# A Question of Plausibility
# Or: The Art of Evaluating Peacebuilding Interventions

*Andreas Wittkowsky*

You have no choice – use it! Demands for comprehensive evaluation of peacebuilding interventions[1] in crisis and conflict situations can be expected to grow. For all the difficulties involved, there is good reason to believe that sound evaluations would enhance the relevance and effectiveness of such interventions. While evaluations in the sphere of foreign and security policy continue to be widely regarded with skepticism, and are conducted using less sophisticated designs, development cooperation is already a step ahead. The most important factors for success are practice-led evaluation methods, meaningful evaluation criteria, stringent plausibility considerations, and evaluators with good powers of judgement.

The question of whether and how to evaluate interventions in crisis and conflict regions will undoubtedly remain on the agenda of Germany's new governing coalition. The final report of the Subcommittee on Civilian Crisis Prevention and Integrated Conflict Management of the German Bundestag, published in 2013, unequivocally demands "that a systematic assessment of activities in the field of civil crisis prevention and conflict response be conducted, including scientific evaluation. This applies above all to monitoring of measures and analysis of their impact and progress. More transparent and objective criteria are required in order to identify mistakes at an early stage and implement the required political course corrections."[2]

---

1 "Peacebuilding interventions" are understood here as international civilian and/or military policies, programs, and activities (above the level of individual projects) that aim to bring about comprehensive, lasting conflict transformation and promote peace.
2 Deutscher Bundestag, *Abschlussdokument des Unterausschusses Zivile Krisenprävention und vernetzte Sicherheit*, 2013, S-17(3)73_UA ZivKri. Translation by the author.

## Challenges for Evaluations in the Field of Foreign and Security Policy

This demand has encountered widespread skepticism in foreign and security policy circles. And it is indeed the case that evaluating foreign policy processes, especially those concerning crisis interventions, entails considerable challenges. Four main problems must be taken into account:

1. **Causal attribution:** Proponents of strictly scientific evaluation rightly emphasize the difficulties of proving direct causalities between an intervention and the intended societal transformation. Crisis and conflict situations in particular are characterized by extremely complex, multi-factorial social processes that proceed in a chaotic rather than linear fashion. At best an intervention can contribute to change, but this is unlikely to be clearly attributable or measurable. Moreover, the comparability of activities in different conflict settings is limited.[3]

   That is, however, not to say that evaluations should be dispensed with, as it would mean abandoning the aspiration to learn by subjecting our actions to critical review. It would also mean underestimating the benefits that evaluations can offer to intervention planners and implementers who are often caught up in the business of day-to-day operations. Instead it would suggest choosing a pragmatic approach to evaluating peacebuilding interventions, one which produces actionable findings through sensible plausibility considerations. Following Max Weber, such an approach is permissible "to the extent that it is successful in producing insights into interconnections which have been shown to be valuable for the casual explanation of concrete historical events."[4]

2. **Conflicting goals:** Almost all peacebuilding interventions are confronted with conflicting goals between their individual components and actors and/or between their short- and long-

term impacts. The more comprehensive the objectives and activities of an intervention, the greater the necessity to respond to unexpected events and adapt activities accordingly. This makes it all the more difficult to determine at the beginning precise routes to the goal and a synchronized sequence of individual activities, both of which would offer clear points of reference for evaluations.

   Evaluations must address these constraints and for example assess the responsiveness, flexibility, and learning capacity of the intervention.

3. **Dealing with risk:** Peacebuilding interventions often operate in highly escalated conflict situations. This by nature involves a high risk of failure. In its 2011 Development Report the World Bank emphasizes that international donors must be willing to accept greater risks yet maintain long-term engagement in conflict situations. Too narrow a definition of "impact" or a mistaken focus on "value for money" raise the danger of engaging only in interventions promising success (for fear of failure) and leaving the "tough nuts" of complex major conflicts unaddressed.

   Evaluations must deal with this dilemma by including political intention and the corresponding willingness to take risks in the assessment.

4. **Political vulnerability:** Politicians fear that the critical findings of an evaluation could erode the public support for a government and offer political ammunition to its opponents.

   However, renouncing critical learning processes will reduce the successes of a government to no lesser extent. And if successes fail to materialize due to a lack of learning and adaption, the loss of confidence will probably be more substantial than if the government pursues a deliberate "culture of error". For it is precisely the critical public sphere that demands accountability concerning the

3   Peter Rudolf and Sascha Lohmann, *Außenpolitikevaluation im Aktionsfeld Krisenprävention und Friedensaufbau*, SWP-Studie S 20/2013.
4   Max Weber, "Objectivity in social science and social policy," in The *Methodology of Social Sciences*, trans. and ed. Edward Shils and Henry Finch (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1949). 49–112 (71).

effectiveness of interventions. It is therefore more promising to promote practice-led evaluations and present learning from mistakes as a political opportunity and strength.

To sum up, doing without evaluations is good neither for the quality nor for the communicability of policy. The point is to shape evaluations constructively in the interests of continuously improving interventions.

## Recent Evaluations of Peacebuilding Interventions

Peacebuilding evaluations have indeed expanded in recent years. Among multilateral institutions the United Nations (UN) and the European Union (EU) have become especially active.[5] A number of major donor countries have also evaluated their peacebuilding interventions.[6] Even if the approaches are in some cases still relatively unsophisticated, they have succeeded in generating valuable findings for future implementation. This experience should be built upon, and the methods refined.

In 2009 the UN Secretary-General instructed the Office of Internal Oversight to assess the effectiveness of the UN Mission in Côte d'Ivoire (UNOCI). Comparable evaluations of the missions in Liberia, Sudan, Haiti, and DR Congo followed in 2011 and 2012. Because these were active missions, the evaluation reports made recommendations regarding the continuation or termination of the mandate. The reports do not apply particularly strongly structured evaluation criteria, and instead tend to follow the UN's traditional reporting format. A wide range of data collection methods were used, with sources including key players on the ground and interviews with all mission staff. One novum in Côte d'Ivoire was a survey of the local population, seeking to get the views of the target group concerning the effectiveness of the mission.

In the EU the European Court of Auditors chose a slightly different approach. With respect to the EU's policy of deploying its instruments in a coordinated comprehensive approach, the Court in 2012 investigated the interaction of all Rule of Law instruments in Kosovo – both the EULEX mission deployed under the Common Security and Defense Policy and the Commission's pre-accession programs. A comparable evaluation of good governance measures in DR Congo followed in 2013. In 2011 the European Commission assigned independent consultants to conduct a broad cross-sectional evaluation of its activities in the field of conflict prevention and peacebuilding, followed in 2013 by an evaluation of the African Peace Facility created for African peace missions. The design of these evaluations varies widely. Some are more strongly systematized along evaluation criteria, while others work through very detailed lists of individual questions.

Major donor countries have also evaluated their peacebuilding interventions. In the United States some of these have been conducted by the Government Accounting Office, in the United Kingdom by the new Independent Commission for Aid Impact. Some donor countries have conducted joint evaluations of country programs.

## A Framework for Peacebuilding Evaluations

Evaluation methods for peacebuilding activities have been developed most systematically and intensively in the sphere of development cooperation, which can draw on a long tradition of evaluation work. This is reflected prominently in the guidelines published in 2012 by the OECD's Development Assistance Committee (DAC), which state that any evaluation of peacebuilding interventions must take into account seven criteria: relevance, effectiveness, impact, sustainability, efficiency, coherence, and coordination.[7] In order to keep the evaluation framework manageable it is

5  UN-OIOS: www.un.org/Depts/oios/pages/other_oios_reports.html; European Court of Auditors: www.eca.europa.eu/en/Pages/Audit-ReportsOpinions.aspx; US Government Accounting Office: www.gao.gov; UK Independent Commission for Aid Impact: icai.independent.gov.uk/2013/12/01/list-of-reports/.

6  A good overview is offered by Jörn Grävingholt, Julia Leininger, and Christian von Haldenwang, *Effective statebuilding? A review of evaluations of international statebuilding support in fragile contexts* (Copenhagen: Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs/DANIDA, 2012).

7  OECD, *Evaluating Peacebuilding Activities in Settings of Conflict and Fragility: Improving Learning for Results*, DAC Guidelines and References Series (OECD Publishing, 2012).

helpful to select three key criteria and assign the others (which can be seen as specific aspects of the former) to them (see text box).

At the same time there is a trend in the field of development cooperation to develop more stringent evaluation methods. Firstly, quantitative methods are increasingly used in appropriate contexts. Secondly, the DAC guidelines include important pointers as to how more robust qualitative verdicts could be gained. In conflict contexts, surveys examining the experiences and opinions of the target group as well as peer-group reviews by peacebuilding experts have proven useful instruments for hardening plausibility hypotheses.

Still the expertise of the evaluators remains a central determinant of success. Assessing relevance demands well-founded judgments as to whether appropriate conflict analyses were conducted, the key factors of the conflict addressed, and convincing hypotheses about the impact of the intervention formulated. And when assessing impact it is absolutely legitimate – wherever causalities cannot be clearly proven – to make well-informed plausibility judgements.

## Conclusion: A Question of Plausibility

The evaluation of peacebuilding interventions will remain on the public agenda. This should be seen as an opportunity. Ultimately it is about improving strategy and its implementation. The core objective is not absolutely certain knowledge about causalities, but an adequately justified probability of doing the right thing at the right place and time. Thus the objective of any evaluation is to provide answers to the critical questions raised by the intervention and recommendations for future action.

If we demand that politicians show greater willingness to take risks in intervening in conflict situations, everything possible should be done in return to thoroughly assess past experience and thus enable research-based policy. Without such a basis we risk peacebuilding interventions being well-meant but not well made. Moreover, a public that is to legitimize high-risk decisions has the right to systematic information. Finally it does intervention planners no good if findings relevant to the effectiveness of their activities are kept from them.

The decisive success factors of peacebuilding evaluations include an application-driven approach, convincing evaluation criteria, and stringent plausibility considerations. And ultimately it also demands good judgement and analytical abilities on the part of the evaluators. Leading peacebuilding interventions is an art – and so is evaluating them.

*Dr. Andreas Wittkowsky is head of the Peace and Security project funded by the Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development and coordinator of the Working Group on the Comprehensive Approach at ZIF.*

Design: finedesign, Berlin