

Towards more effective peace building: a conversation with Roland Paris

*Interview conducted by Alina Rocha Menocal and
Kate Kilpatrick*

Introduction

Since the early 1990s, the international community has become increasingly involved in efforts to (re-)build states that have been torn by war and violent conflict. Today, the UN alone is engaged in more than ten political and peace-building missions around the world, building on a record that has included post-conflict reconstruction efforts from Cambodia to Guatemala to Mozambique.¹ With the massive operations underway in Afghanistan and Iraq, peace building represents a major global growth industry. Yet how much do we really know about its effectiveness in reducing conflict and supporting post-conflict reconstruction?

Roland Paris's most recent work, *At War's End: Building Peace after Civil Conflict* (2004) (which has won several awards, including the Chadwick F. Alger Award for best book on international organisation), examines 14 of the major UN peace-building missions launched between 1989 and 1999. In particular, Paris questions whether the predominant models of peacekeeping, with their emphasis on rapid democratisation and market liberalisation, are appropriate in fragile post-conflict contexts. In this interview,² we (*DIP*) ask him (*RP*) to share what we can learn from the peace-building record about its effectiveness as a means of preventing the recurrence of violence in post-conflict situations.

DIP: What, in your view, constitutes peace building?

RP: I define peace building as an activity that takes place in a post-civil war environment, the purpose of which is to create the conditions for a stable and lasting peace and to prevent the recurrence of large-scale violence.

DIP: Beyond preventing the recurrence of violence, which seems to be a good but rather narrowly focused indicator, are there other elements that you would consider important in post-conflict reconstruction efforts?

RP: I use the definition given by Boutros-Ghali in his Agenda for Peace (Boutros-Ghali 1992), which was the prevailing definition during the early and mid-1990s. Since the late 1990s, the term 'peace building' has been used to describe a much broader range of local, regional, national, and international initiatives intended to promote peace, including conflict prevention. For example, those in the tradition of Johan Galtung³ talk about peace building as the creation of what they call a 'positive peace'. This 'positive peace' encompasses far more than the absence of violence, and includes freedom from various kinds of oppression and deprivation. This kind of definition

blends the development and security agendas, and forms part of a wider debate about 'human security'. Although these goals are important, defining peace building to include such a wide range of development, security, and governance assistance makes it very difficult to distinguish causes and effects. That's why I have adopted a narrower definition for my own enquiry. I am not saying that peace-building operations should ignore other objectives, such as promoting good governance and development or addressing issues of distributional inequality. But it is the prevention of large-scale violence that I am most interested in studying, so I focus on that as the principal purpose of peace building.

DIP: You have argued that while peace-building operations vary in many important respects, they all share a basic set of principles and assumptions. Could you tell us more about the values and norms you see as implicit in peace building?

RP: Two things strike me when I look at the peace-building record from the 1990s. My first observation is that there is a great deal of difference across the missions that I have studied and across the settings in which they are operating. They take place in very different environments; the countries in which they are deployed experience very different kinds of problems; and the composition of the missions themselves varies widely. The second observation is that despite all these differences, and despite the lack of any central coordinating agency for peace building, there has been a general convergence around a strategy of promoting peace through the development of democracy and a market economy in very rapid fashion. Whether implicitly or explicitly, the peace-building missions I studied have all, in one way or another, promoted democratisation and marketisation as a remedy for civil violence, and attempted to effect those reforms as quickly as possible.

DIP: Is the ideal of seeking to convert war-shattered states into liberal market democracies inherently misplaced? If so, what alternative models are there?

RP: No, I don't think that the goal is inherently misplaced. In fact, I would argue that in most countries, democratic or representative forms of government, plus some kind of market-oriented economy, are probably the best long-term solution for civil violence. An impressive number of studies has demonstrated that well-established market democracies are significantly more peaceful than other kinds of states, both in terms of their internal politics and in their relations with other states, and they also tend to be less repressive, and less likely to experience humanitarian disasters. For all of these reasons, market democracy of one kind or another seems to be a very good model for stability.

DIP: So what seems to be the problem?

RP: The problem is not the idea *per se* of promoting democracy or free markets. The problem is the assumption that external actors can do so quickly and painlessly in countries that are just emerging from civil war—that it is possible to hold an election, initiate market-oriented reforms, sit back, declare success, and then expect the rest to take care of itself.

But things are never so simple. For one, a functioning market economy requires, at a minimum, an effective state capable of upholding the rule of law in the broadest sense. Even Adam Smith argued that the free market depended on a state that could enforce contracts, for example, and resolve disputes through an even-handed judicial mechanism. The same is true on the political side: successful democracies need legal systems and courts that can be relied upon to resolve disputes over the application of election laws, for instance. Peace builders have not internalised the

need for establishing states and state structures and institutions that can underpin successful, lasting market-economy and democratic political systems.

DIP: What you are suggesting, then, is that the aspiration of building liberal democracies is a good one in the long term, but that this creates many difficulties in the short term. Why is liberalisation so destabilising in post-conflict societies?

RP: Recent empirical research has shown that the most unstable states in the world, those most likely to experience internal violence and most likely to become engaged in international conflicts, are not fully consolidated states, whether authoritarian or democratic, but rather those in which there has been incomplete or partial democratisation, where the transition has become 'stuck'. So while initiating liberalisation is a necessary step to achieve a relatively stable market democracy in the long term, doing so without continuing through the steps towards consolidating the democratic system can put states into this very vulnerable category.

Further, a 2003 World Bank study (Collier et al. 2003) shows that a country reaching the end of a civil war faces around a 44 per cent risk of returning to conflict within five years. States emerging from civil war are particularly fragile at the outset, in part because they tend to be highly polarised. Almost by definition, they lack institutions that can reconcile differences between the formerly warring parties. This institutional weakness means that there is a very reduced possibility of being able to channel disagreements and disputes through an institutional structure. Post-civil war states also experience particular development problems: they are often flooded with weapons, and faced with the challenge of demobilising and reintegrating large numbers of former fighters. This is quite a volatile mix.

Intrinsic to the introduction of democracy and the movement towards a free market is the encouragement of competition, both political and economic. Political competition, even in the framework of a nascent democracy, can reinforce the very lines of division that defined the conflict. On the economic side, the marketisation programmes and the competition associated with increased privatisation can reinforce the differences and the gaps between the economic winners and losers in a society. This is particularly dangerous in countries where conflict has been fuelled by distributional inequality.

So there is a kind of paradox at the very heart of both a liberal democracy and a liberal market economy. The paradox stems from the fact that in the long run you can achieve beneficial and stable results by promoting competition. Where this competition is channelled and moderated by state institutions, it can serve productive political and economic ends and its excesses can be moderated through practices and rules of peaceful competition that also recognise the importance of equity within society. But in the short term, the promotion of these forms of competition in a post-conflict context can be highly destabilising. Accordingly, we cannot assume that the promotion of democratic political competition, civil society activism, and a free-market economy will have inherently positive effects. In fact, they can also generate significantly negative effects. During the 1990s, the design of peace-building operations was based on over-optimistic assumptions about the inherently beneficial effects of moving to elections and market-oriented reforms. Peace builders need to anticipate the possible conflict-producing effects of liberalisation, and recognise that moderating these effects should be a central element in the design of peace-building operations.

DIP: Conventional wisdom seems to argue that strengthening civil society and promoting media freedoms are essential elements in a reconstruction project, but you are suggesting that to pursue such measures may be problematic. Are there situations in which the promotion of civil society and media freedoms can also be disruptive within a post-conflict environment?

RP: There is a significant history of countries with very active civil societies where civil society organisations (CSOs) have been a force for repression and conflict, not for peace. We should not assume that, just because an organisation is a voluntary, non-state entity, it will contribute to pluralism and moderation within society. It is quite possible that CSOs will reflect the prevailing social prejudices and divisions. This was the case in Rwanda, for example, where political liberalisation produced a number of independent media and CSOs that deepened the country's social divisions.

Of course, many CSOs do promote pluralism and peace. The challenge for peace-building missions is to promote what might be called 'good' civil society and to restrain its potential negative elements. Some peace-building agencies have begun to experiment with the promotion of cross-factional civil society groups in post-conflict countries. The OECD, for example, has conducted 'culture of peace' programmes in El Salvador and Rwanda, designed to increase grassroots dialogue and cooperation among formerly warring communities. However, such programmes remain largely peripheral.

DIP: You have proposed a model for peace building that you call 'institutionalisation before liberalisation', which responds to the paradox you have identified between the promotion of democracy and a market economy and the destabilising effects such liberalisation reforms may entail in the short term. Can you tell us about it?

RP: The broad goal of the 'institutionalisation before liberalisation' model is to try to preserve the objective of transforming post-conflict states into stable democracies with productive economies, while at the same time trying to learn from the failures of peace-building operations where these transformations have been poorly managed.

One element of my suggested approach is not to rush ahead with elections if the conditions for a relatively peaceful election are not in place. International peace builders are often under pressure to produce results quickly and have tended to use early elections as a milestone to indicate 'success', as well as providing a reason to begin scaling-down operations or withdrawing. In my view, the conditions for peaceful elections include a security presence—whether indigenous or international—that is capable of maintaining basic security throughout the electoral period. A second condition would be that there are electoral rules in place as well as mechanisms for dealing with eventual disputes over the administration and outcome of the elections, so that the outcome can be adjudicated and the results enforced. Where there are major armed factions with the potential to overturn the electoral process or election results, demobilisation and disarmament may be another essential condition.

Other considerations include the nature of the political parties that emerge from this process. Immediately following a conflict, it is likely that political parties will replicate the same lines of division that defined the conflict. Moving quickly towards elections may serve to institutionalise these divisions still further. Delaying elections can reduce some of these divisions, and can allow for the development of

parties whose membership cuts across these lines. Creating a bit of space and time after the end of a conflict may permit a new kind of politics to develop. While there are certainly costs to delaying elections indefinitely, peace-building operations should be more concerned about creating the conditions for an outcome that will lay the foundations for continued democratisation.

DIP: What kinds of ‘political engineering’ measures might donors pursue to help promote political entities that cut across the lines of conflict and division, as opposed to those that entrench divisions still further?

RP: To put it crudely, there are ‘sticks’ and ‘carrots’. The ‘carrots’ include international assistance in the form of infrastructure to help create new broad-based political parties. On the ‘stick’ side, electoral rules should include a requirement that parties participating in elections may not preach, advocate, and perpetrate violence against other groups within the society, and that any parties that pursue such tactics should be proscribed. I recognise that this is a highly intrusive power, but I think it is a necessary one, and there are ways of managing that kind of power to make it less likely to be abused.

More broadly, different electoral rules can create different kinds of incentives for political parties to emerge, develop, succeed, or fail, which can in turn shape the prospects for reconciliation or continued conflict. We need to be mindful that certain kinds of electoral rules can reinforce divisions rather than promote cross-cutting politics. In the case of Bosnia, for instance, the design of the presidency and the elections in September 1996 was ill conceived. The idea was to create a tripartite presidency where each co-president would represent one of the three principal ethnic divisions in Bosnia—the ethnic Croats, the Bosniac or Muslim community, and the Serbs. The electorate could vote only for presidential candidates representing their own ethnic group. This created a tripartite presidency in which any one of the presidents could effectively veto decisions being supported by the other two. A rule like this creates strong electoral incentives for candidates to mobilise support on the basis of ethnic exclusiveness because there is little incentive to reach across communal lines in order to win and to build a constituency that cuts across the different communities.

DIP: So, would you say that, in post-conflict societies, the capacity to transcend the lines of conflict must in some way express itself in the ability to create cross-cutting alliances?

RP: I think that, particularly for countries emerging from conflicts that have a strong ethnic component, it is important to try to move towards a form of government where there is the possibility for ongoing accommodation across ethnic lines. The model in Bosnia was fundamentally flawed because it was really about institutionalising separateness.

An interesting model was used in Nigerian elections between 1979 and 1983, according to which, in order to be elected, a presidential candidate had to receive a minimum percentage of votes in a certain number of communal districts. Within a system like this, political leaders must articulate and promote a platform that is capable of achieving support across communal lines.

DIP: You seem to be arguing that even where groups espousing extreme tactics have considerable support from the population, the proper electoral incentives and rules can actually work towards making them far less radical.

RP: That’s right. In order to be able to win, groups need to be able to appeal to broader sectors of society. And designing systems that reward political moderation is a much

more effective tool than simply banning parties that are too extreme. But as I said before, I think there is a place for proscribing parties that openly and explicitly promote and advocate violence against other groups.

DIP: If you do that, though, would you also be inciting more violence from those parties who can then claim that they are not being represented, and so need to resort to violence?

RP: No, I don't think so. It is important to remember that electoral rules need to be negotiated in one manner or another. There must be at least a rough consensus within society on the appropriateness of different kinds of electoral rules. And this is a balancing act: you do not want to push so far that you end up disenfranchising people through electoral rules, but at the same time there are a lot of legitimate ways of providing incentives for moderation.

DIP: Looking at the wider question of local ownership, the 'institutionalisation before liberalisation' approach you call for seems to be rather 'top down' in the way that it promotes intervention. Where do you see the role of domestic actors in the reconstruction project? By creating a long-term role for international peace-building operations, is there a risk of undermining national capacity, ability, or even the desire to work towards reconstruction? And how would you deal with the fact that peace builders cannot provide immediate benefits and do not produce results that are immediately good for everybody, despite the expectations raised?

RP: I think there is a real danger of that. For example, David Chandler (2000) argues that in Bosnia the dominant position occupied by international organisations in the post-conflict context is creating a culture of dependency. I would also add a further risk: that citizens might become actively opposed to the presence of peace builders, who start to be perceived as occupiers rather than as facilitators.

Much depends on the conditions under which peace-building missions are launched. The 'circumstances of birth' of most such missions in the 1990s were a negotiated peace settlement among the local parties in which these parties requested international assistance in helping to implement the settlement, and where the peace-building missions were authorised by international organisations and were multi-lateral in nature. In contrast, the conditions for the deployment of the more recent post-conflict peace-building missions in Iraq and Afghanistan were quite different. These missions took place following an international invasion, and in a sense it is natural that the local population should come to view peace builders as occupiers rather than facilitators. In a situation like this, the space and time in which international peace builders must create the conditions for stability are far more limited than they are when missions are launched under more consensual circumstances.

Although I agree that there is a potential risk of creating a culture of dependency in more expansive and extended peace missions, the 'quick-and-dirty' approach often fails to achieve a sustainable peace. The question should really then be how to reduce and avoid such dependency and the problems it generates, rather than dismiss the idea of longer term deployments. For example, longer term deployment does not preclude timetables, with specific goals, including the goal of handing over authority to local people as quickly as possible in specific areas. In East Timor, for instance, although there were problems in the way the operation was organised and conducted, one of the achievements of the peace-building operation was to hand back elements of the international administration to the East Timorese fairly rapidly.

Equally, I think that there is room for a great deal more creativity with regard to incorporating local groups and actors into the management of the peace-building operations. This can provide opportunities for people to engage in their own national politics, even during the transitional period before democratic institutions have been established, and so reduce the reality and perception of dependence on external actors. It can also create more effective mechanisms for holding the power of peace builders themselves accountable in a way that is consistent with the democratic norms that they themselves are trying to promote. In East Timor, there was an attempt to do this through the creation of consultative bodies, although these were criticised for not having been incorporated adequately into the management structure of the peace-building mission.

Incorporating domestic actors into the local, regional, and national management of peace-building missions can also provide a resource for information on how to adapt and adjust democratic models to local practices and customs. The Loya Jirga in Afghanistan was a creative and effective initiative, because it married a legitimate traditional and culturally specific model of inter-group decision making with the norms of democracy that were developing.

DIP: Have there been international initiatives calling for greater ownership of the peace-building processes at the local level?

RP: At the international level, the High-level Panel Report (Panyarachun 2004) recommended the creation of a new international institution called a Peacebuilding Commission, which would include representatives of the host countries of peace-building missions. Including local representatives at the highest level in the planning and coordination of peace building would increase the opportunities for participation in shaping the design of all of these missions on a day-to-day basis, and for increasing their accountability. By moving towards a situation in which there is much more accountability and local participation in peace-building missions, I think we could go a long way towards addressing the concerns about dependency and resistance, while at the same time getting away from the notion that the only way to deal with these issues is through immediate elections and the withdrawal of the peace-building mission.

DIP: Do you think that there has been a growing awareness among policy makers of the 'limits of liberalism' as you term them, and of the problems of promoting rapid political and economic liberalisation?

RP: Yes, I think there has been a growing awareness, though it has not translated enough into policies that take seriously the challenges of completing the transitions that are currently underway. The missions that began in the late 1990s tended to be far less rushed and were more conscious of creating the conditions for a successful election than those launched at the start of the decade. Nonetheless, in my view, these missions still do not pay sufficient attention to the longer term need to build the kinds of institutions that are required in order to underpin a functioning market democracy. If peace-building missions can't make that kind of commitment, then we are likely to continue to witness and experience mixed results and failures. In addition, a peace-building model that promotes rapid reform and transition, followed by exit that leaves behind a fragile transitional state, risks squandering the goodwill and hopes of the host population and discrediting the idea of democracy in their eyes.

DIP: Does the current structure of the international system that provides reconstruction assistance lend itself to adapting to the model of peace building you have spelled out?

RP: In addition to the policy changes and international political will that the more phased liberalisation approach I advocate would require, it would also demand a greater degree of coordination between the various peace-building elements and actors. Currently, there is no institutional centre for peace building, just an array of international agencies (various UN agencies, the World Bank, the IMF) promoting different activities with varying degrees of coordination—or even competition. Aside from coordination problems, this means that the accumulation and spreading of expertise and lessons learned from one mission to the next is difficult and piecemeal.

As I mentioned earlier, the High-level Panel Report recognised the problems of ad hoc and uncoordinated peace building, and recommended the creation of a UN Peacebuilding Commission with broad-based representation, supported by a small Peacebuilding Support Office. Recognising that many of the principal peace-building actors are based outside the UN system, I would go further and recommend the creation of a multilateral body to oversee post-conflict operations. This would include representation from the UN and its specialised agencies, other major international organisations involved in peace building, international financial institutions, multilateral and bilateral development agencies, representatives from the NGO community, and—importantly—representatives from the states hosting these missions. The composition of this new international peace-building body would include a permanent staff—to ensure long-term expertise and cumulative learning—and a governing council whose membership could be adjusted to reflect the particular peace-building activities underway at a given time.

DIP: The peace-building missions in Iraq and Afghanistan constitute some of the most ambitious efforts at post-war state reconstruction currently underway. As you mentioned earlier, these missions were born out of foreign occupation, setting them apart from the missions you have studied, but do they reflect some of the learning about why certain missions have been successful while others have not? Are these missions better designed to bring about stable and lasting peace?

RP: The ‘light footprint’ approach that the UN has adopted in Afghanistan is not a recipe for effective, durable peace building. Although the Loya Jirga was an excellent example of a creative combination of traditional political forms with the principles of liberal democracy, Hamid Karzai does not govern the country, most of which remains in the hands of regional warlords. In the absence of a real international commitment to build a functioning state, Afghanistan is becoming the world’s leading narco-mafia ‘enterprise zone’. These are among the conditions that facilitated the rise of the Taliban in the 1990s.

In Iraq, the USA failed to prepare for instability in the post-conquest period, wrongly assuming that US forces would be welcomed by all, that US forces combined with the Iraqi police and military would be sufficient to maintain order in the streets, and that the armed resistance would disappear. It was clear from the outset that the USA needed to deploy a massive police presence (either an international force or US military police) immediately following the invasion, but those of us who made this point in media interviews following the war were shouted down in the yelling match of US current-affairs television. Of course, now even Paul Bremer acknowledges that US post-war planning suffered from those very same weaknesses.

But more generally, Iraq is difficult to compare to 1990s peace-building cases because the US military was immediately viewed as an occupation force by

significant segments of the Iraqi population, whereas when multilateral operations are deployed to help implement ceasefires that have been locally negotiated they are less likely to be viewed as occupiers right from the outset. This creates time and space for peace builders to shape the development of domestic institutions with the support of major elements of society.

DIP: What is your evaluation of the elections that took place in Afghanistan and Iraq?

RP: In Afghanistan, the problem was not that the elections were held too hastily but that too much emphasis was placed on elections and too little on a more comprehensive approach to state building. In their own terms, the elections were largely successful, building on the creative and effective use of the Loya Jirga transitional mechanism. However, these elections have also been claimed to signal the overall ‘success’ of peace building in Afghanistan. This is misleading in my view, given the lack of a countrywide strategy for institution building. In the absence of such a strategy, the central government has gained little authority over regional warlords and ‘druglords’. If the goal of peace building is to help war-shattered states move from a shaky ceasefire to a lasting peace, peace builders need to assume greater responsibility for the institutional reconstruction of these countries.

In Iraq, the USA was under tremendous pressure to hold elections quickly. However, there were costs to moving so fast. Time pressures precluded the design of a voting system that would elect candidates from sub-national geographical constituencies, and instead the decision was made to proceed with voting on nationwide party lists. That turned out to be a problem, because the low-turnout Sunni areas ended up with an even smaller impact on the election results than they would have had if seats had been allocated on a geographical basis. Further, the security situation was still so unstable that most candidates made no effort to campaign—or even to publicise their identities. But despite all these significant weaknesses, once the US administration had established the date for a national election there was no going back. Delay at that stage would probably have caused greater harm.

DIP: Where peace-building missions adopt a longer term approach, how should their end-point or ‘exit strategy’ be determined?

RP: Establishing a fully consolidated liberal democracy with a fully developed market-oriented economy is an unrealistic goal to set for peace-building missions. The right exit point really depends on the specific conditions in each particular case. Countries in the initial stages of transition tend to be most at risk both of experiencing internal unrest and of becoming involved in international conflict. Moving a country further along its transition—to a point where the most acute risks of instability are diminished somewhat and where there is at least a reasonable prospect that institutional reforms will survive the departure of peace builders over the short to medium term—might be one test that determines an appropriate mission end-point. There are important countervailing pressures to consider. Indefinite prolongation of an international mission would be unaffordable, and would eventually create concerns about dependency and occupation. More could be done to mitigate such pressures by increasing awareness of the potentially destabilising effects of rapid liberalisation, of the need to establish the institutional pillars for a sustainable functioning democracy and market economy, and of the need to incorporate domestic actors more directly in the management of the mission at the local, regional, and international levels.

DIP: If you had to pick one or two peace-building missions that have been exemplary for what they have achieved, which ones would you choose?

RP: Despite their many differences, if we compare the peace-building missions in Angola and Kosovo we can shed some light on this question. In Angola, the international community anticipated that a very light presence of international peace builders would be sufficient to oversee the implementation of the peace accord, including the reconciliation of the leaders of the warring parties, and the success of the planned 1992 elections. There was minimal security deployment on the international side, very limited demobilisation and disarmament of the parties, and a striking optimism about the ability of the local parties themselves to implement the peace agreement and elections without much international management or preparation. And, of course, that situation exploded. In contrast, in Kosovo, the international community took a much more assertive role at the start of the operation and immediately began rebuilding state structures that would be at least minimally neutral in political terms. The mission inserted international actors into key areas like the court system, which had been biased against ethnic Serbs, and focused on creating conditions of security and political neutrality in order to support an election. Of course, we need to bear in mind that the ultimate status of Kosovo remains unresolved and that this creates special challenges for the peace-building mission. Nonetheless, I think the awareness of the need to create politically neutral institutions and to have a robust security presence on the ground contributed to a better outcome in Kosovo than in Angola.

DIP: On balance, do you believe that post-conflict peace-building interventions have increased peace and stability, or have they historically done more harm than good?

RP: I think that they have done more good than harm in the aggregate, and by a large measure. The worst cases, like Angola or Rwanda, are really extreme examples. Let's take a less obvious case, like Cambodia. On balance, Cambodia is much better off as a result of the international peace-building assistance it received in the early 1990s. The country is no longer at war and its developmental prospects are more promising. It has a measure of media freedom that it did not have previously, and independent Cambodian NGOs are promoting causes such as human rights and democracy. I do not by any means intend to suggest that in the aggregate peace building has failed. What I am arguing is that there have been some significant shortcomings that could have been avoided if the major peace-building organisations had built into their model greater anticipation of the need to consolidate the transformations that they were promoting and to mitigate the destabilising effects of their own actions. What I'm talking about is a more strategic and serious approach to peace building that will improve our chances of building functional, stable, and liveable societies in countries that are at risk of violent collapse.

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Notes

1. For information on UN peace-building operations, see www.un.org/Depts/dpko/dpko/index.asp#
2. The interview was conducted on 18 February 2005.

3. Johan Galtung is founder and director of TRANSCEND, a global network of experts committed to the transformation of conflict through peaceful means. He is the author of the UN's first manual for trainers and participants (Galtung 2000), and is considered a leading pioneer of the study of peace and conflict transformation in theory and practice.

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