

**Participatory Action-Research in
Post-Conflict Situations:**
The Example of the
War-Torn Societies Project

Agneta M. Johannsen

Abstract

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The War-torn Societies Project (WSP) began in 1994 as an experimental project. It facilitates the active involvement of local, national and international actors in ongoing collective research and dialogue that allows societies emerging from conflict to better understand and respond to the challenges of social, economic and political reconstruction. Headquartered in Geneva and supported by almost thirty donor governments and aid agencies, WSP has been engaged in experimental field-based activities in Eritrea, Guatemala, Mozambique and Somalia over the past six years. WSP contributes to the recovery and strengthening of societies emerging from conflict by bringing together indigenous actors (including former adversaries and victims) to set priorities, build consensus and formulate responses, aided by participatory action-research, and with the help of regular consultation with external aid providers. WSP's carefully defined methodology embodies principles of local capacity and responsibility; wide-ranging participation; better understanding of differing interests and objectives; proper use of relevant data and analysis in integrative decision-making; practical policy impact; and a catalytic rather than a dominating role by international actors. In mid-2000, the experimental pilot phase of the project evolved into the establishment of a successor body. Under the name 'WSP International', the project's work will be further tested in new country projects with new variables in order to draw further lessons.

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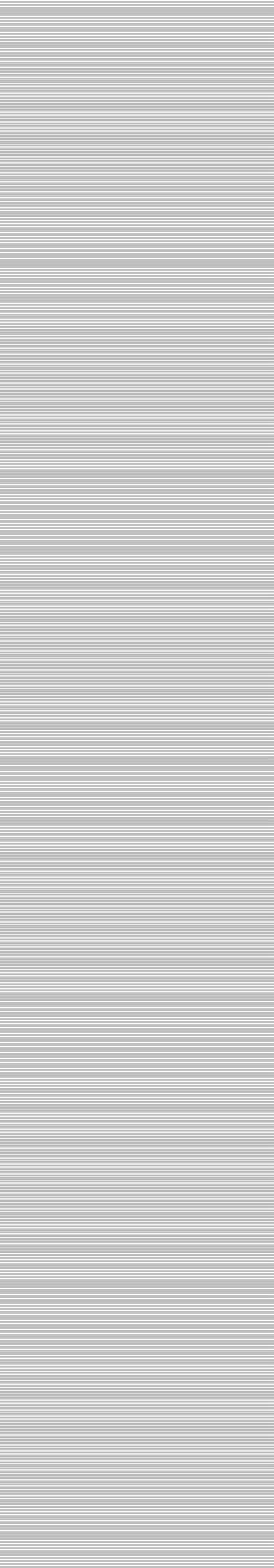
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The War-torn Societies Project (WSP) began in 1994 as an experiment. It was an attempt to find answers to some of the questions that had arisen in the late 1980s and early 1990s as to the role of the international assistance community in rebuilding countries emerging from conflict.

This was a time of disillusionment and disappointment: the heady years following the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War had raised hopes of a new era of peace, a time when efforts could be concentrated on moving the development agenda forward and seeing real improvements in the lives of people all over the world. Instead, the failure of the international community to prevent new outbreaks of war in countries like Cambodia and Angola, the disastrous international intervention in Somalia and the helplessness felt in the face of the tragedy in Rwanda plunged the international community into a period of self-evaluation and instability.

A new name had been coined for the daunting challenge that assistance agencies faced: the "complex emergency". This represented a clear recognition of the reality of action on the ground. No longer were the development agencies the principal actors in aid recipient countries; increasingly, development work was continuing in parallel to peacekeeping and emergency relief activity, particularly due to increasing demands for the support of those displaced from their homes by conflict or famine. The concept of discrete phases of aid - in which relief personnel would leave and peacekeepers move in, eventually to be then in turn replaced by development workers - was no longer valid. Now these three arms of international assistance found themselves working side by side and, inevitably, competing for funds, duplicating efforts, leaving gaps in needed assistance and sometimes treading on each others' toes. Despite calls for co-ordination and strategic direction and genuine attempts to make these a reality, the international community was just not getting it right.

WSP was set up to explore the use of participatory action-research (PAR), first tested in the 1960s and 1970s, in post-conflict settings. WSP's adapted PAR worked through a locally recruited and trained team of researchers, under the leadership of a local/national director, necessarily a 'consensus' figure with research credibility and a reputation for fairness. The methodology involved initiating interactive research and dialogue to bring together the many different actors engaged in rebuilding from both inside and outside a war-torn country. They were to be given a chance to explore their different views, and define traditional and potential new roles and priorities in a neutral space in which vested interests could be laid aside. However, in order to underpin this dialogue with facts, realistic assessment and analysis, WSP teams also carried out collective research on the topics being discussed.

Through this 'participatory action-research', a better understanding of the respective actors, their programmes and agendas was to be achieved, and ultimately enable a better alignment of external assistance with local priorities. To ensure that those participating took ownership of the process and felt responsible for it, topics to be addressed were decided upon collectively. As the research fed objective ideas into the dialogue process, the dialogue would then raise more questions for the research. In this way the whole process would be characterised by action, participation and interactivity.

Box 1: Participatory Action-Research

Participatory Action-Research (PAR) was developed in order to render academic research more applicable to the needs of those being studied, and encourage them to actively participate in the research design, methodology and projected outcome. PAR was first experimented with in small, underprivileged communities in Latin America, Asia and Africa in the context of the political liberation movements of the late Sixties.

Using this methodology and general approach, WSP aims to produce both a body of research knowledge on priorities for a country beginning the post-conflict rebuilding task, and a process of consensus-building that addresses the central issue facing post-conflict societies: rebuilding relationships and trust. It also helps external assistance actors to identify how their projects and programmes might best take account of locally agreed priorities, and facilitates their understanding of the rebuilding needs of a country and the resources available locally to address them.

This interactive research methodology - and the neutral forum/local ownership approach that allowed it to work in situations in which internal discord and internal/external disagreement often continued to simmer - was piloted between 1994 and 1998 in four countries with very different post-conflict profiles and in very different stages when WSP became operational there: Eritrea, Mozambique, Guatemala and Northeast Somalia (Puntland). Eritrea had emerged from a prolonged civil war with a broadly supported government that accepted external aid only on its own terms. In Mozambique an externally imposed ceasefire had been followed by an influx of external aid and growing concerns about aid dependency. The devastating civil war in Guatemala had run out of steam and the details of a peace agreement were being negotiated by the government and guerrillas. And Northeast Somalia was relatively stable, with first attempts being made to establish governance structures in one corner of this 'failed state'.

In each case, WSP initiated processes that led to a series of results in each country as well as to lessons for the international community. At the end of the four-year pilot project, these results were evaluated and a series of documents published (see Further Reading section below for details of WSP publications). As the pilot phase came to a close, the project's donors, participants and observers signalled clearly that, in their opinion, WSP's methodology and approach provided an effective tool for both national and international participants in post-conflict rebuilding.

In 1999, therefore, a Transition Programme was set up, with a mandate to analyse lessons and conclusions from the pilot phase, as well as to establish a successor body that would build upon its work. The WSP Somali Programme extended its work to Northwest Somalia, Somaliland, and this particularly complex component of the project continued to feed lessons and new experiences into the ongoing analysis. By mid-2000, the transitional phase had been completed and concrete support for a successor body obtained.

Under the name 'WSP International', the project's work will be further tested in new country projects, with new variables and additional lessons. Which new countries WSP will take on is not yet clear, but exploratory activities are advancing in the Great Lakes area, Central Asia, the former Yugoslavia and Haiti. These missions will determine whether the political space for WSP involvement in these areas indeed exists and whether a concrete WSP project is therefore feasible.

II. How WSP Works: The Methodology

II.1 The WSP Methodology Functions on Several Different Levels Simultaneously

Research and Analysis: Through wide-ranging consultation with members of the post-conflict society, local WSP researchers identify urgent priorities for collective research and collective action. The project's participatory approach makes maximum use of available expertise and experience among both internal and external actors in finding ways to ultimately align external assistance with internal priorities.

Peacebuilding/Conflict Prevention: WSP brings together key actors from across the political and social spectrum and offers them an informal, relatively private space in which to discuss major public policy issues. These actors are self-selected in each country, but normally comprise representatives of the government, the opposition, the trade unions, churches, vocational associations, interest groups, members from the business community and elders: in short, whoever may have an

important role to play in the country. In addition, international actors with programmes in the country are also invited to take part in the action-research exercise. While researching and debating policy issues, consensus is being formed. In this sense, WSP has complementary value to conventional third-party mediation techniques.

Good Governance: By ensuring the participation of a broad cross-section of society in the articulation of political, economic and social priorities and in subsequent discussions on related policy issues, the 'bottom-up' approach of WSP encourages an inclusive, democratic approach to problem solving without directly challenging established power relations.

Review and Co-ordination: WSP offers donors and aid agencies an alternate window through which to evaluate the impact and acceptance of their programmes, as well as the extent to which their programmes correspond to local priorities.

II.2 The Four Main Phases of WSP Activities

1. Preparatory Phase

Intensive, careful preparation is essential to the success of the WSP approach. During the preparatory phase, the Project accomplishes the following (not necessarily in this order):

- Rapid assessment of the socio-political situation, in order to establish suitability of the country (or region) for WSP research activity
- Consultations with national or local authorities in order to explain the WSP approach and to obtain official agreement for the project to begin
- Identification of an overall director or co-ordinator, a 'consensus' figure, acceptable to the major political/social groups. As far as possible, candidates should be 'vetted' by various key actors before a final decision is taken.
- Establishment of an informal 'core group' of actors who understand and promote the project's aims and methodology
- Development of project document(s)
- Resource mobilization
- Instalment of research infrastructure
- Recruitment of additional members of the research team (as required)

2. Preliminary Research Phase

The preliminary research phase involves:

Preparation of Notes: Assembled by WSP researchers, these Notes are the product of extensive consultations with a broad range of internal and external actors, together with basic documentary research, and should reflect main themes pertaining to the country's political, social and economic reconstruction. In addition to their documentary value, these notes have proved to be highly valuable consensus-building tools.

Formation of Project Groups: Through the consultative process, the research team assembles a representative group of 20-30 members from the pool of major internal and external actors in the rebuilding process. This Project Group gives broad, overall direction to the research programme, and also confers legitimacy upon the exercise.

Identification of Entry Points: On the basis of the Notes, the Project Group identifies 3-5 key issues for further, in-depth research. These Entry Points are best defined as "obstacles to recovery", when common understanding and collective action are viewed as a prerequisite to progress.

3. Main Research Phase

During the main research phase, the Project conducts in-depth, participatory research into each of the Entry Points identified in the preliminary research phase. Principal elements of the main research phase include:

Working Groups: For each Entry Point, Working Groups are formed at a more technical level by those actors most directly engaged in the respective Entry Points, and are moderated by a WSP researcher. Membership in the Working Group derives mainly from, but is not limited to the Project Group. The Working Group functions as a kind of 'steering committee' for the duration of the main research phase.

In-depth Research: Each Working Group breaks down its chosen Entry Point into precise research questions for action by the WSP research team. Working Group members are invited to place their own experience and expertise (including relevant reports, data and other documentation) at the disposal of the collective research effort, in order to avoid waste and duplication. The Working Groups guide the research activity throughout the main research phase and may redirect the research into particular areas of strategic or operational relevance, in response to changing circumstances.

Resource People: In addition to core WSP research staff, who receive training in the project's participatory methodology, certain Entry Points or research questions may require more specialised expert attention. WSP has the capacity to engage additional experts (or 'resource people') as appropriate, in order that the Working Groups benefit from the best advice available locally. Some resource people may be needed for only short periods, while others may be engaged throughout the main research phase.

Visions Component: Space is provided for the identification, recording and presentation of the visions of the society being rebuilt. Through the use of primary field research, focus groups, audio-visual technology, the arts and media raw material for presentation to the Working Groups is generated. In this way, WSP aims to extend the representative nature of the exercise to social groups who might otherwise be excluded, and to offer them a voice in the medium they prefer.

Policy Options: Towards the end of the main research phase, the Working Groups are invited to develop common policy options on the basis of their research. The degree to which this can take place varies according to the quality and comprehensiveness of the research, the commitment of Working Group members and the sensitivities of local or national authorities.

Research Products: The information and analysis produced by each Working Group is compiled, edited and published by WSP as a formal research product.

4. Analysis and Evaluation

When the main research phase is completed, members of the Working Groups and the Project Group analyse the WSP process to evaluate its contribution - positive or negative - to their own efforts towards post-war reconstruction.

The research findings for each Entry Point are examined to ascertain the extent to which the project has contributed to the resolution of problems, as well as the degree to which the project enriched and enlightened the practical and analytical work of the various actors. It is also important to determine whether the research has been adequate or whether additional investigation on insufficiently researched areas is still needed. Above all, the relevance of the policy recommendations are carefully assessed.

At its final meeting, the Project Group selects and proposes those Policy Options that are supported by firm rationale as well as by the

consensus of the group, recommendations which, with sufficient analytical support, fit into a medium and long-term perspective. The Group's final task is to determine the future of this interactive, participatory, action-oriented and problem-solving process, and possibly to establish the operational and financial modalities for its continuation. The analysis, findings, recommendations and proposals are all documented in a final report.

Two further evaluations are then carried out: an internal evaluation that gathers the views of all Project Group participants and constitutes a self-reflective analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the programme, and an external evaluation that is carried out by an independent expert focusing particularly on the impact the programme had both locally and internationally.

While this is the model that was implemented in each of the pilots between 1994 and 1998, the specific realities of each country situation moulded the overall process into distinctly different shapes. In hindsight, it can be said that in no one country was the project implemented 100 per cent as it had been designed. Operational realities caused shifts in time frames and personnel; the momentum in each country and priorities superimposed by the national participants caused the shape of WSP to change over time. Given the participatory nature of the project, this result had been anticipated. Nevertheless, taken as a single global experiment, we can safely say that all the elements of the methodology were tried.

III. How WSP Works: The Practice

How did WSP fare with this methodology? Both research and action benefited from their close relationship. As research fed objective ideas into the dialogue process, the dialogue in turn raised more questions for the research. In this way, resulting actions became further considered and better informed, and research was more useful and applicable to real-life situations. The following example gives a taste of how WSP's action-research process worked in practice:

Case Study: Consensus-building through WSP's approach and methodology in Mozambique - The Working Group on the Reintegration of Demobilized Soldiers

'[his] Working Group included policy makers, Mozambican and external project personnel and demobilized combatants themselves - the target group of the policies and programmes. They were represented by the leaders of the veterans' organisation, AMODEG.

The approximately 95,000 combatants demobilized in Mozambique were mostly men with few marketable skills and little experience in the civil economy. In a shattered post-war economy, with more than 2 million returning refugees and displaced persons to be settled, and given pervasive poverty in both urban and rural areas, their integration posed major problems. A large number of projects had been initiated by the international community between 1992 and 1995, and one of the aims of the research undertaken was to assess how much had actually been accomplished, where there were gaps and the extent to which remaining problems could be solved in order to deter possible conflict.

AMODEG argued forcefully that the accumulated efforts to reintegrate demobilized soldiers had accomplished little. At the other extreme, the government representative from the Ministry of Labour considered that the integration phase had been satisfactorily completed. Participants from NGOs and others who had worked in reintegration programmes questioned the extent to which AMODEG's strong positions accurately reflected the situation and priorities of former combatants, but acknowledged that major problems did still persist in the reintegration process. The wide gaps in opinions among Working Group participants made consensus on research priorities difficult and the researcher himself was largely left to decide the direction the research would take, on the basis of what he saw as the major questions being debated.

Contrary to widespread expectations, especially among external actors, the research indicated that the majority of demobilized combatants had been able to return to their home communities and re-enter family and community circles. This was particularly true in rural areas; in urban communities, particularly in Maputo and Beira, unemployment, lack of marketable skills and of social support for those settling in new areas rather than returning home continued to raise concerns.

Reconciliation mechanisms were especially effective in rural areas, where former combatants frequently underwent painful public rituals intended to purge them of guilt for the violent acts they had committed and the suffering they had caused. Once purged, they were accepted into their former communities. Nevertheless, the fact that demobilized combatants had access to resources that other community members did not have, and that some sought to relocate to new areas, created tension. Moreover, the civilian population in general distrusted the former combatants whom they accused of any crime committed in the area and whom they refused to hire on the grounds that they lacked work discipline. In one community, the researcher discovered that the former combatants had formed vigilante committees to apprehend law-breakers

so that the community would no longer assume the demobilized soldiers to be guilty.

The research found that social integration had been more successful than economic integration: benefits and credits were short-term and did not compensate for the lack of land, employment opportunities and skills. Training programmes initiated by international agencies did not necessarily match market opportunities for skills, and were often uncoordinated and unrelated to project needs.

In short, the results vindicated neither the claims of AMODEG nor the view of the government, but did establish the outstanding problems - economic, moral and ethical - yet to be resolved. The dialogue that ensued improved and became more dynamic once the results were presented. In particular, both AMODEG and the Ministry of Labour representative softened their positions, found common ground for their efforts and acknowledged that dialogue should be maintained.' (WSP in Mozambique 1998, p. 21)

IV. The Achievements of WSP

In general, achievements of WSP's action-research processes in the four pilot cases were of two kinds, each valuable and important in their own right. On the one hand, the interactive research process further developed understanding of specific topics, such as the reintegration of ex-combatants or the rebuilding of administrative and political structures, as well as general questions related to rebuilding war-torn societies and external assistance. Eventually, these lessons resulted in research publications that filled much-lamented gaps in knowledge and understanding of the situation in the four post-conflict situations concerned (see Country volumes in Further Reading section below).

On the other hand, the processes of consultation and analysis, essentially political in nature, also contributed to encouraging dialogue and relationship-building among the key actors. Indeed, they allowed conflicting approaches and views to be shared, discussed and moderated in a neutral forum in which all actors were regarded as equal and vested interests could be left at the door. In each case, the research process eventually led to consensus recommendations for policy and programme action. The above-mentioned research reports provided these recommendations on each sector of investigation in their conclusions.

The questions as to how these recommendations were then followed up, and what the overall impact of the WSP programme has been, are more difficult to evaluate. In fact, part of the answer relates to

how the WSP processes can be made sustainable, a topic that is further addressed below (Section 6). One indicator of achieved impact, however, might be the fact that many groups quite unexpectedly made use of both the WSP process and the products it generated.

Two interesting examples of how the products are utilised come from Northeast Somalia (Puntland):

1. Gaalkacyo Women's Development Centre: The centre's director aims to use the WSP gender paper as a training resource. For example, each week a section of the paper will be read and analysed by students. They will then be asked to observe how each issue operates within the society and how it impacts women. They will also be required to discuss and provide comments and opinions.
2. Reading Clubs using WSP documents as their prime reading material are being formed in several main towns in Puntland, with funds already collected from a number of community members.

Further examples of how the methodology has been used come from Guatemala:

3. An NGO adapted and applied the methodology to the issue of local governance, organising a multi-sectoral forum for defining public policies in the municipality of Sololá.
4. A group of organisations from within civil society (Coordinadora vamos por el cambio) has proposed to the presidential candidates the launch of WSP-inspired participatory action-research fora, with the participation of government representatives, academic institutions and NGO's, for defining public policies in the areas of women rights, youth and indigenous rights.
5. An indigenous NGO (Naleb) is proposing the use of WSP methodology in the final stage of encompassing efforts to establish inter-ethnic consensus on different aspects of the multicultural composition of the state.
6. The Latin-American Faculty of Social Sciences (FLACSO) Sede Guatemala and the Guatemalan Institute for Peace and Development (GIPD) are, together with WSP-TP, jointly applying the WSP methodology to promote a multi-sectoral policy research effort on the issue of civil-military relations and the establishment of a Security Policy (Política de Seguridad) for the State.

A third kind of result was evident in the particular benefits gained by the international participants in the project. In fact, WSP's initial assumption that the effectiveness of the international community in providing assistance to war-torn societies had to improve dramatically and, specifically, needed to be much better aligned with local priorities, was confirmed in practice. The WSP experience showed that development assistance can - instead of merely paying lip service - in fact adhere to and implement the fundamental principle of local participation and national ownership, which has particular importance in societies emerging from war.

Box 2: Tools for the International Community

Senior managers from bilateral and multilateral agencies explored how these lessons could practically be taken forward in agencies providing assistance to war-torn countries in a workshop held in Bossey, near Geneva, in June 1998. On the basis of WSP's and the participants' experience, a statement on improving external assistance to war-torn societies was prepared, and five areas of crucial importance identified:

- an in-depth analysis of the local situation,
- staff quality and competence,
- adaptability and flexibility on the part of the assisting organisation(s),
- measures of success which take proper account of the distinctiveness of war-torn and conflict societies, and
- adherence to the principles of local participation and ownership in the relationship between assistance actors and recipients (Bossey statement 1998 and "Improving external assistance to war-torn societies" 1998).

On the basis of explorations of these cross-cutting challenges, the following concrete operational steps were formulated for agencies delivering assistance to war-torn societies:

1. *Improve your understanding of the local reality and context through analysis and research carried out in a variety of ways: conduct mapping exercises; create opportunities for contact with a large variety of local, national and international interlocutors; systematically collect information on perceptions and viewpoints, ideally through a local, neutral 'third party'; in short, listen and learn. This exercise must be on-going and continuous, and ideally should not be carried out by each bilateral or multilateral actor on its own, but rather as a common exercise.*

This 'listen and learn' phase is crucial, since perceptions of a crisis often differ, and actors and their agendas might not be altogether transparent. The general lesson is that a humanitarian crisis can be seen not just as an isolated emergency, but also in systemic terms as a low point or breakdown of the continuing history of a people. The response mechanisms to this situation will be very different and depend largely on whether or not the perception of a crisis is that of an emergency. Also, diverse kinds of players on the scene often compete with one another and produce results that contradict or cancel each other out. In particular, in-depth understanding is required of how various actors positively or negatively affect the 'victims' and the capacity of vulnerable groups to respond themselves to crisis situations before the international community intervenes.

The implications of this, however, are fairly far-reaching. Pursuing this kind of analysis and research requires an almost continuous field presence, specially trained staff and contacts to experts and specialists.

2. *Periodically collate the information gathered into a 'collective assessment of the situation' - a balance sheet that indicates the key issues the country faces in the coming months - and use this assessment as a consensus-building tool among all key actors.*

This collective assessment is a useful basis for further action, because first it summarises key issues and helps prioritise work programmes, and secondly it portrays a collective view. Work programmes based on this assessment will therefore run less of a risk of later veto or cancellation. The implications of this are that a neutral structure must be created on the ground and qualified staff must be engaged to lead, moderate and animate such periodic and collective stocktaking.

3. *Encourage formal and informal mechanisms for consultation and participation. Through these mechanisms, priorities and work programmes will be further discussed, researched and analysed, and a larger picture will emerge as to how individual programmes might strengthen and build on each other. This needs to be done without weakening emerging formal structures and authorities.*

Consultation and participation will provide for more effective results. The scale and urgency of the challenges of rebuilding should not lead to a setting aside of basic principles of development cooperation such as participation, self-reliance and local or national ownership. On the contrary, the scale and urgency of rebuilding are reasons for giving them special attention.

Participatory mechanisms will also promote a gradual shift from externally imposed solutions to internally supported and sustained answers to crisis situations. While consultation and participation might be the more cumbersome way of achieving resolution, it is important to recognise that local, private and internal actors are generally the main forces of rebuilding.

It may not be easy, however, for external actors to discover positive local initiatives and projects with which alliances can be formed or which could serve as a basis for a post-conflict rebuilding strategy. Nor is it easy to associate local actors with national policy-making processes in the absence of well-functioning structures of political representation. Local players are often politically or operationally weak, and this unfortunately diminishes their credibility.

Also, it might not always be appropriate to work directly 'with the people', bypassing local elites (or the state), who, instead, need to be strengthened in their ability to represent the vision of the people, in order to focus aspirations and motivate the necessary social transformations. Still, consultation and participation mechanisms help in the selection of partners and in the definition of a holistic vision for rebuilding. (The implications for doing so are the same as mentioned under point 2 above.)

4. *Encourage the development of local capacities and opportunities for training, beginning with the provision of 'breathing space for reflection' for local actors and the strengthening of a local, independent analytical and research capacity.*

As international assistance, by definition, is not sustainable in the long run, it is very important to provide ample opportunity for local groups to take responsibility for putting together effective programmes themselves. Even though international assistance is provided in the short term, it is essential to consider the impact that these assistance policies might have on local capacities. This effect is often more significant than the immediate objectives such policies or programmes pursue.

Any serious commitment to building local capacity requires, of course, the political will to leave leadership to local actors. Unfortunately, many international actors find this hard to put into practice.

5. *Always be prepared to adapt your own programme in light of the emerging collective priorities. This might, for example, include substantive amendments to the programme as well as structural changes in the relationship between headquarters and field level.*

Policies worked out in detail in the headquarters of international agencies might be well intended but are often ineffective, because they are not in line with local realities. To counter this, international policies require programmatic and budgetary flexibility, and increased delegation of authority to the field level.

6. *Re-define periodically the form and locus of external assistance to crisis situations so that it supports, reinforces and protects local coping mechanisms.*

Only if this re-definition takes place periodically will external assistance be effective. However, international assistance agencies need to be ready to accept the resulting revisions of their programmes.

7. *Organise periodically joint assessments of problems, resources and priorities led by internal actors in order to sustain the process.*
8. *Review and re-assess programmes systematically, in view of their impact on relationships, the development of trust, dignity and confidence, and their wider impact on conflict and peace.*

Assistance programmes and activities inevitably affect (even if indirectly) the fragile relationships among people, between people and institutions and between people and the government. Assistance programmes can unwittingly fuel tensions or have a reconciliatory effect. These relationships gain in importance when we consider that the central and primary challenge in rebuilding war-torn societies is intrinsically linked to mending relations and restoring dignity, trust and faith. If people do not trust each other, the government and the rebuilding process in general, the best rebuilding strategies are likely to fail.

Implications for assistance agencies are the development of new criteria for evaluation and assessment, and the engagement of specially trained and qualified staff. (Further elaboration of how new criteria and the practice of evaluation can be developed is proposed in WSP-TP: Measuring Results of Assistance Programmes to War-torn Societies.)

While WSP activities did provide important results, certain challenges and dilemmas faced by WSP have led to periodic re-definitions and improvements of the WSP methodology and approach. Three critical areas of reflection are of particular interest:

1. *WSP's neutrality*

One of the most important elements of WSP's positive achievements has been the preservation of a neutral space in these fragile post-conflict situations, which allows for the vital development of trust among the WSP participants. Indeed, WSP has managed to preserve this space, despite attempts to dominate it by one or the other actor. WSP never came to be seen as the extended or hidden hand of any one organisation or country.

However, WSP is not neutral itself - it cannot be, as it stands for certain values and beliefs that are expressed through its methodology and approach. As one of our external evaluators (Menkhaus 2000) has recently pointed out: 'The challenge for WSP, and by extension for all aid projects, is to balance the conviction that "solutions cannot be imported" with a commitment to certain principles and practices - such as "inclusion, participation and consultation" - which they believe are universal.' In fact, while in its mode of operating WSP perceives itself as a neutral venue for others to come together and express their viewpoints, the outcome of this process is likely to be intensely political in nature, and could open the door to changes in the political status quo. In the opinion of the evaluator above, '[t]he first step in this balancing act may be to recognize this tension explicitly in project documents rather than to gloss over it'. A point well taken, but WSP will in the future take important steps beyond such overt recognition in order to clarify more explicitly the values it hopes to implicitly bring to the country.

2. *Missed opportunities for international involvement in WSP country programmes*

A second criticism levelled at WSP relates to the opportunities it has missed in not bringing the international community more closely into the Project and Working Group dialogue process. In Somalia, for example, it had been anticipated that, given the widespread interest in learning from past mistakes and the large number of actors still working on Somali programmes out of Nairobi, representation from the international community could be quite constructive. Three years into the programme, it is not.

The obvious question to ask is: why? One explanation was that because most of the major players in international assistance to Somalia work out of Nairobi, the geographical distance was simply too great for

these middle-level representatives to attend WSP meetings in Somalia. Instead, either no or only more junior representatives placed in situ attended, and these were often hampered by the additional difficulty that they felt obligated to speak not only on behalf of the international agency they were representing, but also as Somalis on Somali affairs.

But yet another potential 'gap' may have been at play: the one that exists between the head office of most United Nations agencies in either New York or Geneva and the country offices in Nairobi. Even if the policy-makers at the central level were fully committed to WSP and to the exploration of its full potential, this might not have been effectively transmitted to the field operational level.

While Somalia might be a special case, given the presence of most of the international community outside of the country, the involvement of international representatives in other WSP projects, such as Guatemala, was also cautious. This reticence was a disappointment to WSP management and frustrating to the extent that it underlined the policy/implementation gap between central and field levels that is so often at the core of unsuccessful international engagement.

The question remains whether WSP could have been more vigilant in bringing the international community at the field level more fully into the WSP process. Reaching out to international actors early and often and appealing to individuals to overcome institutional rivalries or fears might be time-consuming and labour-intensive, but it is likely to be helpful and necessary. Also, methodological adaptations could be envisaged that provide for a staggered involvement in Project and Working Groups allowing the international community to first associate with the local members only tentatively and informally and later engage in a more in-depth manner.

3. How to move from talking to doing

WSP's third perceived shortcoming relates to the fact that the projects left behind have rarely been operational. The question has been raised as to how WSP could move from 'talking to doing' or from 'research to action'. Whereas WSP's main focus is on providing opportunities for priority-setting, strategic planning and policy development, some critics have rightly pointed out that such efforts can only make sense if they are then followed up by operational practice. WSP's lifespan in each country is too short, however, for any serious expectation of operational projects materializing within that timeframe. However, successor initiatives should be formed and charged with developing such proposals. Furthermore, WSP will globally devote efforts to maximize the impact of WSP's lessons on those who might later follow suit and respond to proposals for operational implementation.

Handing over is not all that easy. All international agencies that take seriously the commitment of building local capacity are faced with the fundamental question of how to withdraw gracefully while leaving something behind that will have made the original assistance worth its while. Establishing successor arrangements is important if local actors are not to fall into the same dependency trap that has so often frustrated the relationship between donors and aid recipients.

WSP gained some insights into how to do this effectively when it concluded its work in three of its four pilot projects. In the first two, Eritrea and Mozambique, the attempt was made to set up fully-fledged successor institutions, and preparatory work was undertaken for the creation of independent research centres. Statutes for the institutions were developed with the active participation of a large number of key actors in the country, and donors promised financial support.

In both cases, however, the institutionalisation of what had previously been an externally initiated project proved to be too ambitious. In Eritrea, the government believed that the lessons of WSP research had already been sufficiently taken on board in government structures, and fairly late in the negotiations the creation of the centre was indefinitely postponed. In Mozambique, the final approval for the creation of the Mozambican Centre for the Study of Democracy and Development from the Ministry of Justice came only a year and a half after the end of the WSP project. Once the approval was finally obtained, new momentum had to be regained first in order to make the centre truly operational. This phase is not yet over.

In Guatemala, with the lessons of Eritrea and Mozambique already in mind, successor 'arrangements', rather than a new institution, were put in place. For example, plans were developed to use the WSP methodology in the work of local, regional and national development councils, which had been largely inactive. Other attempts to continue with the WSP methodology were carried out by a local NGO, which (as mentioned in Section 4, above) proposed to use the WSP methodology for reaching inter-ethnic consensus on different aspects of the multicultural composition of the state (see section 4, Guatemala!). These initiatives were to be connected and supported by a loose network. For one reason or another, however, none of these attempts resulted in sustained activity. Only more recently, and with the vital support of former WSP staff in Guatemala, has a new WSP-inspired project on the role of the military in rebuilding begun. This project has already shown interesting results, and is continuing.

Still, the general lesson is clear: while institutionalisation appeared to have been too ambitious, loose networking did not manage to provide the appropriate structural follow-up either.

Therefore, a different approach was tried in Northwest Somalia (Somaliland): Here WSP established a national research institution, the Somaliland Centre for Peace and Development (SCPD), that *ab initio* applied the WSP approach and methodology. This variation on the original approach not only responded to the fact that very few national institutions were available locally that could readily continue a WSP-type programme, but also attempted to create a structure right from the start to which emotional and legal ties could be attached and later built upon. The hope was that, due to a sense of ownership and the immediate structural insertion into the local context, WSP would be greatly facilitated in eventually withdrawing from Somaliland. As of mid-2000, the work in Somaliland is on-going.

Two lessons of general interest can be drawn from these experiences:

First, it is more important to continue a process of local engagement than it is to institutionalise a project. Second, externally-initiated assistance should be seen as a platform from which to consolidate and continue local work, rather than as a finite project in itself.

If indeed it is the process and the continuation of activities that are important, rather than the creation of an institution, then the question arises as to whether - and, if so, in what form - external actors can still play a useful and nurturing role after they have already withdrawn the bulk of their assistance.

VII. Networking as Support

One response might be the creation of a global network comprising the assistance actor, projects currently supported by this actor and successor initiatives. The idea of networks is a common one that has gained much currency in recent years as group work, team building and liaison have become important concepts in organisational development. However, networks are only effective if the result of the invested energy is greater than the sum of the energy of its parts, or, in other words, only if each participant in the network feels that his or her membership is worth the effort.

In practical terms, the purpose of a network of external agencies, current recipient projects and successor initiatives is to broaden, improve and structure communication among its members, thus adding value and a two-way perspective to the current communication

flow, assuming, of course, participants want to be in touch with each other.

Other obvious objectives are the cross-fertilisation of and continued learning between the various initiatives, the construction of internal institutional support mechanisms and the facilitation of the identification of synergies. Most importantly, a network should provide the 'soft' structure which allows all members to become true partners in jointly addressing outstanding development problems. While preconceived notions about who is in charge may hinder mutual learning between donor and recipient during the phase of providing assistance, a network established after substantial withdrawal of the assisting agency, by definition, provides for equality among its members: here, responsibilities and duties are shared.

In addition, such a network may provide an opportunity for a supporting organisation to monitor the effects and usefulness of its own programme and to evaluate its continued impact after longer periods of formal disengagement.

Outputs may be meetings, training exercises, private communication exchanges and published newsletters, as well as concrete recommendations to the sponsoring organisation as to how its support could be of optimum quality and effectiveness.

None of the above might, in itself, sound entirely new. In practical terms, a network might indeed not offer any novel results. However, what is suggested here is innovative in that the establishment of networks between and among societies engaged in post-conflict rebuilding, with only minimal 'partnership support' from external actors, has not yet been considered as a possible means of assistance to war-torn societies. Even if both external and internal actors agree on working together in principle in order to pursue the same goals, these goals are all too often not reached because the format of engagement fails to enable a true partnership.

WSP is currently experimenting with setting up such a network. A first meeting of WSP successor initiatives, on-going country projects and the global project management is planned for mid-2000. It is premature to speculate about the results of this meeting, but the hope is that perhaps a global WSP network might experiment with some of the issues of 'partnership support' given above.

What is clear, however, from WSP's work since 1994 - its pilot country projects in Eritrea, Mozambique, Guatemala and Puntland, the central collective lessons-learned exercise and the exploration of results and their future application, new activities in Somaliland, and preparations for novel projects in new areas and with new variables - is

that the oft-cited concepts of local ownership, capacity building, partnership and respect for the dignity and rights of beneficiary countries can be made a reality. And this reality has crucial implications for the way in which external assistance actors plan and deliver assistance in post-conflict situations.

Reference and Further Reading

Four country-specific reports detail WSP's experience in each country:

WSP in Eritrea. 1998. WSP.

WSP in Guatemala. 1998. WSP.

WSP in Mozambique. 1998. WSP.

WSP in Somalia. 1998. WSP.

Further publications connected with the initial stages of WSP:

Rebuilding after war. 1999. WSP. - a presentation of the main lessons drawn from the pilot phase

WSP in practice. 1999. WSP. - an operational handbook focusing on the field methodology and experience

WSP: the first four years. 1999. WSP. - an overview analysis which explores the global operation and impact of the project

Country volumes comprising the research results from each working group are currently available as follows:

From Conflict to Dialogue: The WSP Guatemala Way. 1999. WSP & FLACSO (Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales Sede Guatemala). Also available in Spanish.

Post-Conflict Eritrea: Prospects for Reconstruction and Development. 1999. WSP & Red Sea Press.

The Mozambican and Northeast Somalia (Puntland) volumes will become available in summer 2000.

Other:

Improving external assistance to war-torn societies: practical recommendations for managers of multilateral and bilateral aid agencies. 1998. mimeo., WSP.

Improving external assistance to war-torn societies: the Bossey statement. 1998. mimeo., WSP.

Measuring Results of Assistance Programmes to War-torn Societies. 1999. mimeo., WSP.

Menkhaus, K. 2000. *Evaluation of the War-torn Societies Project in Puntland, Somalia.* mimeo., WSP.

War-torn Societies Project
<http://www.unrisd.org/wsp/index.htm>