



Rethinking Intervention and Interventionism

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Although history offers many examples of international intervention, the post-Cold War era has seen a burgeoning of different forms of outside interference and intervention by a range of state and non-state actors and for many different purposes. These include practices known as humanitarian intervention, responsibility to protect, development intervention, governance intervention as well as peace-building and state-building intervention. Many of these interventions are controversial and many are judged as having mixed results, or even as being complete failures, as illustrated by present-day Iraq, Afghanistan and a number of interventions throughout Africa.

This article argues that ‘the problem of intervention’ cannot be divorced from its external political origins. A significant portion of research in the field shows that interventions have all too often been based on an insufficient understanding of the surrounding context, and on an external definition of the problem these interventions set out to solve. As many have noted, interventions are often designed for purposes other than solving the problems of those described as ‘beneficiaries’ and ‘targets’ (Rubinstein 2005; Richmond 2011). We argue that there is a need to rethink external interventions in general and what occurs in the encounter between interveners and those ‘intervened upon’ in particular. Indeed, determinations of the success or failure of interventions are partial unless they take seriously the role of local dynamics and cultural meaning systems that inform social action as well as the power relations between interveners and those intervened upon. This article constitutes our first step in outlining what such a ‘rethinking’ implies theoretically and conceptually.

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The rise of liberal interventionism

Since the end of the Cold War we have seen a proliferation of interventions by a widening range of actors, and the traditional international norms for intervention have been fundamentally altered. Although there are, historically, many examples of international intervention, the discourse of international relations – and of intervention – during the 20th century was dominated by the idea of the Westphalian nation-state order, predicated on national sovereignty, non-recognition of supranational authority, demarcated borders and non-interference in the internal affairs of individual nation states. The 21st century, however, has already seen a burgeoning of different forms of outside interference and intervention by a range of state (and non-state) actors and for many different purposes, such as humanitarian intervention, responsibility to protect (R2P), rebuilding failed states, and development intervention. Indeed, intervention by ‘outsiders’ in the affairs of ‘insiders’ has become a structural characteristic of today’s global politics (Leurdijk 1996).

Interventionist activity is certainly not a new phenomenon, but contemporary interventions have, many contend, been transformed since the end of the Cold War and in the context of what is frequently referred to as ‘globalisation’ (Duffield 2007; see also Sørensen and Söderbaum, and Duffield in this volume). One of the most profound changes in the landscape of intervention is the doctrine of humanitarian intervention and R2P, which awards the international community responsibility for intervening when states are considered fragile, failed or abusive to their citizens. Many so-called ‘humanitarian interventions’ as well as the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have been justified in this way and they are associated with blueprints for the promotion of universal freedom (Richmond 2005; see also Chandler in this volume).

Contemporary interventions by international actors in the affairs of individual countries are frequently justified in the name of the ‘global good’. For instance, humanitarian intervention is presented not only as a way of ending lethal conflict but also as a means of ‘getting politics right’ in the aftermath of war (examples include Cambodia, Kosovo and Bosnia, East Timor, Afghanistan and Iraq). Other examples may include economic sanctions against certain regimes to address their financial crises (Southeast Asia, Latin America), or structural adjustment programmes designed to stabilise economies or ‘get economics right’ in large parts of the developing world.

One fundamental problem arises because ‘the global good’ is often taken as synonymous with ‘the liberal peace’ or as neoliberal ‘good governance’. This view is promulgated by the prevailing policy-making

consensus in the West and by a related scholarly body of work, which makes up a significant portion of the intervention literature (Sørensen 2006). The supposed fruits of intervention (stable/constitutional rule, macroeconomic stability, ‘good governance’, law and order) are intimately connected with a normative and ideological project: a liberal project. Therefore, when we discuss world order the liberal peace is essential to understanding the inherently political and normative assumptions that underpin and motivate contemporary interventionism. As pointed out by Richmond:

The liberal peace has become a model through which Western-led agency, epistemology, and institutions, have attempted to unite the world under a hegemonic system that replicates liberal institutions, norms, and political, social, and economic systems. It has been deployed in something like fifty to sixty post-conflict and fragile states over the last twenty years. Peace in these terms is seen not as an international gift, or as a local production, but as a contract. Emancipatory thinking about peace has collapsed into conditionality and governmentality (Richmond 2011:1).

Liberalising the world implies indirect rule, thus reducing or denying receiving areas the possibility of open-ended political processes. Constitutional democracy and free market economy are seen as core elements of the normative goal (the ‘good life’ and basic human dignity are defined within a liberal frame of reference, yet showcased as if they were universal understandings). This sets the direction and frame for interpretation of the actual political, economic, and social process, thus conflating the normative course chosen with an objective or universal idea.

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Hamadiya IDP camp in Zalingei, West Darfur, Sudan.

Defining intervention

Intervention has been a frequently used but rarely defined concept in the social sciences. Generically, intervention is a specific kind of ‘intentional’ strategy, defined by the fact that it is externally initiated. Intervention is undoubtedly controversial. Political philosophies range from strict adherence to non-interventionism to arguing for strong societal control on a more or less permanent basis (interventionism). The general attitude to intervention also tends to shift over time with the nature and severity of the problem. However, history reveals that outside intervention is often granted broad legitimacy as a means of ‘managing’ many social and global problems, particularly in situations considered abnormal, such as post-conflict reconstruction or natural disaster.

Since the end of the Cold War one important topic in the larger debate has been humanitarian intervention. A widely used definition of humanitarian intervention is ‘the threat or use of force across state borders by a state (or group of states) aimed at preventing or ending widespread and grave violations of the fundamental human rights of individuals other than its own citizens, without the permission of the state within whose territory force is applied’ (Holzgrefe 2003: 18). There has been intense discussion about the ethical, legal and political dilemmas involved in humanitarian intervention, particularly when respect for state sovereignty conflicts with the protection of human rights (Holzgrefe and Keohane 2003). The R2P doctrine has emerged as an attempt to change the discourse and terminology surrounding humanitarian intervention, arguing that the ‘right to intervene’ is problematic and should be replaced with the ‘responsibility to protect’. Given many failures during the last two decades, there is still much controversy regarding when, why and for what purpose humanitarian intervention and R2P should be carried out as well as the role of force in intervention.

The fact that intervention cannot simply be based on coercion and non-consent (as in the narrow definition of humanitarian intervention) is even more evident in other types of intervention, such as state-building, peace-building and development intervention. State-building interventions concentrate on key state functions, such as security, the rule of law, bureaucratic institutions, public goods, democratic processes and the fostering of market-led development (Wesley 2008: 375). Peace-building addresses the sources of hostility and builds local capacities for conflict resolution and reconstruction after peace has been negotiated or imposed. Strengthening state institutions, increasing political participation, engaging in land reform, deepening civil society, finding ways to respect ethnic identities are all ways to improve the prospects for peaceful governance (Doyle and Sambanis 2006: 22).

Historically the vocabulary of intervention in development is somewhat more controversial, but the term has gradually become more widely accepted in most strands of the development discourse. For instance, Escobar (1995) argues that the Third World was created as a needy object of international development intervention. From a very different standpoint, former World Bank economist William Easterly (2006: 327) argues that aid agencies must be constantly experimenting and searching for interventions that work. Similarly, one of the foremost experts of international development assistance, Roger Riddell (2007), refers to ‘aid interventions’, ‘NGO development interventions’ and ‘governance interventions’.

The rapidly changing global landscape, in which ‘outsiders’ intervene in the affairs of ‘insiders’, challenges the ways in which we can frame and respond to questions of intervention. While interventions have historically been performed by ‘the state’, contemporary international interventions are carried out by an increasingly wide variety of actors. This tends to blur the distinction between ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ in the arena of global political action, which now includes many state and non-state actors who are not only beyond the control of any state, but who may in fact exert control over the intervened-in state. Therefore, interventions of different kinds may deliberately or unintentionally have the effect of modifying or, conversely, reinforcing political authority in the target society.

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UN Photo/Martine Perret

Malaysian and Portuguese contingents of the United Nations Formed Police Units, members of the International Stabilization Forces, and the Rapid Intervention Unit of the National Police Force participate in a joint-exercise to develop skills to deal with demonstrators.

We find the concept of external intervention useful for understanding interference and intrusion in most areas of politics, despite the multidimensional nature of such practices. Drawing on research conducted several decades ago, we define intervention as the carrying out of organised and systematic activities across recognised boundaries or borders, by one actor or a group of actors, with the goal of affecting the structures of political authority or an identifiable ‘problem’ in a target society (for example, reconstruction, reconciliation, state-building, or political or economic crisis) (Rosenau 1971: 292; Young 1968: 178). This definition enables investigation into the similarities, differences and links between different and largely isolated types of intervention (for example, humanitarian, military, peace-building, state-building, development, governance and aid interventions). The definition is deliberately abstract, thereby avoiding the specificities of particular definitions of intervention, especially the unhelpful tendency to focus on interventions as based solely on coercion or non-consent. Thereby the definition avoids academic compartmentalisation and allows various sub-fields within intervention literature to speak to one another. We focus on external interventions as intrusive though not always coercive forms of interference, with necessarily varying degrees of consent/dissent/acquiescence by the target state or other domestic actors, into domains that were traditionally considered within the domestic jurisdiction of a sovereign state. This moves beyond conventional or orthodox analyses of intervention that give the state analytical precedence

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US Army/Robert W. Valencia

U.S. Army Soldiers and local Iraqi citizens play soccer during a visit to a historical ziggurat, Aug. 21, 2007.

(as the prime agent and object of intervention), that focus only upon formal interventions, and that unquestioningly compartmentalise military, humanitarian, development or state-building activities.

As touched upon above, an intervention is necessarily linked to the notion of ‘intention’ since the shared perspective behind all types of intervention is a desire to bring about change. The notion of intention is built on the idea that social entities can be steered, guided, managed and corrected. According to this view of the social world, it is possible to manage/correct a local problem with an externally initiated solution. We view external intervention as analytically distinct from other kinds of outsider-insider interfaces. An intervention is a special kind of response to the diagnosis of an ‘extraordinary’ and assumedly time-limited set of circumstances (conflict, underdevelopment, lack of governance and so on) in which action is considered necessary for a delimited period of time. The action is not intended to be permanent although there are cases where this is not straightforward. In theory intervention differs from governance, government, or policy, which constitute more ‘normal’, long-term actions. However, the dividing line is not crystal clear since interventions may not be short-term but instead protracted and enduring, as illustrated by the military intervention by the US in Iraq. Yet, this example also illustrates the way in which governance and interventionism may overlap; governance becomes interventionist, or vice versa, interventions become governance.

The failure of liberal interventionism

There is a vast amount of research that analyses from a top-down perspective the way in which external interventions (especially humanitarian interventions, peace-building and state-building interventions) are executed and implemented. This literature tends to focus on operational limitations, such as the lack of political will, the under-financing of missions, insufficient force, poor logistics, issues of coordination between actors, and interaction dilemmas between civil and military forces, which in turn lead to legitimacy and authority problems, and undesirable outcomes (Doyle and Sambanis 2006; Thakhur 2005; Weiss 1999). Good outcomes, it is assumed, follow from getting the technical or operational side of things right (usually starting on day one of the intervention and ending on the day of staff evacuation). In this way, much of the intervention literature favours political order and stability, and tacitly accepts and legitimises liberal governance. In other words, it approaches intervention in a problem-solving, operational-technical manner. Often, it evaluates efficiency and legitimacy within specific missions (see, for example, Diehl 1993; Durch 1993). By focusing on cases, typologies or mission-specific operational and institutional constraints, the analysis

is rarely embedded in the local and national context and rarely considers those intervened upon as acting subjects. Indeed, those intervened upon are usually defined as objects or as powerless (illiberal), are not systematically discussed, or are overlooked (Richmond 2011). Likewise, critical issues, questioning and problematising for whom and for what purposes interventions are carried out receive rather muted attention in the debate. Here it needs saying that international development co-operation is more systematic in its emphasis on the relationship with national counterparts and recipients, and national/local ‘ownership’ and participation, than are military or emergency/relief interventions.

There are of course reasons why the encounter between intervener and those intervened upon has received too little attention. Framing a local political issue into a ‘concern’, something ‘dangerous’ that requires an external intervention, implies an act of detachment. It demarcates who brings the rescue (rational political order) and who needs it (zones of irrationality/political chaos). Indeed, societies in need of intervention or international rescue can be seen as irrational, assumed to be prone to chaos and sometimes even barbaric violence. This in turn results in these societies being objectified or deemed passive.

The bias to conceptualise and theorise intervention more or less in isolation from those intervened upon is part and parcel of the failure of many contemporary interventions.

The strong emphasis on top-down analysis, from the standpoint of the interveners, is not simply an academic problem. The bias to conceptualise and theorise intervention more or less in isolation from those intervened upon is part and parcel of the failure of many contemporary interventions. There is a growing literature that draws attention to the failure of liberal intervention and liberal interventionism in most parts of the world (in the global South in particular, where most liberal interventions are carried out). In widely different settings, such as Liberia, Sierra Leone, the former Yugoslavia, Cambodia, Sudan, the DRC, Haiti, El Salvador and Afghanistan, research has shown that intervention can exacerbate the inequalities in the target society that give rise to conflict (Duffield 2001; Keen 2005; Kostic 2007; Richmond 2011; Sørensen 2009, and Sørensen in this volume). Indeed, interveners sometimes leave behind a society afflicted by a culture of impunity, and sometimes the situation is more prone to the ‘chaos’ and criminality that the intervention was ostensibly meant to rectify (Bellamy 2004; Pouligny 2006: 257–258). Significantly, critical and post-structuralist contributions have repeatedly shown that in the wake of interventions, new types of conflicts, tensions and frictions are generated – which very rarely appear in more orthodox assessments. As pointed out by Richmond:

Liberal peacebuilding has caused a range of unintended consequences. These emerge from the liberal peace’s internal contradictions, from



its claim to offer a universal normative and epistemological basis for peace, and to offer a technology and process which can be applied to achieve it. When viewed from a range of contextual and local perspectives, these top-down and distant processes often appear to represent power rather than humanitarianism or emancipation (Richmond 2011: i).

Furthermore, many studies of ‘good governance’ and neoliberal aid interventions in African domestic economies reveal that these interventions have primarily benefited the local elites and the donors themselves (Abrahamsen 2000). Interventions have also weakened the state’s domestic moral legitimacy. For instance, if the government acts as middleman between international aid donors and rural recipients locally, it may with time become perceived as transferring loyalty from the local to the international arena. Governments (or national elites) thus become interveners in relation to their own people. To the extent that interventions alter the political economy of a poor nation, the state may lose domestic legitimacy (Hughes 2003). These studies underline the significance of research on the perspectives of those intervened upon and the national context. They have also helped reveal the limits and silences of orthodox top-down analysis.

There is a rich and steadily growing literature on the limits and failures of liberal intervention. The problem may be further illustrated with a concrete example: the EU’s peace-building intervention in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). The EU aspires to be a global peace and security actor, and the Union is very active in various types of peace-building operations and security interventions in Africa. The EU’s role in the DRC is both comprehensive and much debated. In fact, the DRC has become a laboratory for EU crisis management. A significant portion of research reveals that the EU’s coherence and effectiveness as an actor in peace-building and security sector reform is severely compromised by the Union’s bureaucratic and organisational complexity (Lurweg 2011; see also www.eugrasp.eu). The EU’s institutional set-up provokes institutional divisions as well as overlapping competencies within the Union and among its member countries. The top-down and Brussels-led approach that is applied by EU bureaucrats negates or sidelines policy advice emanating from the field. These shortcomings are further exacerbated through personality-driven policies as well as mistrust, personal rivalry, mutual envy and open disrespect expressed by various Commission and Council actors against each other. Although the EU tries to follow a multifaceted approach both in its rhetoric and through the provision of a significant amount of development as well as humanitarian assistance and the deployment of various

civil and military missions in the DRC, its efficiency and relevance as an external intervener is deeply problematic. The inefficient and poorly defined strategy is closely related to the EU's internal weaknesses as well as its failure to develop appropriate links and relationships with those intervened upon (Froitzheim, Söderbaum and Taylor 2011). Importantly, the Union focuses exclusively on the Congolese government as its counterpart and fails to develop links to other actors of society and those intervened upon in a broader sense.

The EU's approach is state-centric and rather formalistic, which is flawed in a context where the ruling political regime in the DRC is both part and cause of the problem. Hence, the context and the logic of the conflict are not sufficiently taken into consideration by the EU, with the resulting effect that it becomes an actor for financing rather than for policies. In addition, while the regional dimension of the conflict is highlighted in the EU's rhetoric, the Union lacks functioning instruments and policies to deal with cross-border and regionalising effects. The EU continues to deal exclusively with the Congolese state, no matter how dysfunctional it is, and even if there is much talk about accommodating the regional dimension of the conflict. This demonstrates the EU's inability to deal with a regional conflict where no credible regional counterpart is present. Taken together, in spite of the enormous amount of attention and spending on the DRC and the larger Great Lakes region, the EU lacks a coherent strategy for its peace-building interventions in the DRC (Froitzheim, Söderbaum and Taylor 2011). Our research within the EU-GRASP project (www.eugrasp.eu) reveals that the EU's interventions are poorly designed in terms of their links to those intervened upon. This is closely linked with the fact that the EU appears to be more concerned with establishing symbolic presence and political representation than with real achievements and genuine peace-building on the ground.

Rethinking intervention – Towards a two-pronged approach

An intervention cannot be a neutral or impartial act because it brings new political opportunities and rewards for both intervener and intervened upon at various points in time. Outsiders and target populations become linked through new forms of interaction and political processes. Researchers and policy-makers must therefore begin to acknowledge both the importance and the complexity of the relationship between the intervener and those intervened upon. In particular, there is a need to recognise that interventions always become embroiled in local power struggles. Rubinstein observes that interventions are always ambiguous, meaning one thing for the intervener and another thing for those intervened upon:

The intervener maintains a perspective on the issues at hand and, by taking action to try to change that situation, takes a position on the situation... At the same time, those who receive the intervention make it meaningful from within their own experience and cultural framework. Sometimes, this can lead to interveners having understandings of what they are doing that are very different from those of the people who are subject to the intervention (Rubinstein 2005: 529).

Power relations between intervener and intervened upon affect the way interventions are constructed by different actors, even if they do not make up the full story of impacts. 'Whether or not the intervention is invited, there is always a delicate hierarchical relation between the intervener and the intervened' (Rubinstein 2005: 529). Richmond (2005) distinguishes between four different models/strategies of the liberal peace (hyper-conservative, conservative, orthodox and emancipatory), emphasising that each of these models is based on a different relationship between intervener and intervened upon. The point is that it is only the latter two that recognise the problem inherent in external forms of domination through intervention (Richmond 2005: 217; Chandler 2008). Hence, there is a pressing need for more research on how to understand, conceptualise as well as theorise the encounter between intervener and intervened upon.

Interventionary power cannot be understood as top-down domination even in encounters characterised by power inequalities.



U.S. Army / Jon Soucy

It is important to avoid simple categorisations and simplistic understandings of what constitutes intervener and intervened upon, but also the nature of their interaction. One fruitful example of research that avoids simplistic categorisations is Mannergren-Selimovic's study about how groups in Foca, Bosnia-Herzegovina, used local narratives of truth, justice and reconciliation, through their encounter with the International Criminal Tribunal for Former Yugoslavia (ICTY), producing processes that often differed from the outcomes intended by the outsiders/interveners (2010). Mannergren-Selimovic shows how interveners take part in the construction of a social arena, but also that the ensuing contentious exchange of plural meanings is not completely steered by one side, or one single actor. An important point is that the intervened upon never simply respond to an intervention that either succeeds or fails, without the intervener also becoming affected by local actions and constraints on actions (Mannergren-Selimovic 2010: 219; Sørensen 2009). Therefore, interventionary power cannot be understood as top-down domination even in encounters characterised by power inequalities.

A core constructivist insight is that all social relationships may affect social identities. Applied to relationships between interveners and intervened upon, this insight suggests that the *encounter* leads to identity changes. Such identity changes, and what they might mean for intervention impact, has not been sufficiently or systematically addressed (for exceptions, see Acharya 2004; Tussie 2003; Abrahamsen 2004; Pouligny 2006; Mehler 2008). The encounter between intervener and intervened may have implications for the self-image and identity of both parties, and consequently for their respective notions of truth and right. This may also have implications for understandings of efficiency. The intervener or intervened upon may as a result of their encounter react to, adapt to, work with, sabotage, or acquiesce in this social relationship. Against this backdrop, the complexity of the notion of consent becomes evident. The act of consent-giving to intervention will vary over time. It is not an absolute value; there will always be a spectrum of consenting, dissenting and opposing actors. The encounter enables new political possibilities that could not have been anticipated by either outsiders or insiders.

Intervening (successfully) in the domestic jurisdiction of a state would require getting close to local communities, because of the far-reaching and value-laden political projects and changes that this entails. Outsiders (interveners), there for a time-limited phase, nonetheless struggle to achieve such closeness, which impedes trust-building (Pouligny 2006: 251). Since outsiders connect themselves to 'universal' moral values, such as upholding the right to life through measures to protect civilians, or

promoting the liberal peace, there will inevitably be tensions with insiders – especially if these have not been consulted about what their needs really are (Poulligny 2006: 181). Hence, the local legitimacy of an intervention is best understood as a process-based value, dependent on local perceptions of impacts during the mission. Our argument is that interventions therefore should be analysed both from a top-down and a bottom-up perspective; or, differently expressed, both from the perspective of the intervener and from the perspective of those intervened upon.

A Senegalese peacekeeper with the African Union-United Nations Hybrid Operation in Darfur on duty at the main entrance to his contingent's team site in Um Baro, North Darfur, 14 November 2011.



UN Photo/Albert Gonzalez Farran

When interventions are strongly regime-biased, local legitimacy is quickly lost. The two peace operations deployed to Darfur to bring security and protection – the AU-led AMIS (2004–2007) and the AU-UN hybrid mission UNAMID (2007 onwards) – have had tremendously disappointing results. Insufficient conflict analysis and consultations were carried out by the AU and the UN, resulting in quite poor relations between intervener and intervened upon. In their considerations on when and how to implement the mission task to protect civilians, the AU and the UN prioritised the wishes of the host state – even though the host state's counter-insurgency strategy had caused most of the atrocities. Civilians and representatives of non-state armed groups, in their encounters with interveners, observed to what extent implementation matched the mandate formulations and public statements by AMIS/UNAMID mission leadership. In response they adopted pro- and anti-intervener strategies.² AMIS/UNAMID have had their

² The section draws on Gelot's field research in the Darfur region in November–December 2006. Pro-intervener strategies include cooperation and negotiation. Anti-intervener strategies include demonstrations; rebels' or traditional leaders' refusal of patrols; attacks, kidnappings and killings of international staff.

freedom of movement and access to those most insecure in Darfur (anti-government civilians in rural areas) blocked by the government of Sudan. Observing these developments, local authority leaders, traditional leaders, rebels and internally displaced people (especially those living in areas held by the most powerful rebel groups) maintained that the AU and the UN were biased in favour of the government of Sudan. A common impression was that the peacekeepers they hoped had come to protect their lives could not even protect themselves. Many civilians had seen peacekeepers witness but not stop attacks, killings and looting. Peacekeepers came after the attacks to write reports, with the permission of the military party controlling the area.

Pouligny's 'micro-sociology' of UN-led peace operations is a valuable example of how interventions can be studied from the bottom up. She highlights the importance of local agency, power relations, and perceptions regarding what interveners say and do. She demotes clinical and technical efficiency as valid parameters of intervention performance. The study carefully avoids homogenising the local society into a monolithic constituency and demonstrates that agency and political preferences are dynamic and plural. In spite of the obvious strengths of Pouligny's study, we need to point out that this is not an example of the type of two-pronged approach we are advocating here. Pouligny does not advance a theoretical argument. It is hard to discern what overall argument is advanced by the rich empirical material, and to whom it is addressed. Pouligny's argument is quite pragmatic: if interveners took the time to understand better the context into which they were entering, if they were prepared to negotiate interaction more frankly, and with more respect, interventions would have better impact overall (Pouligny 2006: 34-35). We believe that our two-pronged approach is more systematically focused on both ends of the relationship, taking into account both the intervener and the intervened upon. This is obviously an ambitious task.

We have identified what strand of intervention research we are engaging with, and why. We make the case for moving from efficiency to impact, and this case has been supported with reference to empirical illustrations of unintended, disappointing outcomes. Nonetheless, we take Pouligny's point that once interventions begin, the interveners' capacity for action becomes both enabled and constrained by local social and political realities. The inclination of the overall corps of outsiders (mission heads as well as other levels of intervening staff) towards understanding these realities and towards interaction will influence their own capacity for action (Pouligny 2006: 141).

Given the emphasis on local power struggles, future research focusing on the encounter between intervener and those intervened upon will need to pay close attention to how to unpack terms such as host state, national elite, society, civilians, as well as consent, and other contested issues relating to the question of by whom, for whom and for what purpose interventions are designed and carried out. Hence, it is crucial also to unpack the meaning of both interveners and those intervened upon. Focusing on the encounter between the interveners and those intervened upon is meant to avoid simplistic categorisation as well as dichotomisation. Neither the intervener nor the ‘targets’ of intervention are homogenous groups. In particular, given the tendency to ignore those intervened upon, it is certainly necessary to problematise and nuance this group. The targets are not simply objects deprived of agency. Nor do they speak for all of society; nor do they represent moral rightness any more than the interveners do. Having argued that the exclusion of the targets of intervention has led to poor peace and security governance, we cannot simplistically assume that their inclusion will ensure the best outcome in all cases. There is a considerable lack of research on this aspect, and further theoretical development depends on more empirical research on the patterns and degree of inclusion/exclusion (Schulz and Söderbaum 2010; Richmond 2011; MacGinty 2010).

UN Photo/Martine Perret



Having argued that the exclusion of the targets of intervention has led to poor peace and security governance, we cannot simplistically assume that their inclusion will ensure the best outcome in all cases.

Although there are many ways to theorise and study the encounter and power struggles between interveners and those intervened upon, our elaboration above leads us to the conclusion that a critical perspective is the most promising. By adopting the distinction between problem-solving and critical theory developed by Robert Cox one may differentiate between an intervention account that looks at isolated technical flaws, ‘top down’, and one that instead contextualises, denaturalises or problematises the practice, ‘bottom up’. The problem-solving mode of intervention analysis takes the prevailing social and power relationships and the institutions into which they are organised as the given framework. The purpose of problem-solving modes of knowledge production is to make the order of the day work more smoothly; hence the starting point is to accept that intervention performs an essentially problem-solving task in world order (Bellamy and Williams 2004: 6).

The critical mode of intervention analysis, instead, calls into question world order by enquiring into the origins of existing institutions and social power relations, and by observing how and whether they might be undergoing change. Indeed, it is first and foremost critical (and poststructuralist) research that has enabled both a problematisation of external interventions as well as a more systematic analysis from the bottom up, which seeks to turn local populations into subjects, as op-

posed to objects (Bellamy and Williams 2004: 7). The forte of critical analysis to date has been its explicit normative discussion of tensions in world politics, laying bare the political and normative assumptions behind interventions, and the dangers and tensions that may follow. Importantly, critical research is able to incorporate that interveners and recipients are bound together by complex relationships that extend beyond the temporal limits of any particular intervention. The promise of social change and emancipation facilitates the imagination of, and the discursive constitution of, alternative politics. Indeed, some studies have advanced a bottom-up perspective, which emphasises the role of non-state actors, civil society and outsider-insider relations for ongoing conflict transformation or emancipatory politics (Bleiker 2004; Richmond 2011; Stamnes 2004).

Conclusion

Given the many millions that die in the large-scale emergencies that interventions are trying to manage or solve, and the enormous amount of resources invested in various types of interventions every year, it is difficult to imagine any research area within the social sciences that has higher policy relevance, or one which is more controversial. The academic significance of ‘the problem of intervention’ is further enhanced by the difficulty of finding solid arguments for how complex social problems can be solved from the ‘outside’, by external ‘interveners’.

This article takes as its starting point the realisation that in spite of a massive amount of literature in the field, there is little agreement regarding when and why interventions ‘fail’ or ‘succeed’. Even if certain interventions are widely considered ‘successful’, the majority of interventions are controversial. Empirical evidence shows that many interventions – regardless of whether these are humanitarian interventions, peacekeeping operations, peace-building or state-building interventions, governance interventions or development interventions – tend to be poorly planned, guided by narrow ideological or strategic goals, and yield less than satisfactory results. Indeed, many interventions even appear to be counterproductive.

The core of the problem, in our view, is that most interventions are usually analysed and assessed as well as designed and implemented from the standpoint of the ‘intervener’, with less attention given to national context and those being intervened upon. We need, therefore, to rethink the way we study as well as carry out external interventions. Our main message is that the encounter between interveners and those intervened upon lies at the heart of any improved understanding of the logic and impact of external interventions.

Our study draws attention to the fact that interveners (and the underlying motives and goals of external interveners) need to be problematised, rethought and reconceptualised. Likewise, as elaborated upon earlier, the so-called ‘intervened upon’ are not a homogenous group or objects deprived of agency. We suggest a focus on the *encounter* and the relationship between interveners and those intervened upon. Such an encounter necessarily requires a broadening of the conventional parameters of intervention and at least a partly new type of analysis whereby we combine the top-down approach with a bottom-up perspective. Through the top-down perspective one can analyse how intervention is implemented and legitimised by the interveners whereas the bottom-up perspective can provide evidence regarding how the intervention is perceived and reacted upon by those who are objects or recipients of intervention, both on the national and the local level. In essence, in sharp contrast to the current tendency in the field to concentrate on interventions from the top down, we draw attention to local dynamics and cultural meaning systems that inform social action as well as the power relations between interveners and those intervened upon.

Even if certain interventions are widely considered ‘successful’, the majority of interventions are controversial.



US Army/Kieran Cuddihy

U.S. Army soldiers on foot patrol during an operation in Tharthar, Iraq, Oct. 7, 2007.

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