ACUNS Summer Workshop 2011: Afterthoughts from Participants

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During seven summer days in July 2011, twenty one professionals from academia, international think tanks, research institutions and the United Nations system gathered in Vail, Colorado (US) – right at the foothills of stunning Rocky Mountains – to discuss and examine the role of the international community in peacebuilding and statebuilding in deeply divided societies. We came from all around the world: Afghanistan, Austria, Brazil, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Canada, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Finland, France, Kazakhstan, Germany, Mexico, Sweden, and the United States of America. While diverse in terms of nationalities as well as professional and academic backgrounds – representing economics, law, psychology, and political science – we all shared a keen interest in how “factors of identity, especially ethnicity and religion, affect the success of peacebuilding and the prospects for statebuilding after war.” This was the focus of the Summer Workshop 2011 organized by the Academic Council on the United Nations System (ACUNS) to which we had all applied.

At the conclusion of the Summer Workshop we also shared another commonality: A strong sense of privilege and gratitude to have benefited from each others’ experiences, views and critical thinking on this topic under the excellent co-directorship of Dr. Edgar Alistair (Executive Director, ACUNS, Wilfrid Laurier University) and Prof. Timothy Sisk (Joseph Korbel School of International Studies, University of Denver). With a view to inform and encourage others to apply as well as to support the ACUNS Secretariat in its admirable efforts to ensure continuity and high quality of these Summer Workshops, we have collected the afterthoughts of participants and highlighted the main themes and challenges related to peace- and statebuilding. We asked participants three questions: 1) Why did you apply to the ACUNS/ASIL Summer Workshop 2011? 2) How has your participation made a difference in your work? 3) Would you recommend the summer workshop series to your colleagues? It is our hope that the present collective reflection on this unique programme, dedicated to free exchange and discussion on how to advance the ideals, goals and purposes of the United Nations, will contribute to securing a sustainable future for ACUNS Summer Workshops and strengthen the academic-practitioners partnership and networks they so successfully promote and stimulate.

ACUNS SW 2011: “A wonderful learning opportunity”

ACUNS has organized the Summer Workshops annually since 1990. The workshops are designed for “junior professors in international relations, international law or other relevant disciplines, post-doctoral and advanced doctoral level students, young lawyers and practitioners from civil society groups, policy staff from international organizations, and others at similarly early stages of their professional careers.” Each workshop is organized under a topic of contemporary concern, such as Civil-military Relations in Peace Missions, Global Public-Private Partnerships, the United Nations and Regional Organizations – Partners for Peace and Security, to name some recent Summer Workshop themes. They are convened in
different parts of the world (e.g., Geneva, Ghent, Edmonton, Ljubljana) to stimulate research and analysis on the UN, multilateralism and international organization.

The 2011 summer workshop offered an exciting mix of lectures by guest speakers and presentations by participants. We were fortunate to have Susan Woodward from the City University of New York with us in Vail. Prof. Woodward gave two lectures, one on deconstructing the notion of ‘ethnic conflict,’ and another on the state of peacebuilding and statebuilding in the Balkans. Many of the points raised by Prof. Woodward resonated with the participants and would be repeatedly referenced throughout the remainder of the workshop. Our academic director, Timothy Sisk, meanwhile demonstrated his wide array of research competences by leading us through a plethora of topics, including the state of research on identity and violence, the role of religious leaders in divided societies, and identity dynamics in electoral processes. By video-conference, we learned about the relationship between power-sharing and identity from Stefan Wolff (University of Birmingham), about sectarian conflict in Egypt from Scott Hibbard (DePaul University) and about the enduring relevance of the Responsibility to Protect doctrine from Thomas G. Weiss (City University of New York). A particularly timely video presentation came from Carolyn Fluehr-Lobban (University of Rhode Island) who spoke to us about religion and peacemaking in Sudan, on the eve of South Sudan’s independence on 9 July 2011. Jonathan Moyer from the University of Denver joined us in-house for a talk on how to evaluate quantitative measures of state vulnerability to intrastate conflict. Jonathan’s enthusiasm for quantitative methods was – dare we say it – contagious!

Finally, ACUNS Executive Director, Alistair Edgar, spoke about the relationship between justice and peacebuilding in Kosovo, Cambodia and Northern Uganda based on interviews with local communities in these places. We were also treated to an unplanned photo presentation and talk by fellow participant Alexandra Novosseloff (France, Ministry of Defence) who is the co-creator of a photography exhibit and publication, Walls Between Peoples, which examines separation walls in places such as Northern Ireland, Israel, Kashmir and Cyprus.

The centerpiece of the workshop, however, came in the form of participant presentations, which covered a wide array of case studies as well as thematic issues. Cases covered the entire spectrum: Bolivia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Côte d’Ivoire, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Kyrgyzstan, Guinea-Bissau, Haiti, Israel-Palestine, Lebanon, Nepal, Northern Ireland, Sierra Leone, and Somalia. Thematically, presentations touched upon the extent of coherence in peacebuilding, identity constructs, transitional justice, the role of refugees and diasporas, and the effectiveness of the UN’s peacebuilding architecture. We heard arguments for the adoption of a rights-based approach to peacebuilding, for a stronger international commitment to the values of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, and for greater recognition of the critical role that political parties play in times of transition.

The popularity of the ACUNS Summer Workshops is testified in the fact that a record number of applications were received for this year’s edition. What may have triggered such interest? By asking our fellow ‘Swiosians’ why they applied for the Summer Workshop we also sought to illustrate the multiple – and all very good! – reasons why this is something not to be missed. The interesting topic per se and the chance to learn more about it in an informal but intense setting where academics and practitioners meet was found to be the key reason for turning to the ACUNS Summer Workshop 2011. As captured by
Eamon Aloyo and Elizabeth Ludwin King from University of Colorado and Wake Forest School of Law, respectively: “I applied because it looked like and was a wonderful opportunity to learn more about fascinating topics that coincide with my research, work and teaching, and meet people doing interesting and good work from all over the world” and “I was eager to be in a small, mixed group of professionals and academics who wanted to discuss these issues and how we might learn from each other.” Maria Ortiz-Perez, working in the Economic and Social Commission for Western Africa (ESCWA)’s Emerging and Conflict Related Issues Section, applied because it gave “access to practitioners and high quality lecturers on the topic and exposed me to the issues that I have been studying from multiple points of views.”

Interestingly, the Workshop attracted both persons with considerable insights and theoretical and practical expertise in the topic as well as more neophyte peers. Katri Tala from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), Vienna, a specialist in psychology, was interested in conflicts and how they happen, where and why and how that impacts the wider societal and international level, but felt that she lacked knowledge in political science and international relations and needed a better understanding of how the UN system works: “And it turned out to be really fascinating and I found myself wanting to learn more.” Tracy Wallach, affiliated with the University of Massachusetts, applied as the workshop was devoted to her area of research interest and expertise, and also hoped to make professional connections and to learn more about the UN system. Selamawit Abebe at UN Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA)’s Sub-regional Office for Western Africa, whose mandate is to engage in capacity-building of its fifteen member countries towards achieving regional integration, sought analytical techniques on peacemaking and statebuilding which are important tools in her work to this end.

The high quality of the programme is witnessed in the fact that at least two participants had already had the opportunity of attending Summer Workshop. Denise Sumpf, at ESCWA in Beirut, was one of them and applied on the basis of that earlier positive experience, regarded as a “good intellectual challenge and learning opportunity.” She also appreciated the fact that participants had to submit a written research proposal in advance. To Fernando Cavalcante, a PhD candidate at Coimbra University, this opportunity to “present and discuss my work with knowledgeable people who can provide critical feedback on my ideas and arguments” was essential. Last, but not least, the fact that the workshop is free of charge to all participants was raised as a not irrelevant factor!

“Step back, interact and connect”

Participants were confident that the time spent in Vail would be beneficial to their own work over the long-term. When asked how their participation in the summer workshop would impact their own work, three themes emerged from the responses. First, all the respondents identified the connections, both professional and personal, made at the workshop as one of the highlights of the experience. Some noted that they were able to draw on the expertise of other participants once they returned to their daily work; as one participant noted, “already the network of participants helped with information I needed for work.” Fernando Cavalcante was impressed with the “high-level quality of the comments received in both group and informal discussions.” He stated that participants “gave me a lot of food for thought and
pointed to alternatives for overcoming some of the challenges I was stuck with.” Others noted the possibility of collaborative projects they were hoping to undertake with fellow participants. Two participants from ESCWA had the opportunity to organize a workshop on transitions to democracy, where they provided an overview of the summer workshop experience and at which Susan Woodward was able to speak.

The second theme was the benefit of a week-long focus on one topic. Elizabeth Ludwin King succinctly noted: “Having a week to focus on one topic is a luxury in a world where multitasking is the norm.” This point was seconded by Denise Sumpf: “The workshop provided me with some time to take a step back from my daily work and to think more in-depth about a certain topic, thereby it has refreshed my approach to my daily work.” Katri Tala also noted that it gave her an appreciation of how her daily work as a psychologist fits into the larger UN system.

Finally, one of the intentions of the summer workshop programme is to bring together scholars and practitioners working on similar issues who might not otherwise get the opportunity to interact. The respondents overwhelmingly noted that this was a positive feature of the programme as it allowed them to deepen their appreciation for “the other side.” Eamon Aloyo summed up the academic perspective: “I learned more about the specifics of approaches practitioners are taking, dilemmas they face, and the realities of places around the world that help me in my practical work.” Maria Ortiz Perez stated: “The SW was truly a learning experience for me. I got exposed to the theoretical and practical side of peacebuilding and statebuilding. The reference materials and discussions helped me to better understand the topics I have been working on and also gave me new ideas on how to approach my work.” When asked if they would recommend future summer workshops to their colleagues, there was near unanimous agreement that the experience was invaluable and they would not hesitate to recommend the programme to others.

**Build back better together**

As the theme of the workshop suggests, it underscored a strong – albeit not always explicitly recognized – interrelationship of state-building and peacebuilding. A more familiar description of this interdependency can be found in the 2005 Outcome Summit Document where Member States of the United Nations affirmed the interdependency of the three pillars of the UN: Peace and security, development and human rights. Lasting peace requires functioning and representative State institutions that operate in accordance with and implement policies and laws respectful of human rights. As Prof. Sisk underscored at the outset of the workshop, “relative status deprivation” and patterns of discrimination are often among the root causes of conflict. Resolving conflict and consolidating peace therefore depends on three pillars: State capacity, legitimacy and accountability.

Guest lecturer Prof. Susan Woodward highlighted in this respect that the international community has traditionally been reluctant to frame peace-building as state-building due to sensitive issues related to State sovereignty. Due to a certain mistrust in the State per se, peace-building projects have hence often left the task of “state building” to the international community itself or to local projects, focusing

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1 2005 World Summit Outcome, UN Doc. A/60/L.1, 15 September 2005, para. 9.
primarily at implementing the liberal internationalism agenda rather than building common identities in conflict-affected regions. Woodward challenged the importance attached to “ethnic identities” as causal factors explaining conflict, noting that wars are often prompted by State power and aggressive majorities. She argued that how the international community labels a conflict may be more likely to determine the course of war and its outcome. Participants were reminded of the importance to examine to what extent identity and ethnicity are externally imposed or voluntarily assumed: It served as a sound call to engage in self-critical reflection as we undertake our daily work under severe time pressure where a blind eye may easily replace re-assessing how and why we label certain conflicts with certain concepts and identities.

A concrete challenge for the international community in its efforts to build peace and rule of law-based States is hence how to promote societal transformation and foster common identities – not only stabilize post-conflict situations in the short-term as per available resources and political interest (a point stressed by many of the participants). A case in point was the Dayton Agreement for Bosnia and Herzegovina, which, as Admirela Ancion at UNODC in Vienna noted, was a ceasefire rather than peace agreement. Allison McCulloch, Assistant Professor at Brandon University in Canada who also presented on Bosnia, further highlighted that the exclusion of gender issues in the Dayton talks and agreement has had lasting negative impact in terms of women’s political participation: ethno-nationalistic considerations still trump the pursuit of gender equality. Tracy Wallach of University of Massachusetts (USA) highlighted in her presentation using the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a case in point, the significant role played by the political interests of the diaspora of different groups affected by conflict.

Constructive engagement of the international community in the creation of power-sharing agreements may present an important opportunity. In this regard, we learned from Prof. Stefan Wolff that (i) local leadership and commitment, (ii) well-resourced and long-term regional and international diplomacy, and (iii) institutional design (for instance quotas for women’s political participation) are key to the success of lasting power-sharing agreements in the aftermath of conflict. In this context, assisting post-conflict States in constitutional review represents to the international community an important opportunity in establishing a new foundation of equal rights, representation and participation. A related challenge concerns how the international community deals with the increasing hybridity in state-building processes, such as the dilemma of how to address the application of multiple laws, including customary law. The interim Constitution of South Sudan, which was established as the 193rd Member State of the United Nations during the workshop, served as an illustrative case in this regard.

“Building back better,” to paraphrase the UN Secretary-General, requires learning from past failures but, perhaps more importantly, building upon good practices which can be helpful to local governmental and non-governmental actors as well as to the international community. While failures have been documented extensively, the workshop highlighted the need to report on successful engagement of the international community and the processes that made them successful. Herein rests a collective opportunity – indeed responsibility – for all of us!

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Building peace and state capacities is a collective endeavor and responsibility requiring collaborative visions and strategies at local, national and international levels. ACUNS Summer Workshops, including the 2011 Vail edition, offer a unique platform for young professionals believing in and acting on this ideal.