker 2018).

Still, this is a research area that is just beginning to develop, and we still know fairly little about how the socio-material relations and dynamics of urban versus rural environments actually affect peacebuilding and post-war dynamics. One of the first quantitative studies disaggregating data on rural and urban violence showed, firstly, that violent conflict is more common in cities than in rural areas (Höglund et al. 2016). This, the authors suggest, may be due to the higher population density, but also the symbolic and economic importance of cities. Secondly, and perhaps surprisingly, urban violence led to fewer casualties compared to rural violence. So, while urban violence is more frequent, it seems less deadly. However, a study on local peace initiatives in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, instead shows higher levels of post-war violence in rural Richmond and Umbumbulu, compared to semi-urban Bhambayi. The authors of this study suggest that kinship ties and land conflicts play out differently depending on the community's rurality (van Baalen and Höglund 2017). The mechanisms at play with regard to the urban-rural dimension may also affect mobilisation for peace, for instance through informal and formal institutions for peace negotiations, including the traditional chiefs in rural areas who often play a role in peace-making.

In a study on communal conflicts, Elfversson investigates under what conditions ethno-political communal conflicts are manifested in cities (Elfversson 2020). She recognises that cities are associated with cosmopolitanism and tolerance, while at the same time inter-group conflict may be aggravated when communities are forced to compete and interact in close proximity. This 'urban dilemma' thus encapsulates the idea that the city simultaneously has the potential for peacebuilding and for violent conflict. Silvia Danielak (2020) has similarly demonstrated the coexistence of destruction and production in the aftermath of violent conflict taking place in post-apartheid Johannesburg. She shows how 'momentary spaces of trust, empathy or solidarity exist within landscapes of insecurity, inequality, relative deprivation, disengagement and destruction' (Danielak 2020, 458). Danielak develops the concept of 'conflict urbanism', where she argues that conflict without violence (agonistic rather than antagonistic) in post-war urban space can actually be a constructive force.

After this brief review, we move on to discuss the question of how urban approaches can help bring clarity to some of the questions that have remained in the local turn debate. In what ways can an urban approach take us further in understanding and explaining the role of the local for outcomes in peacebuilding and post-war efforts? What is the main analytical added value of these recent urban approaches? What are the potential pitfalls and how can the research agenda be brought forward?

## Analytical contributions of urban approaches – and pathways for future research

In the following section, we bring to the fore three postulates regarding the added value of an urban approach, and these concern: (1) the particularities of urban and rural space; (2) urban space and its relevance for traditional territoriality; (3) the usability and manageability of the city/urban as a unit of analysis. Below, we present our arguments in detail and situate our position in relation to previous research. We also identify and discuss some of the potential pitfalls and key issues for advancing this research agenda further.

### *The particularities of urban and rural space*

An urban approach can help clarify the ontological question of what the local is. An urban perspective will first and foremost make the distinction between urban and rural places and spaces, and this builds on the theoretical assumption that these different types of localities embody different dynamics. In other words, the whereabouts of the local, and whether it is represented by an urban or a rural place and spatiality, matters significantly to the dynamics of conflicts and peacebuilding. Through this assumption, the urban approach gives us a better and more theoretically informed point of departure that specifies what the local is in terms of its spatial and material dynamics (eg density, population size and mixing, informal settlements; socio-cultural aspects such as political, economic and civic culture, etc).

In some respects, this goes against Mac Ginty's argument discussed above, that we need to go beyond territoriality and materiality to understand the local and instead understand the local as *de*-territorialised, networked and constituted by people and activity rather than by place (Mac Ginty 2015, 841). We suggest that an urban approach takes into consideration that the materiality and dynamic of urban (or rural) space will matter to and have an impact on both people and activities. In other words, it is not a question of either/or; we must include both perspectives by also including an analysis of how the spatial situatedness of people and activities affects peacebuilding. To a certain degree, it also goes against the idea that cities can be used as an analytical lens through which broader conflict or post-conflict dynamics can be understood (see eg Björkdahl and Strömbom 2015) – or, as Bollens suggests, that cities can be seen as microcosms of broader societal fault-lines and tensions affecting a nation (Bollens 2006). Here lies a main tension in the urban peacebuilding literature: while much recent research has emphasised the importance of (urban) space and place for peacebuilding, there are different and contradictory ideas concerning what the urban approach or a focus on cities can actually help us achieve analytically.

We side with the argument that urban environments represent a specific type of place and space, with its own dynamics, that differs from other (rural) environments (see in particular Björkdahl 2013; Elfversson, Gusic, and Höglund 2019). However, there is still important conceptual work to be done. Of central concern here is, for example, the risk of creating a problematic (and false) binary; urban versus rural. First of all, there is no consensus on how to define a city, either in terms of geographical boundaries or in terms of population size.<sup>6</sup> It is not always self-evident whether a specific locality is to be regarded as urban or rural. One way forward is to take another conceptual lesson from the urban studies field, and also incorporate analytical categories such as peri-urban (sometimes referred to as urban fringe,

semi-urban or rural) as well (see eg Dadashpoor and Ahani 2019; Mondal and Sen 2020). Such conceptual nuances would imply important epistemological progress since we could then also include in the analysis the complex spatial dynamic of spaces of transition between cities and its surrounding rural areas. A striking feature of current global urbanisation trends is that a majority of the growth is concentrated around (not in) the large metropolitan areas in the world. These growing peri-urban areas are characterised by complex interactions between the city and its surrounding rural areas; they are typically heterogeneous and diverse societies involving complex mixes of rural and urban land uses (Mondal and Sen 2020, 183–184).

In other words, in contrast to scholars who mainly justify their choice of cases in terms of the urban being a microcosm of the general conflict, we suggest that in order to know the local we must focus on the particularities of the combination of, for example, density, proximity and mixing that distinguishes the urban, peri-urban and rural spaces, respectively, and on how these types of places and spaces shape peacebuilding.

Another related potential problem of the urban approach lies in its inherent urban bias, which may come at the expense of non-urban localities. This is a valid concern indeed. At the same time, one of the most important contributions of the urban studies field in recent decades (especially the Global Cities and rescaling literature) is the realisation and conceptualisation of the increasing global importance of cities and urban regions. What happens in cities and urban regions (politically, economically, socially and culturally) reaches well beyond city walls (see eg Sassen 1991; Brenner 2004; Curtis 2016; Ljungkvist 2016). Related to this is the networked function of cities and the various urban arenas available for mobilisation for peace. As Sassen and Kaldor point out, cities are not only increasingly important sites of violence, but also increasingly powerful and important sites of 'resistance and opportunity for the emergence of new norms and political arrangements' (Kaldor and Sassen 2020, 5).

One such urban arena is street demonstrations. Social movement scholars have long argued that cities have become the epicentre and strategic locale for protests and for international political mobilisation on issues such as democratic change, social injustice and immigration (see eg Köhler and Wissen 2003; Uitermark 2004; Rabrenovic 2009; Harvey 2012). Cities are centres of power, and therefore also magnets for global media attention. Demonstrations often include signs in English even in countries where English is not the official language. Demonstrators seek the attention of international media and donors, who often have their headquarters in major cities, in order to put pressure on warring actors and government. This was noted for instance by one of the authors during field work in Bosnia-Herzegovina. A huge banner outside the parliament said: 'Europe: You must talk with the people of BiH (VGuBiH) NOW. Otherwise, you'll be responsible for what is coming.'<sup>7</sup> Here, the protestors directed their demands towards the EU, which plays a key role in maintaining the peace, and even put the blame for potential hostile events on the EU rather than on national politicians. Another example is that activists often re-define their demands according to what they see as global trends. For instance, in an informal settlement in Johannesburg, where protest against poor service delivery of electricity has been ongoing for decades, activists have begun to demand equipment for solar energy, as they believe this is something that international donors could be interested in supporting.<sup>8</sup>

Urban approaches to peacebuilding sometimes involve a perspective of comparison with its rural counterparts, and we suggest that this comparative aspect needs to be developed further, not least because the literature otherwise runs the risk of becoming self-confirmatory in its urban bias where more available (urban) data motivates more studies on the same (urban) phenomena. Studies of rural peacebuilding are also important in order to address the primary objective of the local turn, namely to include the agencies of those previously excluded from centralised peacebuilding taking place in the capital where exclusive peacebuilding clubs have evolved, alienating the broader population from their idea of peace (Kappler 2012; Martin de Almagro 2018; Zanker 2014). Therefore, we need to further explore and conceptualise the origins and character of urban peacebuilding, conflict and violence in relation to and/or in comparison with its peri-urban and rural counterparts. For example, in what way is urban violence and conflict different in character from its peri-urban and rural counterparts? What characterises peacebuilding in these various types of spatialities, and what is the relation between them? As noted above, cities as well as rural areas simultaneously have the potential for peacebuilding and violent conflict, but how do the different dynamics of urban, peri-urban or rural spaces and places affect post-war dynamics and peacebuilding more specifically?

Furthermore, as Björkdahl and Buckley-Zistel (2016, 2) suggest, considerations of space and place make it possible to analyse how peace and war can coexist, but more research is still needed to sort out whether such duality is a result of the web of peaceful and hostile relationships that exists at different levels of society, or if it indeed is the same actors who are engaged in peace and war. A potential way forward is to employ a new conceptual framework for the study of 'relational peace', developed by Söderström, Åkebo, and Jarstad (2020) for urban areas and for comparison between urban, peri-urban and rural areas.

### ***Urban space and its relevance for traditional territoriality***

Another important issue where the urban perspective can take us forward has to do with how we should understand the relationship between urban space and traditional state territoriality in conflicts and peacebuilding. As mentioned above, the turn to urban dimensions of peacebuilding can be seen as part of a more general spatial turn which has taken place throughout the social sciences and lately also reached international studies and peacebuilding (see eg Björkdahl and Buckley-Zistel 2016; Björkdahl and Kappler 2017). Studies taking spatiality as an analytical point of departure often urge us to move beyond methodological nationalism (Adamson 2016) and to look for aspects that a traditional state-centric perspective cannot reveal. This is evident for example in Kaldor and Sassen's book *Cities at War: Global Insecurity and Urban Resistance* (2020). They argue that the city can be seen as 'a lens through which to understand contemporary violence as well as contemporary peace' (Kaldor and Sassen 2020, 3), but not in the sense that we through the analysis of cities can understand the broader conflict in traditional terms. Instead, they argue, the urban lens will help us 'shed new light on how to explain, interpret, and perceive twenty-first-century war without the blinkers of geopolitical preoccupations' (Kaldor and Sassen 2020, 3). In other words, it is not about the city as a level of analysis mirroring the national, but an alternative ontology altogether – one where the main point is to move beyond state-centrism, thereby helping us to see otherwise hidden aspects and reach a deeper understanding of violence as (urban) phenomenon.

This is a highly valuable approach, and indeed an essential one. But as Fiona Adamson (2016, 20) argues, a spatial turn 'does not mean that we should throw out the state, state interests, or state practices', but rather that we should strive to include both perspectives at the same time. To be sure, traditional Westphalian territoriality is not dead, despite globalisation. The return of geopolitics suggests, rather, a reterritorialisation, for instance of sub-national regional integration across borders in the EU (Noferini et al. 2020) and in relation to refugees (Kataria 2021). Importantly, armed conflicts still often revolve around territorial issues, and this can involve ideational and identity issues as well as material aspects. As Chojnacki and Engels (2016, 33–34) argue, territorialisation is in fact a central aspect of contemporary conflicts, especially in terms of identity and the construction of 'self' and 'other' where, for example, struggles over land between local groups are often about whose claims to land are legitimate. Historically, cities and urban space have played a very important strategic and symbolic role in such respects, and still do. The control of certain cities can even determine the success or failure of entire conflicts (Shaw 2004). Marika Landau-Wells (2018) has shown, for example, that in contemporary civil wars, the warring parties are highly motivated to use any means necessary to gain or maintain control over the capital city since the international community will typically base their decision to officially recognise any one of the warring parties as official heads of state based on who holds such control. According to Landau-Wells, this leads to low or no incentive to keep the city itself intact or its citizens secure. Mogadishu, Brazzaville and Kabul are all illustrative examples of capital cities being completely destroyed while the warring parties sought official recognition by the international community (Landau-Wells 2018, 104). This is also closely related to the often highly symbolic role that cities take in conflicts and post-war contexts – eg Jerusalem, Nicosia, Mostar or Belfast as material and symbolic spaces representing the entire conflict (see eg Björkdahl 2013).

We suggest, therefore, that rather than focussing on either (urban) spatiality or (national) territoriality, we must do both. We should strive to identify and analyse how the dynamics of urban space interact with traditional notions of state territoriality as well as national and international peacebuilding institutions and practices – this is key to advancing the research agenda. This brings us back to the point made above regarding the potential pitfalls of an urban bias; and this is in fact an area of research where such bias makes complete sense. Given what has been shown in the urban studies literature (specifically in the Global Cities literature) on the significance of what happens in cities also beyond city walls – even on a global scale – studies of urban peacekeeping should seek to further unpack the interactions between urban and global scales and examine more closely the mechanisms through which urban peacebuilding in highly symbolic and/or strategically important cities can (or cannot) contribute to national and international peace.

### ***The usability and manageability of the city as a research object***

Urban perspectives have brought important epistemological and methodological developments to how we study and understand local peacebuilding. Geospatial and disaggregated data that include cities rather than (just) states as units of analysis has become increasingly common (Grob, Papadovassilakis, and Ribeiro Fadon Vicente 2016, 12). We would even suggest that the urban perspective is (at least partly) driven by methodological advancements such as geospatial analysis and geocoding.

'Geospatial' data means that conflict events are disaggregated and can be analysed at specific moments in time at a particular subnational/local level (eg city, neighbourhood, street level). Bhavnani et al. (2014) have, for example, used geocoded data on settlement patterns in Jerusalem in order to assess why intergroup interaction sometimes aggravates violence, while in other situations it instead seems to mitigate violence. Another example of this methodology comes from Uppsala University and the recently introduced Geocoded Peacekeeping Operations (Geo-PKO) data set, covering all UN peacekeeping missions to Africa from 1994 to 2014.<sup>9</sup> The data set includes a multitude of information on each deployment (such as sector and main headquarters, types of units deployed, number of troops, troop-contributing countries, etc) at a disaggregated geographical scale involving longitude and latitude coordinates at the city/village level (Cil et al. 2020). According to Cil et al. (2020, 361), 'This allows users to aggregate the information to various levels of analysis, such as grid cells or administrative units, deemed most suitable to their research design'.

These types of methodological developments are epistemologically significant since they provide more detailed data on where local agents are, and where peace and conflict take place. If developed further (as discussed above, by including more nuanced analytical categories), they will also provide the necessary preconditions to further analyse the different dynamics of urban, peri-urban and rural conflict and peacebuilding, and to understand how peacebuilding activities in different spatialities interact with national and international peacebuilding institutions and practices. This fine-grained type of data with spatial precision is also highly useful for advancing our understanding of the nature as well as the level of post-war violence, which we know can differ greatly from street to street within a single city. It can also help us improve our understanding of the spread of violence and the role of urban peacebuilding: Is violence imported to cities from rural areas, for example via migration to the cities? Or is violence rather exported from, for instance, violent street protests in cities to peri-urban or rural areas? When it comes to peacebuilding, it seems common at least in policy circles to expect a trickle-down effect of peacebuilding, but how does this play out in reality – does urban peacebuilding travel to peri-urban and rural areas?

Also, because peacebuilding is a complex process, involving several formal and informal actors, at various levels, a pragmatic reason for an urban approach is that it is manageable and accessible, and provides more focus than if we approach the peacebuilding process from the national level. Major government institutions and donor agencies are located in cities, and an urban focus thus facilitates field work. In addition, while few scholars explicitly state that the availability of new data is the main reason for doing a study, anyone engaged in quantitative work knows that this can indeed be an important driver of research focus. This is not a major problem as such, as long as the focus is (also) motivated by theoretical concerns and identified research gaps. We do, however, see a sloppiness in the literature in this regard, as many authors simply refer to the increased urbanisation as a main motivation for studying urban peacebuilding. As discussed above, a potential pitfall here is the risk of the urban approach becoming self-confirmatory since the availability of data in itself might motivate more studies. Information about the city may also be deemed more reliable than information about what happens outside the cities, not least due to the logic of media reporting where the focus tends to be on cities. This is an area that needs considerably more attention and exploration in future research.

In sum, it is certainly clear that the possibility to code the exact position where peacebuilding activities or violence takes place has fundamentally changed and improved the possibility for fine-grained empirical analysis.

## Concluding remarks

Urban approaches have given a new lease on life to the local turn, and even have the potential to alleviate some of the conceptual problems that have persisted. Urban approaches to peacebuilding add new and significant analytical and conceptual clarity to our understanding of the local, primarily through (1) an increased understanding of how particularities of urban and rural space affect peacebuilding locally and, potentially, beyond; (2) how cities and urban space are interrelated with traditional territoriality; and (3) the methodological benefits of the city/urban as (local) analytical entry point. In particular, we see as one of its most important contributions the theoretical insights brought in from the urban studies field, concerning for example the role of urban governance and planning for local peacebuilding, and the particularities of urban space and how such spatiality may affect the dynamics of peacebuilding locally and, potentially, beyond.

We also see two main areas for further development and future research. Firstly, further learning from the urban studies field and incorporating more nuanced analytical categories (eg peri-urban, rurban) could lead to considerably sharper empirical analysis and help avoid the pitfalls of a problematic and false urban–rural binary. Secondly, we need to further explore how urban peacebuilding matters not only locally but also beyond, by focussing for example on how urban peacebuilding in strategically important and highly symbolic cities matters in relation to national, international and even global peacebuilding.

Taken together, we suggest that the focus on cities and on urban approaches has revitalised the local turn through epistemological, ontological and methodological clarifications, but there remain many unexplored questions to address in future research.

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## Notes

1. The peacebuilding literature is not easily demarcated from the broader discourse of peace and conflict studies, involving studies on, for example, peacekeeping or conflict resolution, or war studies. While urban approaches seem to be increasingly prevalent in all of these interconnected fields, our main focus is on the (post-war) peacebuilding literature.
2. By this we mean that our focus is on peacebuilding studies, where there is a clear incorporation of theoretical perspectives and insights coming from the urban studies field. Urban studies is obviously also very broad and interdisciplinary (incorporating eg urban planning, urban sociology, geography, urban politics, studies on global cities, etc), but at its heart lies an idea that cities and built environments are not just simple and non-affectual 'containers' of human activities, but rather that they involve particular social, cultural, political, economic and material dynamics (for a historical background to the urban studies field and the meaning of 'urban', see eg Popenoe 1965; for a more recent description of the field, see eg LeGates 2001).
3. This volume also makes a point of merging the literature on urban violence coming from fields such as development studies and criminology, looking into interrelated issues of (for example) trafficking, terrorism and gang-related violence.
4. Interviews and field notes by Jarstad, March 2017, Johannesburg, South Africa. See also Jarstad (2021).
5. There are various and varying definitions of central concepts such as space and place in the literature. However, the notion of place typically refers to the physical and material aspects of the built environment that are used and made meaningful through human action and interaction. The notion of space goes beyond the material and physical of locations to refer to its ideational aspects and the social construction thereof (for a more thorough discussion on this, see Björkdahl and Buckley-Zistel 2016, 3–10). Another way of conceptualising urban space is to look at it as involving two dimensions (see Ljungkvist 2021, 11). The first relates to material-geographical aspects (eg the socio-spatial and material characteristics of cities in terms of density, sprawl, infrastructure, informal settlements, etc). The second has to do with political and socio-cultural aspects of urban space, relating to, for example, political, economic and civic culture, as well as the symbolic essence of built space.
6. For example, the concept of the 'city proper' describes a city according to an administrative jurisdiction, while a 'metropolitan area' is typically used to define the degree of economic and social interconnectedness (eg commerce or commuting patterns) of urban areas (UN 2018, 1). Concerning population size, there is also substantial variation in how different countries define their cities or urban areas. For example, Denmark and Iceland define an urban site as 200 inhabitants or more, the Netherlands and Nigeria have a threshold of 20,000, and Japan uses a 50,000-inhabitant threshold.
7. Field notes by Jarstad, March 2014, Sarajevo, Bosnia-Herzegovina.
8. Interviews and field notes by Jarstad, March 2017, Johannesburg, South Africa.

9. Although this database focusses, as mentioned, on peacekeeping and not peacebuilding per se, it serves as an interesting illustration of these emerging methodologies.

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