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Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability

The global-capitalist elephant in the room: how resilient peacebuilding hinders substantive transformation and undermines long-term peace prospects

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This article reviews critical responses to recent academic debates on resilience and peacebuilding, with a focus on approaches that question the underlying logics of resilient peacebuilding in fundamental ways. It argues that, while resilience in peacebuilding lends agency and new policy direction to peacebuilding actors, enabling them to uphold the image of active global governance, this also helps to legitimize the existence and reproduction of dominant global-capitalist structures and practices that undermine long-term peacebuilding and give rise to risks of conflict and environmental disasters in the first place. We argue that this process hinders transformation away from an infinite growth economy by focusing on imminent systemic risks and solutions while ignoring potential normative–theoretical and practical–experiential alternatives to the global-capitalist frameworks at the heart of the problem.

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Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability 2023, **62**:101291

This review comes from a themed issue on **Resilience and Peace**

Edited by **Albert Norström, Cedric de Coning, Cibele Queiroz, Jeeyon Kim, Rika Preiser** and **Florian Krampe**

Available online xxxx

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cosust.2023.101291

Introduction

The idea of interventions by the 'international community' [8] into low- and middle-income countries (LMIC) around the world with the aim to foster conditions for peace is as strong as ever. While classic liberal peacebuilding with its focus on externally led institution-building and the promotion of democracy and market economy in conflict-ridden states has declined over the last decade, the peacebuilding idea as such has not. Rather, peacebuilding — defined here as a set of organized activities by external actors to promote self-sustaining peace — has been repackaged as a risk management strategy in view of the high levels of uncertainty, ambiguity, and complexity arising from both old and new global challenges, including not least climate change. Central to such peacebuilding approaches is the idea of 'resilience', a concept focusing on the endogenous capacity of individuals, communities, and societies affected by violence, environmental degradation, and other challenges to prepare for, manage, and cope with risks.

'Resilient peacebuilding' is an umbrella term for both top-down/external and bottom-up/locally led processes, and is seen as "a socioecological system's (community, society, state) response to violence and capacity to both maintain peace in the event of a violent shock or long-term stressor and resist the pernicious impacts of violence on societal norms and relationships" ([46], 3). Resilience in peacebuilding has been embraced as a welcome response to the failure of earlier liberal peacebuilding, which was criticized for formulaic, top-down, one-size-fits-all approaches, result-focused and state-oriented interventions that do not sufficiently take the local context into account, and linear thinking with short time horizons [4,5,9••,13,20,24,31,33,37,39]. Yet, the resilience-centered approach to peacebuilding has not remained without its critics either.

This article reviews critical responses to resilience-centered peacebuilding initiatives by international organizations and Global Northern states in LMIC countries. It focuses specifically on the role of the concept of resilience in such external peacebuilding interventions — and *not* the myriad locally led peace processes and initiatives of conflict resolution and resistance to violence, which would warrant a review article in their own right (see, e.g. [32]). Based on a review of this critical literature, we argue that, ultimately, resilience thinking in peacebuilding undermines rather than fosters prospects for long-term peace, by enacting active locally centered global governance

around pressing challenges, while leaving the structural inequalities underlying the causes for armed conflict and environmental degradation unaddressed.

In the first part of the article, we unpack two different strands of critique leveled against resilient peacebuilding. In Robert Cox's widely used distinction between social–scientific theories as either 'problem-solving' or 'critical', problem-solving theory is focused on making the social world work more smoothly from within by improving the institutions and relationships that constitute it ([11], 128–129). In the case of resilient peacebuilding, critiques coming from such a perspective include, for example, the idea of a 'gap' between the progressive concept of resilient peace and its deficient implementation. While such concerns are engaged in this article, our focus is on critiques that fall under Cox's definition of 'critical' social theory, that is, approaches that take a step back to unpack the logics of prevalent institutions and social relationships, and of the process of theorizing about them ([11], 128–130). Regarding resilience thinking in peacebuilding, this concerns questions of how the relationship between violent conflict, environmental shocks, and societal impacts is theorized, and what options for political action such theorization opens up or precludes.

In the second part, we use the example of environmental peacebuilding as a novel strand within the resilient peacebuilding approach, to sketch critiques that see the absence of the Global North in the construction of global problems as a major deficit of resilience thinking in peacebuilding. We argue that the focus on resilience distracts from what we provocatively call the 'global-capitalist elephant in the room': the question of how the causes and effects of global socioeconomic inequalities and planetary environmental degradation are distributed. As long as the doctrine of the infinite growth economy that underpins the global-capitalist structures benefiting the affluent countries of the Global North remains unaddressed, the majority of the causes for global challenges, most importantly climate change, will continue to emanate from the Global North, while their negative effects — and the onus of building resilience against harmful impacts — rests with the societies of the LMICs.

Resilient peacebuilding: two strands of critique

Resilience thinking has had a major effect on today's peacebuilding practice and scholarship, but assessments differ in explaining this success. For some, this is because resilient peacebuilding addresses simultaneous and interwoven challenges such as civilian protection, climate change, and migration much better than the previous simplistic, top-down peacebuilding approaches adopted by external actors. Resilient peacebuilding focuses on complexity and nonlinearity, advocates a systems approach to understanding and addressing conflict, embodies a shift to local capacities, and emphasizes human agency [21,23]. The practice of resilience is conceptualized to entail engagement through a diverse range of partnerships and instruments [31,6••], the strengthening of social cohesion and institutions [1], and a shift toward the United Nations' Sustaining Peace agenda [45]. Specific suggestions of new paths in peacebuilding illustrating the purchase of these ideas include de Coning's [13] *adaptive peacebuilding*, which integrates resilience, and Paffenholz's [37] *perpetual peacebuilding*, which argues for a more dynamic, flexible process without a fixed outcome or endpoint.

In a second perspective, the acceptance and adoption of resilience as a guiding normative image in global governance are attributed to the concept's lack of clarity that makes it highly adaptable to a range of interests and perspectives ([1,23], 290–91; [26,38,43•]). Resilience has been described as a boundary object or bridging construct, enabling its use across disciplines and policy fields despite differing understandings ([22], 566–67; [43•], 307, 314). Owing to this ambiguity, it has been seen as meaning simultaneously everything and nothing ([43•], 309), which may explain why it is criticized as vague and undertheorized while still highlighted as an essential mechanism ([44], 1220). Since it seems unclear how exactly it can and should be worked with ([26], 684), resilience is discussed as both an approach that will bring about transformation [23,24] and one that is inherently conservative and favors stability [1,43•].

This ambiguity notwithstanding, there has been a clear turn toward resilience thinking in both peacebuilding scholarship and practice. Yet, a number of authors worry that this may only be a rhetoric shift with few changes to peacebuilding implementation [5,6••,21–23,26,27,44]. Curran and Hunt [12], for example, argue that the United Nations has continued to prioritize stabilization missions that undermine local peacebuilding. Similarly, Schouten and Miklan [42] show how the elevated role of multinational companies (MNCs) within UN peacebuilding channels benefits upward and diminishes the quality of the peace being built. This 'implementation gap' is a typical example for critique from a problem-solving perspective and has inspired solutions within the realm of optimization of current institutions and relationships — for example, through better phasing of conflict stabilization efforts with the formal cycle of peacebuilding operations ([12], 61), or by improving cooperation between MNCs and multilateral peacebuilding institutions in order to extend public authority over corporate activities in conflict zones ([42], 430). 'Failure' in the implementation of resilient peace, in this perspective, is seen either as a valuable learning opportunity [13,26] or as irrelevant within the infinite game of sustaining peace ([13], 313).

From a critical perspective in Cox's sense, by contrast, the implementation gap is not just a matter of optimizing external assistance; it is complicit in upholding the current global order that makes such assistance necessary in the first place. Since resilience promises more than what current practices and policies are able to provide — more local ownership, more inclusivity, and longer-term perspectives ([6••], 265) — subsequent deficits in the process of engendering resilience thus lead to further calls for continued expansion, which legitimize additional monitoring and control, and enable foreign practitioners to stay indefinitely [5]. Far from being embraced as a learning opportunity, from a critical perspective, this acceptance or embracing of permanent failure [6••] by practitioners happens on behalf of locals without their consultation and allows for western experimentation on marginalized communities. In practice, the endless cycle of projects entrenches inequalities and infantilizes local populations ([35], 126), while the ability of external practitioners and donors to assess what constitutes a failure must be questioned as locals and donors inevitably have differing perspectives ([4], 155).

Concerns from a critical theory perspective about the role of resilience in peacebuilding thus go far beyond worries about a lack of implementation. For critical theorists of peacebuilding, resilience allows high-income countries of the Global North to experiment with new forms of governmentality in LMICs, while ridding themselves of responsibility. Local actors are made responsible for objectives that remain externally set, with international actors continuing to govern from afar ([6••], 268; [24], 373). Yet, while societies in LMICs are made to be able to handle shocks, the adaptation methods themselves may intensify, redistribute, or spread problems, while root causes are left unaddressed [9••]. Vulnerable populations are forced to accept and live with uncertainty and risk, while being expected to bounce back from crises regardless of the structural challenges they face ([43•], 317). From a critical perspective, then, the problem with resilient peacebuilding is that it enables actors in global governance to perform agency, purpose, and bustling activity in addressing global challenges, while hiding that it changes little to nothing in global–structural or causal terms.

Another intrinsic problem of resilience thinking is the construction of shocks as inevitable in a complex world, or of catastrophes as emancipatory, which removes the Global North's role in creating them in the first place [9••]. It allows its proponents to absorb all previous critiques of peacebuilding, without any indication that either the practices of global capitalism or its foundations such as the mantra of GDP growth, which underpin both global inequalities and environmental degradation, are being addressed — a critique we turn to now.

The Global North and its place in environmental peacebuilding

Environmental peacebuilding provides a good example to unpack this critique. There has been a growing call to integrate the environment in the pursuit of sustainable and resilient peace. Areas recovering from or experiencing conflict are seen to consist of the most biologically diverse regions of the world, to be more vulnerable to climate-related shocks, and to have an impeded ability to implement efforts to mitigate those shocks [2,15,30•,36]. Proponents of environmental peacebuilding therefore hold that the violent shocks and stressors societies and communities must harness against according to resilience thinking are increasingly related to climate change-induced environmental degradation: "Recovery plans to sustain peace can no longer exclude the management of the environment, natural resources, and strengthening societies' resilience to climate impacts" [28].

The relationship between the environment and conflict in policy and academic literatures on environmental peacebuilding is complex. Climate change is regarded as a threat multiplier, while armed conflict, in turn, causes the destruction of nature and natural resources [16,30•]. Yet, the environment is also increasingly viewed as a potential source for cooperation and peacebuilding, due to being supposedly less politically sensitive and contested than other issues [18,19]. While some critics have highlighted the lack of theoretical foundation and empirical evidence in this literature ([20], 2; [2,7,36,15], 9–10; [18], 2–3), and that policy benefits are so far assumed rather than proven ([29], 3; [30•], 570), the idea is nonetheless gaining in popularity.

Critical theorists, however, have taken issue with core assumptions of resilience in environmental peacebuilding. In line with the general critique of resilience, they point out that the burden is placed once more on those most vulnerable to, and least responsible for, shocks and disasters, and subsequently least able to deal with them [2,9••,15,25]. This disconnect manifests, for instance, in government officials and NGO staff addressing local conflict arising from environmental change — such as the pressures on pastoralists in Kenya from ever more frequent droughts — exclusively through local socioeconomic activities and programs, that is, how pastoralists can change their activities to become resilient. This does not account, however, for broader regional complexities — such as the pressures that the internal displacement of pastoralists puts on other regions dominated by sedentary farming. It also does not acknowledge the wider global responsibility for increasing drought frequencies — such as the Global North's substantial role as polluter in global climate change. The local focus thus leads to rather short-term, spatially limited, and/or ineffective responses [2].

Going beyond the core critique of resilience, authors in the critical theory tradition find fault with the fact that environmental peacebuilding ignores insights of the Anthropocene literature by not taking the effects of modern human activity on the natural world into account. Instead, the approach shows a propensity to depoliticize climate change, portraying it as a nonpolitical or even as a positive phenomenon [15]. While resilience relies on ideas of 'bouncing back', or in more progressive interpretations 'bouncing forward', Anthropocene thinking suggests that the complexity of the relationality between humanity and nature means that disasters or shocks cannot be viewed as something external to bounce back from [9••], nor can progress and development be viewed as a fixed linear trajectory to be restored ([10••], 172). Both moves — the depoliticization and the dehumanization of environmental degradation — make it difficult to address underlying drivers of insecurity and conflict [17], as they obfuscate capitalism and the Global North's overconsumption as root causes of problems such as climate change. Not least, they leave the environmentally harmful GDP growth mantra underpinning socioeconomic policies in the Global North as well as development interventions into LMICs completely unaddressed.

Alternatives to the impasse of resilience thinking

Where does this brief review of the critical literature on resilience thinking in peacebuilding leave us? Critical perspectives have themselves been criticized for being unable to step outside of the global-capitalist world order they are analyzing or to offer alternatives. Yet, there are already both normative–theoretical and practical–experiential approaches looking beyond seemingly unalterable 'truths' such as the need for eternal economic growth, which can help undo the impasse underpinning resilience thinking and practice [20,41,47•]. Nicoson [34•], for example, proposes a framework for peace through degrowth, taking power structures and intersectionality into account, while Raworth's [40] concept of 'Doughnut Economics' puts ideas of economic circularity center-stage. Practical–experiential alternatives include initiatives that are based on 'dialogic encounters' with Global Southern epistemologies [14], such as Colombian peasant movements around food sovereignty, practices of care, and resistance [3]. While we cannot do justice to them here, we argue that taking more seriously the range of alternative propositions of how to organize societies can help us address the global-capitalist elephant in the room: that while resilience lends agency and new policy direction to international peacebuilding actors, it also helps to legitimize the re-/production of the global-capitalist structures and practices that are the causes for conflict and environmental disasters in the first place. By thus hindering substantive transformation, it ultimately undermines long-term peace prospects.

Data Availability

No data were used for the research described in the article.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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