

BOOK REVIEW:

Local ownership of peace building in Afghanistan: Shouldering responsibility for sustainable peace and development by Chuck Thiessen

Reviewer: Abdul Tamim Karimi¹

After the collapse of the Taliban regime in 2001 and the invasion of international security forces, Afghanistan has experienced enormous international peace building intervention (such as huge amounts of aid) for the purpose of security, stability, restructuring of political and economic processes, rehabilitation of infrastructure, and community development. The main objective of *Local Ownership of Peace Building in Afghanistan: Shouldering Responsibility for Sustainable Peace and Development* (Plymouth, United Kingdom: Lexington Books) by Chuck Thiessen (2014) was to investigate the possibility of local ownership of peace building activities in Afghanistan.

Thiessen, a scholar and practitioner of international peace building in war-torn countries, has consulted for several international and local organizations in Afghanistan and managed a variety of peace building projects in several countries. According to Thiessen, actual partnership and cooperation to empower Afghan leaders and actors are significant in order to salvage the country's worsening state and to achieve a sustainable and positive peace in Afghanistan. In the book, Thiessen points out two questions, forming the basic argument:

- Why are international and local Afghan groups and individuals still struggling, ten years after the 2001 foreign invasion of Afghanistan, to define and implement an effective strategy that leads to significant advances in local Afghan control over peace building prioritization, project design, and evaluation?
- What can be done to bolster efforts at ensuring increased and literal Afghan ownership over peace building activities?

To answer these two questions, this publication is divided into six chapters and is discussed accordingly. The first chapter briefly introduces the topic of local ownership and peace building in the context of Afghanistan and addresses the problems with adopting local ownership, such as the lack of political motivation to hand over control of local ownership of peace building from foreign partners to domestic counterparts. Additionally, due to increases in grants, government counterparts are known to be corrupt or incapacitated, therefore the dilemmas and struggles faced by both counterparts remain undocumented and undefined. Moreover, this chapter discusses the significance of the research on this topic for the current situation in Afghanistan.

Chapter two focuses on the theory of peace building and discusses the theoretical changes and practice of peace building through the intervention of the international community. Moreover, this chapter explains two rival versions of peace building theory; the first set of theory is considered as “(neo) liberal peace building”, which is the actual peace building practice in Afghanistan and holds liberalization as a remedy for conflict. Based on a survey of peace building theory and practice, four broad (neo) liberal peace building priorities are revealed and discussed: (1) security and demilitarization; (2) political transition; (3) social and economic development; and (4) reconciliation, justice, and social rehabilitation. The second set of theory is considered as “(neo) liberal emancipatory peace building”, which is much more critical in tone that pushes on alternative peace building paradigms, and the emancipatory peace building tenet is fundamental for local ownership.

The third chapter mainly discusses the context and history of local ownership of peace building in Afghanistan, and mentions that the current international intervention is certainly not an isolated event, but

¹ Graduate School of Asia Pacific Studies, Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University (APU), Beppu City, Japan
tamim_afghan4@hotmail.com

the push for local ownership is tied up to the history of conflict in Afghanistan. Therefore, peace builders have to learn lessons from Afghan history regarding the challenging task in creating sustainable peace; and to investigate the contextual factors, such as geography, divided population, central authority and Islam, gender and society, and a tribal social system and loyalty that have been unchanged over the centuries. These factors have served to shape the current state of Afghan society.

Chapter four investigates the debate about foreign ownership of peace building in Afghanistan. The author collected the voice of foreign peace builders and actors through interviews, investigating the possibility of Afghan ownership of peace building. The author suggests a strong justification in the role of foreign organizations and troops in Afghanistan for the continuation of foreign engagement in the ownership of peace building. Moreover Thiessen in this chapter identifies four dilemmas that must be creatively addressed for reforms by international actors to achieve Afghan ownership.

Chapter five explores the debate of ownership of peace building from the angle of the Afghan government and civil society. Both stated that the ownership of peace building is necessary for them, and that ownership should be handed over from the international community to the government. Finally, chapter six addresses and responds to numerous dilemmas raised in both chapters 4 and 5 in terms of achieving ownership over peace building in Afghanistan.

The strength of this book is that, the author has interviewed both local and foreign peace building actors, who are working in Afghanistan and describes their point of view and demonstrates the right route of increasing local ownership. In addition to sharing the perspectives of the participants (peace building staff) in the appropriate peace-building role, the author discussed the eight areas of struggle for Afghan ownership, as illuminated by the foreign participants. The eight areas are: (1) donors and peace building policy and practice; (2) ineffectiveness of aid and wasted money on project costs; (3) sidelining the Afghan government; (4) inappropriate stance toward the local; (5) meddling by regional nations; (6) ineffective capacity building; (7) distorted post intervention work environment and economy; and (8) abuses by NATO military forces. On the other hand, the author stated the significant role of the Afghan government in the peace-building program, though the local participants offered up critiques of the Afghan government structure and processes that highlight several factors serving as barriers over peace building. The five struggle areas are described as low capacity, rampant corruption, inadequate government reach, ineffective leadership and decision-making, and ineffective government structures.

The above-mentioned struggles are very important issues that need to be changed and strengthened for the realization of Afghan ownership over peace building. In fact, it has been more than ten years since the invasion of international security forces in Afghanistan, but still the peace building practice is led by foreigners and not well developed in the country.

Although the book has several strengths, there are some points that have not been discussed well. First, the book is missing the context and experience of other war-torn countries faced with such a situation over the creation and transformation of local ownership and responsibilities for sustainable peace building and development, which would be helpful for the reader. Second, in the last chapter of book, the author designs a holistic system as policy recommendation. The elements are 'inclusive advisory committee to restructure the system, system of education to empower the Afghan leaders and people, system of advocacy to transform international-local and civil society-government relationship, and conflict resolution process' to deal with conflict on the journey of Afghan ownership of peace building. They might need further description in order for the reader to understand how they could expedite the journey toward Afghan ownership of peace building in Afghanistan.

Overall, the abovementioned shortcomings in the book do not undermine Thiessen's discussion. This book is quite informative and well-structured as mentioned earlier; the goal is to investigate perceptions of Afghan ownership over the peace building areas. Moreover, the book emphasizes the voice of both local and foreign peace building actors in order to identify the right way to ensure increased local ownership.