Taking anecdotal evidence seriously: An alternative view of peace indicators

Roger Mac Ginty*

Introduction

A car journey uninterrupted by a police checkpoint. The ability to visit a shopping centre in an area that you previously avoided. Less sectarian graffiti in the town centre. Catholics and Protestants joining more regularly in joint cultural activities. Tescos and Sainburys opening stores.

These are everyday indicators of change in Northern Ireland after the ceasefires of the mid-1990s. Every individual, family and community has their own indicators of change that are often grounded in their everyday reality of getting the kids to schools, travelling to work, doing the weekly shopping. These indicators are often highly localised and rely on anecdotal observations that may mean a lot to a particular individual or family but may not mean a lot to others. They will depend on what was 'normal' before and how this has changed.

While these everyday indicators of change may seem obvious to people on the ground, they are often overlooked by governments, international organisations, donors, and academics. In other words, there is often a gulf between how people on-the-ground and people in positions of power see peace and change. This article aims to address this gulf and to argue that observations dismissed as 'anecdotal', 'too local' or 'journalistic' are incredibly valid and contain important evidence of how a society is changing (for better or worse).

Top-down indicators

Governments, international organisations and academics have developed very sophisticated tools to measure peace and conflict. For a variety of reasons, these tools tend to be top-down. That is, decisions about what is to be measured and how it is to be measured are usually made by governmental or policy elites who many have limited connection with the communities experiencing the conflict or the transition to peace. These elites are often disdainful of locally-rooted observations and indicators that are embedded in daily life.

There are good and justifiable reasons why governmental, policy and academic elites use top-down indicators. Four are worth discussing. Firstly, top-down indicators are usually rooted in traditional and rigorous research methodologies that offer replicable and comparable data. To put it simply, traditional indicators, such as counting the number of fatalities in a year or measuring economic growth after a peace accord, are relatively easily quantified, and, as such, comparisons can be made year-on-year and across societies. By using accepted methodologies, social scientists and others can verify and understand each other's work. Highly respected datasets, such as the Conflict Data Program maintained by Uppsala University, can be constructed allowing long-term measurements across conflict areas.[1] With an agreed methodology that applies across cases, researchers are able to draw comparative conclusions. In a sense, by having the same methodology (or indicators of peace and conflict) researchers have adopted a 'single currency' with a widely known value.

A second reason for the use of traditional, top-down indicators of peace and conflict lies in value for money. Funders of peace-support programmes are anxious to demonstrate that programmes and projects are delivering what is promised. As a result, many peacebuilding programmes and projects have in-built auditing mechanisms designed to ascertain if deadlines and targets are being met. Given that peace is difficult to define, let alone measure, many of the monitoring and evaluation indicators are restricted to measureable outputs such as the number of civil servants who have undergone equality training or the rate at which grant money is spent. At best, such measures are proxies for peace rather than precise measures of the extent to which a society is becoming more or less peaceful. Yet, these proxy measures are often more easily attainable than other measures that would be costly to collect and rest on vague variables.

A third reason for the dominance of traditional measures of peace and conflict lies in the 'technocratic turn' experienced by the peacebuilding sector over the past two decades. Virtually all sectors of life have experienced increased technocracy, or the dominance of a bureaucratic imperative. The peacebuilding sector, just like business and the public services, have been subject to the introduction of practices, technologies, assumptions and norms which have prioritised bureaucratic methods over previously adopted approaches. This can be seen through the use of common management systems or software (such as Microsoft accounting packages) in many spheres of life. Technocratisation has brought a standardisation of assumptions and practices in relation to conflict-response activities by international organisations, INGOs and others. For example, there has been a significant standardisation of the conflict analysis frameworks used by international organisations, bilateral

donors, INGOs and NGOs to gauge and understand conflicts.[2] It should be made clear that there is nothing wrong with technocracy and bureaucracy *per se*. Problems arise, however, when technocracy becomes unreflexive and is unable to take into account local conditions and expectations. Recent decades have indeed seen this problem with the standardisation of peace measurement indicators across conflicts. The advantage of these standardised measures is that they allow cross-national comparisons. The disadvantage is that standardised indicators of peace or conflict may not be able to pick up on the nuances and peculiarities of each context.

Every society, and every conflict, has its own peculiarities. Conflicts will differ according to types and scale of violence, 'rules' of targeting, economic conditions, values attached to gender or childhood, extent to which the conflict is internationalised, and duration of the conflict etc. It would be difficult to conceive of a measurement or set of indicators that could adequately cover these nuances and still retain a cross-case comparative capability. Those measures that attempt cross-national comparisons are often relatively blunt (such as counting the number of battlefield deaths in a conflict). The chief point is that there are significant economic and cultural pressures on peace-interested donors and recipients to use technocratic methods in their practices and the monitoring and evaluation of those practices. The result has been the standardisation of peace indicators, to the extent that localised indicators are regarded as 'non-standard' and somehow inferior.

A final reason for the dominance of traditional indicators of peace and conflict lies in the political economy that has developed around the monitoring and evaluation industry. While there is a widespread recognition that current indicators are less than perfect, there are significant pressures to maintain things as they are. Part of the reason for this inertia lies in the mutual profits to be made by a close relationship between donors and evaluators. Donors, quite correctly, are anxious that projects are implemented in a timely and effective manner. There is though, a vested interest in a positive evaluation (a negative evaluation would mean poor publicity, public pressure and a cut in funding from government or whatever the funding source). The evaluators – often independent consultants – may also have a vested interest in submitting a positive evaluation; this means further evaluation work. This is not to impugn the monitoring and evaluation sector: it contains many unimpeachable people who work to the highest possible standards. But it is to recognise that there is a very political economy at work that has a vested interest in not rocking the boat, not biting the hand that feeds it, and not introducing new thinking into the indicators and measurements used to gauge peace.

The picture is not all negative though. A number of international organisations, INGOs and NGOs have recognised the problems associated with traditional indicators of peace and conflict, and have been scoping out ways of gaining more accurate information.[3] Indeed, even the US State Department has realised that it can only gain very limited information from the security of a diplomatic compound in a capital city and that it needs to develop ways to access thinking in the streets, villages and homes of countries under duress. Its enhanced data collection technique involves the technique of talking to people, lots of them.[4] At first glance, this does not seem very revolutionary and seems like quite an obvious response to the question: how do we find out what people are really thinking? But it is worth taking a step back and considering how governments, academics, international organisations and INGOs have actually insulated themselves from 'real people'. Whether it is through the armoured diplomatic convoy or the use of formalised statistical methodologies, many organisations that are interested in conflict and the transition towards peace have surprisingly few ways of accessing the situation on the ground.

Of course, many academics, journalists, bloggers and NGO workers do have their feet on the ground and are able to tap into local conversations and experiences. But this is quite difficult to do. It requires energy, persistence, local knowledge and sometimes security risks. Moreover, the information gathered often comes in non-standard formats; in the local vernacular, full of emotion and with the colour and rawness that often characterises societies in conflict. As we have seen, international organisations and others tend to favour information that comes in standardised formats: this is readily understandable by its staff and allows for comparison. But this raises a fundamental question: is information gathered using traditionally bureaucratic formats accurate?

Much of this peace and conflict data may be termed 'precisely wrong'. That is, the information is collected to precise and recognised methodological standards, but it does not always accurately reflect the richness of the situation on the ground. Information is often collected, analysed and disseminated by international organisations and others in ways that the individuals and communities experiencing the violence find difficult to understand. External actors, using top-down methodologies, re-interpret the conflict and represent it in ways that those who are actually living through the conflict find difficult to recognise. The dimensions of the conflict become redefined and rewritten by external actors.[5] For example, many academic studies use econometric or quantitative formula to explain the outbreak or persistence or violent conflict. These studies compress very vivid human experiences (conflict, loss, empathy, revenge etc.) into dry numbers. The advantage of this approach is that the conflict 'story' becomes manageable and amenable to statistical interrogation. The profound disadvantage is that it is meaningless to those who are actually experiencing the conflict.

Patrick Chabal's recent book, *The End of Conceit*, describes as 'conceited' the assumption that western ways of thinking can understand the complexity of societies in the global south. Western ways of thinking and organising information, he argues, may work for Europe and north America, but they are of limited worth when attempting to understand societies that operate according to very different standards and cultures. In a similar way, it is worth considering the utility of the tools that international organisations and academics use to try to understand societies experiencing conflict. Some of these tools do have worth, but many of them struggle to pick up on the nuances and complexities of societies experiencing conflict or war-to-peace transitions. Indeed, it is worth reflecting that many societies have both hidden and public transcripts.[6] The public transcript can be found in official documents and the statements of political and public actors. But behind closed doors or among like-minded peers, especially in a deeply divided society, many people revert to the 'hidden transcript' that may reveal their true opinions. This hidden transcript is often kept hidden for a good reason: it might include sectarian, racist or discriminatory language and reflect thinking that is pro-violence.[7]

The gap between the hidden and public transcript was particularly visible during the Northern Ireland Troubles. In the aftermath of a murder or some other violent act, the television news would invariably include an interview with a local cleric or moderate politician. The interviewee would say – almost as though following a script – 'The people of this area do not want revenge.' This was the public transcript – a message fit for public consumption; safe and sanitised. But was it accurate? Probably not. While many people were indeed against any form of revenge, in many local homes, pubs and workplaces an entirely different transcript was being enacted and went along the lines of: 'I hope they get the bastards who did this'. The popular wish for revenge was often kept hidden, confined to in-group conversations and censored from the media.

The question for this article is: how do we – as researchers, as community leaders, as policymakers - access this hidden transcript? How do we ensure the accuracy of the picture we represent of a society experiencing conflict or transition?

Bottom-up Indicators

It seems obvious that the best way to access an accurate picture of conflict is to simply ask the people who are experiencing the conflict. But that is easier said than done. Two problems are worth mentioning. Firstly, there are issues of access, especially in societies in the midst of violence and transition in which there may be security concerns. Access might be jealously guarded by 'gatekeepers', or institutions and people in the community who want to control the story told about a particular conflict or locality. We can see this at the moment in Northern Ireland where researchers trying to access loyalist or republican communities often attempt access through former prisoners' groups or political parties. These organisations facilitate access for the researcher, but – to a certain extent – they screen the story that is being told by directing the researcher to particular sources. In some cases this steering of researchers is simply about convenience. In other cases, however, it is connected with the preservation of a hegemonic narrative: of the righteousness of a cause and sacrifices made in its name. This gatekeeping of research and information networks helps perpetuate the role of community gatekeepers: they become the 'go to guys' and, in the process, alternative narratives risk being overlooked. The presence of gatekeepers might also discourage community members from speaking freely to outsiders such as researchers. Individuals and families may feel disciplined to 'tow the party line' and perpetuate the favoured narrative rather than break ranks and tell a more authentic story that may deviate from the preferred narrative.

This process of perpetuating a preferred community narrative, rather than expressing one's true experiences, may become a subconscious survival mechanism. It is not the case that individuals and communities engage in a vast conspiracy of silence. Instead, it becomes second nature, an unthinking reflex. The very language that individuals and communities might use to describe their situation might be a language adopted from political and media elites. Writing on poverty research Strier noted that '… the poor's perceptions of their poverty are not entirely independent of the dominant discourses' and that 'the poor's description of their poverty does not always rely on their own experiences'.[8] In a similar way, even people living in conflict areas who have had direct experience of violence may adopt the lexicon and idioms of a political and media elite to describe their own situation. In other words, there is no guarantee that merely by speaking to 'people on the ground' that one will get an authentic picture. Even 'authenticity' is filtered.

A second difficulty with simply speaking to 'people on the ground' is that the responses may not be taken seriously. This gets back to issues of epistemology and methodology that were discussed in the above section. Governments, international and INGOs often want robust, replicable data. Often this data is quantitative in format and allows for comparison, longitudinal tracking and sophisticated statistical interrogation. Locally-sourced information is often aggregated to national level statistics so that it can be compared with information from other states. Information that is explained in the vernacular and highly localised does not easily fit into neat statistical schemata. There is a danger that localised information is dismissed as being journalistic, anecdotal or not statistically reliable. It is true that this material may be anecdotal and statistically unreliable, but it still is capable of having immense validity. Unfortunately many conflict response actors, like international organisations and bilateral donors, do not have the capability to accept and process qualitative micro-data. They may use selected parts of it as an illustrative case study, but generally do not take such information seriously. Moreover, there is also a problem of capacity: if everyone has a story to tell then that is a huge amount of data. To make this data comprehensible, academics and policymakers attempt to reduce it to manageable proportions, often compressing it into 'large n' datasets that are based on multiple responses (e.g., from a questionnaire) but in which the data is quantified and standardised.

Notwithstanding these problems of access and credibility, it seems sensible that we investigate further the notion of alternative and bottom-up indicators of peace and change. After all, conflict and change are experienced locally (as well as nationally and globally) and it is often individuals and local communities that must figure out some sort of modus vivendi that allows for post-conflict development and politics, if not peace and reconciliation. One of the persistent problems with conflict research (indeed, much social science research) is the divide between researchers and the researched. There are multiple reasons for this, one of which is the aim of many researchers to maintain some sort of distance from their research subjects in order to maintain neutrality. Other reasons are connected with the political economy of research whereby often the researchers are located in the global north and the conflicts in the global south. The study of sustainable development has made significant efforts to address this divide between the researcher and the researched. It has pioneered research methods that have sought to recruit the researched as stakeholders into the research project.[9] Rather than being merely 'subjects' of the research (and thus 'subjectified' into respondents, interviewees, and ultimately, data) a number of studies in sustainable development have adopted a bottom-up approach to research. While top-down research imposes a research design on the researched, some sustainable development projects have attempted to take their lead from the communities themselves: asking communities to identify their own priorities in relation to sustainable

development and starting the research from that vantage point. It amounts to what Miller calls a 'new civic epistemology'.[10]

The question for us becomes: can research on peace and conflict learn from this? Can we envisage a way of integrating the researched into research so that it is directed by their needs and aspirations rather than ours? This is a tall order, and there are many factors stacked against such an approach, but it seems worth exploring.

A project taking anecdotal evidence seriously

Along with colleagues from the University of Notre Dame in the United States and the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation in South Africa, the author has secured funding to pilot a study based on anecdotal and bottom-up indicators of peace in five sub-Saharan countries. The study, which is scheduled to begin in the second half of 2013, will take the form of Participatory Action Research and will use NGOs in each of the five target countries to choose localities in which local communities can develop their own indicators of peace and change. The project will operate at the village, neighbourhood or valley level rather than at the country level. The research is funded by the Carnegie Corporation of New York and will focus on communities in areas that have been affected by violence.

The project will have six stages. Firstly, the research team will liaise with NGOs to identify the communities and localities where the project can be run. This will depend on security considerations as a minimum level of security will be required. It will also depend on finding areas where NGOs have strong existing links and the logistical wherewithal to conduct the research. Secondly, the NGOs will elicit indicators of peace and change from individuals and communities. This will be done by way of focus groups, questionnaires, and street conversations. The indicators that people are likely to mention are unlikely to be the same as those identified by international actors such as the World Bank or the United Nations Development Programme. Local people are likely to see the world through a mix of local lenses and national lenses. The former would derive from their individual or family experiences and observations, and the latter from the narratives used by political and media elites. Local indicators could include observations that monitoring and evaluation professionals might regard as anecdotal, or mere journalistic social commentary. Yet, if this is how individuals and communities perceive their own reality, then it is valuable evidence for stability or transition and it would be prudent to take it seriously. Depending on context, local indicators might include:

- The adoption of stray dogs (a sign of extra food and stability)
- Store owners painting their shop fronts (a sign of economic confidence)
- The resumption of traditional wedding rituals (a sign of stability)
- A more regular postal service (a sign of stability and more effective state services)
- An increase in the number of tourists (a sign that outsiders have more confidence in local peace)
- Businesses reinvesting rather than exporting their profits (a sign of confidence in the future)

The third stage will be to edit these indicators so that they can be turned into a comprehensible questionnaire. This questionnaire will then be taken to the wider communities to see if the indicators resonate with others and if people identify change (positive or negative) in line with the indicators. The data will be collected via a specially designed mobile phone app and sent by the NGOs to the research team. Participation in the project will be voluntary and while the NGOs would attempt to get a cross-section of the community to participate in the survey, this would not be done in a way that satisfies methodological purists. The NGOs would be encouraged to include a cross-section of genders, ages and ethnic/religious groups in their surveys, but without accurate baseline data and a more labour-intensive survey, this will not be truly random and representative. The aim is to secure 'good enough' data rather than 'perfect' data. The fourth stage will be to collate the research data before fine-tuning the methodology (stage five) and repeating the exercise (stage six) after one year. The year-on-year change, if any, should reveal if the transition in the society is indicates an improvement or worsening of local conditions.

In a break with the usual practice in top-down orthodox surveys, survey participants will be able to change their indicators (variables) when the survey is run for a second time. This may interfere with the longitudinal comparison of the data, but the identification of new indicators will in itself be revealing. Survey respondents may not anticipate the changes that will occur in society and so we cannot expect them to identify these changes as indicators before they occur.

Given that this pilot study has yet to be conducted, there are a number of unknowns. The first of these is the already discussed role of gatekeepers. All communities have individuals and institutions that wish to influence the message. In some instances, this involves coercion, whether explicit or implicit. The second unknown is the extent to which people will be willing to take part in the research project. Many citizens and communities in conflict-affected areas suffer from 'survey fatigue', and see little benefit in participating in

research projects in which they are merely data and there is no tangible benefit. The project hopes to counteract this by being very upfront about its aims: it is an academic research project that is not linked to the possibility of future resources for the community. However, the project does take pains to be bottom-up and to listen to communities rather than impose research frameworks upon them.

The third unknown relates to the indicators that people will identify. The examples listed above, such as indicators based on stray dogs and painted shop fronts, seem to suggest that people will select indicators based on their everyday, local environment. This may not be the case. People might overlook their local context and instead identify national-level concerns and use a language associated with INGOs, political leaders and the media. There is also a risk that the project indicators of stray dogs and painted shop fronts might romanticise local communities and see them as stripped of political agency. This is certainly not the intention of the research project and it will faithfully report those indicators that communities identify. The research is conscious of the danger of privileging all things local, indigenous, traditional and customary and seeing this as somehow 'pure' and normatively superior to national and international intrusions. Instead, the research project assumes that all societies are hybrids and are based on long-running processes of social negotiation and adaptation. The indicators that individuals and communities identify are likely to reflect this hybridity of language and societal norms.

There is a possibility that the community-based process of choosing the indicators could have a conflict transformation dimension in deeply divided societies. The act of people coming together, either at the intra or inter-group level, and discussing and identifying indicators of transition could be beneficial. It could help illustrate that people are interested in 'bread and butter' prosaic items as well as macro-political constitutional issues. The process of indicator identification might provide space for conversations that don't normally take place, and it might help communities identify shared goals connected with services and economic development. Again, it is prudent to be cautious and to recognise that participants in such discussions would be self-selecting and it is likely that 'zealots' would not take part. Yet, on reflecting on deeply divided societies like Northern Ireland or Lebanon, there is often relatively little space in which communities can think about shared future goals. The bottom-up indicator process may allow for conversations to begin and for community members to realise that they have more in common with 'the other' community than they realised. A principal pillar of conflict transformation (as opposed to conflict resolution or conflict management) is education. In this sense, it refers to the ability of individuals and communities to learn about themselves

(including hard lessons) and about other communities. It may be that the indicator identification process provides space for this self and out-group learning.

Conclusion

The author was involved in a seminar in India in March 2012 that helped reveal the gulf between outside 'experts' and local knowledge. In the morning, various international and Indian academics gave papers on issues connected with governance and conflict resolution. The papers used the latest academic jargon and were situated in academic debates on post-colonialism and critical theory. They spoke on behalf of 'local communities', 'indigenous people', and 'the marginalised'. In the afternoon, representatives from local NGOs and collectives spoke. Their presentations concerned hand looms, cottage industry, the poor prices received for their products, land tenure and the caste system. None of the academic speakers in the morning had mentioned any of these issues. Yet these were the issues that were central to the everyday lives of people on the ground. Academic lenses had managed to overlook these issues completely. The speakers from NGOs and collectives saw the academics, quite rightly, as being irrelevant and out-of-touch. More dangerously, there was a risk that the academics were guilty of misrepresenting the local actors, of retelling their story but in an inaccurate way and using a language that had little resonance with the local actors.

The experience suggests the need to think of epistemologies and methodologies that can be holistic and inclusive. It is too much to expect very radical change from many of the organisations that adopt traditional approaches to peace and conflict indicators. As explained earlier in this article, there are substantial vested interests in perpetuating essentially conservative and top-down approaches to indicators, and much monitoring and evaluation. However, one possible way forward would be to think of ways in which top-down and bottom-up indicators could be combined. Top-down indicators do have advantages, and many international and state-based actors are wedded to this type of indicator. But are there ways in which these actors could take more locally-derived data more seriously? This would enable existing data platforms to benefit from more localised and nuanced information. One way of approaching this would be to envisage supplementary reports to existing top-down indicators. These supplementary reports would be based on bottom-up information, and would have their research design influenced by the communities under study. A side-by-side examination of top-down and bottom-up approaches to research would help ground the top-down research and steer local perceptions towards policy relevance.

Despite the vested interests in current approaches to measuring peace, there is a growing recognition in the INGO world, and among some international organisations and governments, that the current suite of peace and conflict indicators is deficient. A number of organisations are investigating changes to peace and conflict indicators.[12] The G7+ countries, for example, published a draft list of peacebuilding and statebuilding indicators in late 2012.[13] The G7+ is a collection of nineteen states that have been the recipients of international peace-support interventions and can be described as 'fragile'. The draft indicators do show some evidence of moving beyond traditional indicators, and it is interesting that the initiative is coming from countries that have been in receipt of international peace-support assistance. It is unclear, at the time of writing, how many of the draft indicators will make their way into policy.

The key point is that issues of 'positionality' are becoming more prominent in research. Positionality refers to an awareness among researchers of their own biases and stances, and how this influences research outcomes. This should make for better research.

Notes

[1] Themnér and Wallensteen, 2012, pp 565-575

[2] United Nations, 2010; United Nations Development Group, 2004

[3] Copeland, 2009

[4] State Department, undated

[5] Sasso, Bekdache and Hassan, 2010, pp 158-9

[6] Scott, 1992

[7] Finlay, 1999

[8] Strier, 2005, p.345

[9] Kreutzmann, 2001; Krimerman, 2001; Miller, 2005; Parkins, Stedman and Varghese, 2001; Reed, Dougill and Baler, 2008

[10] Miller, 2005, p.406

[11] Lederach, 1995

[12] CRS, 2010; Kawano-Chiu, 2011

[13] OECD, 2012

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