CONFLICT, PEACEBUILDING, AND SECURITY: REFLECTIONS ON EFFECTIVE WRITING AND DISSEMINATION STRATEGIES

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ABOUT THE PROGRAM

Launched in March 2012, the African Peacebuilding Network (APN) supports independent African research on conflict-affected countries and neighboring regions of the continent, as well as the integration of high-quality African research-based knowledge into global policy communities. In order to advance African debates on peacebuilding and promote African perspectives, the APN offers competitive research grants and fellowships, and it funds other forms of targeted support, including strategy meetings, seminars, grantee workshops, commissioned studies, and the publication and dissemination of research findings. In doing so, the APN also promotes the visibility of African peacebuilding knowledge among global and regional centers of scholarly analysis and practical action and makes it accessible to key policymakers at the United Nations and other multilateral, regional, and national policymaking institutions.

ABOUT THE SERIES

The APN Lecture Series provides an avenue for influential thinkers, practitioners, policy makers, and activists to reflect on and speak to the critical issues and challenges facing African peacebuilding. This publication series documents lectures given on the platform of the African Peacebuilding Network (APN) program, and its institutional partners. These lectures provide an analysis of processes, institutions, and mechanisms for, as well as the politics of peacebuilding on the continent, and contribute towards broadening debates and knowledge about the trajectories of conflict and peace in conflict-affected African countries and regions. The APN Lecture series seeks to address knowledge gaps in African peace and security, including its links to local, national, and global structures and processes. These publications also provide critical overviews and innovative reflections on the state of the field, including new thinking critical to knowledge production and dissemination in overlooked or emerging areas of African peacebuilding.

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KEYNOTE ADDRESS AT THE 2023 APN-NEXTGEN TRAINING WORKSHOP

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INTRODUCTION

The current centers of power—the United States of America (USA) and Europe in the West, and Japan and China in the East—are past their prime and on the decline side of the rise and fall dynamics that all civilizations seem to experience.[1] However, Africa is just at the start of an exciting new journey. We have the opportunity to reshape our politics and economies to meet the new challenges of our time.

In Yuen Yuen Ang's book *How China Escaped the Poverty Trap*, she points out that strong established institutions protect the status quo, so it is only when you have young and weak institutions that significant innovation is possible.[2] So what we and others see as a weakness—our fragile governance institutions—can under certain conditions and with visionary and effective leadership also be a comparative advantage. It is still possible for us to significantly change how we organize ourselves politically, how we organize our economies, and how we relate to our environment. This gives us a potential adaptation advantage over those societies that are already locked into set and path-dependent trajectories.

According to Donella Meadows, the first and most important tool we have to realize this potential is our understanding of the paradigm we find ourselves in, both how we participate in shaping it when we unconsciously and consciously make sense of the world and how others view and shape the world.[3] The next level of influence comes from how we organize our politics and economics, i.e., the structures and rules and laws we employ.

Knowledge is thus the key—the highest order of leverage for influencing complex systems—to making sense of our paradigms and those of others, and for providing an evidence base for decisions about political and economic structures, rules, and laws. And this is of course even more relevant in an age of global uncertainty, rivalry, and change.

The research supported by the APN and Next Gen represents a part of Africa's knowledge capital for the future. The continent needs to invest in knowledge to realize its full potential. Resolving conflict and sustaining peace are critical prerequisites for achieving our potential.

I have been asked to share ideas about effective writing and dissemination strategies. In other words, to write about how we generate knowledge and share it in ways that can potentially have an impact on how our societies adapt and thrive in the coming decades.

REFLECTIONS ON EFFECTIVE WRITING AND DISSEMINATION STRATEGIES

If we are going to think about effective writing and dissemination, then we need to start by reflecting on what we mean by "effective." This could mean different things for different people and contexts, but at its most general, we all share an understanding that effective means having some kind of impact on knowledge and behavior. In other words, effective essentially means contributing to a change in knowledge and behavior.

As researchers, the two domains we want to influence are knowledge and behavior—or research and practice—and the two are inter-connected and reflexive, meaning they influence each other. So, if we want to improve our understanding, we must influence other researchers and intellectuals that are part of the collective knowledge trust of our societies. The primary way we do this is through conducting research, capturing our results in writing, and then sharing our findings with scholarly, policy, and practitioner communities. Later, I will share some of my own experiences with trying to do that meaningfully.

To influence practice, we need to engage with the policy and practice communities and create channels to communicate the knowledge and evidence they need to do their jobs. This means there must be an intent to have policy and practice impact when conducting, writing, and disseminating research. This requires that we do things differently from how we influence other researchers, and I will also share some of my experiences in this area.

I will share three examples that capture some of the experiences I had with trying to effectively write and disseminate research. Two of these would fall in the policy and practice category, and one is about influencing a research field. I will conclude by drawing some lessons from these three experiences.

Sharing your own experiences is risky—you are opening yourself up to scrutiny and critical reflection. So please accept these examples in the spirit intended, namely as shared with the intent to critically learn together.

FIRST EXAMPLE: SUPPORTING THE DEVELOPMENT OF AFRICAN PEACE AND SECURITY CAPACITY

The first example relates to my work in the Training for Peace (TfP) project, which is now in its 27th year. It is a Norwegian-funded project implemented by the African Center for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes (ACCORD), the Institute for Security Studies (ISS), and the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI). The project has evolved over the years, but it is essentially aimed at helping the African Union and other African institutions strengthen their capacity in the area of peace and security.[4]

My own work in this project has involved the civilian dimension of peace operations, civil-military and multidimensional coordination and integration, financing and partnerships, and doctrinal development.

The first lesson I can identify from this experience relates to the nature of the relationship between researchers, policymakers, and practitioners. As we come from and operate in different professional communities, we need to try to understand each other's realities. This is best achieved by establishing long-term relationships that create mutual trust based on respect for each other's roles and contributions.

It is difficult to effectively share an idea, especially when it differs from the established norm, with someone you do not know. It is difficult to accept criticism from someone you do not trust and respect. So, it is going to be very difficult to have an impact on policy and practice—to influence knowledge and behavior—if you have not previously invested in a relationship with the people you are trying to influence. Most of us work on some topics and fields our whole career and we thus have the time to invest in long-term relationships and networks.

The second lesson is to choose and invest in multi-year projects or topics. If you work on one or more areas for several years with the people in the institutions you study and engage with, you have the opportunity to accompany them on their journey and to gain in-depth knowledge of the process and underlying dynamics that make it possible for some initiatives to successfully become integrated into those institutions, and to learn why others fail.

Engaging in one or more topics for a number of years enables you to gain the in-depth knowledge needed to understand the field, the institution, and the context in which it operates. This means that the policy and practice advice you generate is more likely to be relevant to the issues they are grappling with and more likely to be realistic in terms of being implementable in the context they operate in. This long-term engagement also creates opportunities for relationships to form and the trust and credibility established make it much more likely that the advice given will be seen as credible and well-intentioned—especially when it is somewhat critical of established practice and recommends changes that involve investment in time and resources that differ from the established patterns. So, instead of hopping from topic to topic, it is more impactful to engage in a few topics/issues in greater depth.

SECOND EXAMPLE: ADAPTIVE PEACEBUILDING

For the second example, I turn to what we mean by influence in the research community. Here I can share my experience with introducing a somewhat new theoretical approach to an established field. I did my PhD on the "implications of complexity theory for the peacebuilding coherence dilemma."[5] Complexity theory was then even more unknown than it is now in the fields of political science, international relations, and peace and conflict studies.

When I decided to do my PhD on this topic and started looking around for universities, I discovered that there was an international authority on complexity theory in the philosophy department of Stellenbosch University in South Africa and that the philosophy department and the political science department were on the same floor and shared a tea room. So, the supervisor I had in mind from the political science department and the expert in complexity theory knew each other, at least socially, and that enabled me to suggest a PhD project that could be jointly supervised by both. So, the lesson here is that when you introduce something new, it is useful to use other established relationships and networks to build trust and confidence in the project among the stakeholders.

However, a few years into the PhD project the differences between what the political science and philosophy departments expected from a PhD thesis became unmanageable and I had to adapt my expectations and move the project over to the philosophy department. So, another lesson is that one must remain flexible and willing to adapt along the way in order to achieve your overall objective. It was also very important to have mentors that could guide me through this process. When you are in the middle of a process, and when you are in an asymmetrical power relationship with university departments and professors, you need mentors that know the process that have the seniority to provide advice and give you the confidence you need to make choices and see them through.

Ten years after my PhD, my use of complexity theory in peace and conflict studies still faces skepticism from many mainstream theorists, but one development that significantly boosted its uptake was the publication of an article on adaptive peacebuilding in one of the top international relations journals, *International Affairs*.[6] This article was part of a special issue and I did not understand the significance of the opportunity or the impact of publishing in a top journal at the time.

So, the lesson here is to grasp and make use of the opportunities offered, including the opportunity to publish in high-impact factor journals. And, when you are in a position to do so, offer such opportunities to others. Let me emphasize, however, that I have published in a whole range of journals and most of my publications are in journals that are known in my areas of specialization. So, I am not suggesting that you should only publish in top journals. My advice is to grasp that opportunity when it comes along because it is rare.

Contributing this article as part of a special edition also hints at another important lesson, namely the need to create an enabling collaborative environment for your work. You need to identify who else is working on your topic or in your field and work with them to create momentum behind your research agenda. Sometimes we see others working on the same topic as competitors. I strongly encourage you not to develop that perspective.

My experience is that we need each other, even if we may disagree on specific aspects, to create the larger research agenda within which our research is situated, together. You need special issues, panels, and roundtables at conferences, and perhaps later journals dedicated to your field in order to develop your research and hone your writing skills. So, invest in the networks and relations needed to make your individual research part of a wider community. And encourage and help others to be part of that community.

So, my main advice when it comes to effective writing and dissemination in the research context is to embrace opportunities, including sometimes creating your own, to do the research you are passionate about. And seek out others in the same field; create a community with them so that together you generate momentum for your research agenda in the wider field you are part of.

EXAMPLE 3: COMPREHENSIVE PLANNING AND PERFORMANCE SYSTEM FOR UN PEACEKEEPING OPERATIONS

My third and last example relates to an experience I had with helping introduce a new system into an established policy and practice bureaucracy. In 2018, I was asked to assess the performance assessment tools that the UN was using for its peacekeeping operations.

The first thing to note is that this request was probably based on the many years of prior research and engagement I had with UN peacekeeping, as well as the work of a network I established and coordinated, the Effectiveness of Peacekeeping Network (EPON).[7] So, this reinforces the earlier lessons identified in terms of investing in long-term networks and engaging in multi-year in-depth projects. Working in a specialized field for a few years generates both the knowledge and network required for one to identify gaps or opportunities, as well as the ability to make proposals about how to address those needs. Opportunities do not fall in your lap. You need to identify them and then do the work to suggest ideas, write proposals, consult people, and ultimately convince others that your idea is feasible and can improve things for the better. There is thus an element of entrepreneurship. One needs to be willing to put in the effort to turn an opportunity into a viable project.

Through this commission, I saw an opportunity to apply some of my research on complexity theory, and together with a colleague that shared this interest, we undertook the study.[8] Amongst others we recommended that the UN establish a comprehensive performance assessment system as the various tools they had at the time enabled them to assess various aspects of performance, but not the overall performance of specific missions. The UN accepted our recommendation and asked us to help them design and implement such a system. It is now almost 5 years later, and this system is now rolled-out to most UN peacekeeping missions and several people are working on it, both at the headquarters in New York and in the different field missions.[9]

The system we helped design was informed by several principles based on complexity theory and adaptive approaches to sustaining peace. Applying these ideas in practice has also helped us to improve our understanding of the various factors that influence how these principles and approaches are integrated into large bureaucracies and peace interventions that engage with social and political processes in transition. One of the first things we realized was that we needed to adapt our research language to fit into the established policy language for it to be understood and embraced. Over time, more of the research concepts and language became understood and accepted into the policy language.

A further lesson was the need to let the people who knew the system, and how to operate within the system, lead the process and influence the design of the system. Our role, from a research or knowledge perspective, is to share the ideas, principles, and evidence that inform decision-making. We need to let go and allow others in the policy process to lead the application of these ideas in practice. So, the lesson for me about policy impact from this experience is to lead or influence from behind. Focus on what is important from a knowledge perspective and let the policy experts lead the implementation.

CONCLUSION: 6 LESSONS IDENTIFIED

I started by identifying that effective writing and dissemination probably means having some kind of impact on knowledge and behavior, i.e., contributing to a change in knowledge and behavior. I shared three of my own experiences with you, two related to policy or behavior and one related to knowledge or research.

I can summarize the various experiences I shared in the following six lessons:

1. *Invest in mutual trust relationships.* It is unlikely that someone is going to invite you to offer advice, or to accept your advice—especially if it is critical of the established practice if you do not have the credibility that comes from having an established relationship.

2. *Develop in-depth knowledge by investing in multi-year projects.* You cannot be effective without in-depth knowledge of the subject and context and that requires gaining in-depth knowledge over time through sustained effort. So instead of jumping from paper to paper, or topic to topic, invest in going deep into a few topics. This also creates the opportunity to invest in long-term relationships with your policy and practice counterparts in those areas.

3. *Create or grasp opportunities offered to undertake research, publish, and/or engage in policy processes.* This means that we need to understand that in the course of our careers, some opportunities may be offered, and we need to continuously make choices about which of these we can engage with or not. It is not possible to choose all, and it is impossible to know beforehand where they would lead, but nevertheless, we need to make choices as best we can. If I have to suggest a few principles to guide these choices, I will say: be guided by those that best match your interest and plans, and that have the highest potential return (e.g., a high-ranking journal), even if that also implies risk.

4. *Innovate and manage risk through relationships.* When you introduce something new, it is useful to use established relationships and networks to build trust and confidence in the idea or project among the stakeholders. It is also better to try the idea out first among a few whose opinions you respect, and then refine it based on their feedback.

5. *Invest in an enabling community.* We cannot write and disseminate in isolation. We need to create new or engage with existing communities so that together we generate momentum for our research agenda. The more there are others working on the same topic or field, the more your work will find an enabling community. We are co-responsible for nurturing that community. We also need that community to hone our writing skills. We improve our writing over time through learning by doing, based on feedback from others. We need our community's feedback to improve and we need to give feedback to others to help them hone their skills.

6. *Lead from behind.* When it comes to policy impact, researchers need to let go. Let those who are experts in the policy world take the lead in the design and implementation. Researchers should focus on sharing the ideas, principles, and evidence that can inform decisions, but should leave those decisions to the policymakers and practitioners who have the mandates to make and implement those decisions.

TWO CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Not everything you try is not going to be a success. Failing is a normal part of the process. In professional football (or soccer), only about 1 percent of all attacking

plays and only around 10 percent of all shots taken at the target end up in a goal.[10] Similarly, all academic journals and research application processes are designed in such a way that only a small portion of submissions and applications are successful. We thus need to anticipate that we will probably fail more than we will succeed. Learning from failure is also a necessary part of gaining knowledge and experience. Every time we get a rejection letter for an article or a research application, we need to see it as an opportunity to gain more experience and learn. You will never reach a point in your career where you stop learning, i.e., where you stop failing. Even established senior researchers receive rejections. If they do not, it is a signal that they have stopped being innovative and taking risks.

The key to effective writing and dissemination is, however, not to focus too much on success and failure, but rather on consistent hard work across all the domains—reading, research, writing, networking, collaborating in special editions, participating in conferences, engaging in boards and advisory capacities, and mentoring and supporting others.

Effective writing and dissemination come about through the everyday consistent effort over your entire career life of gaining in-depth knowledge, honing the skill of writing, building long-term relationships, and investing in your research community, i.e., those that share the same broad research agenda.

NOTES

1. Turchin, Peter. War and Peace and War: The rise and fall of empires (New York: Penguin Random House, 2007).

2. Yuen Yuen Ang. How China Escaped the Poverty Trap (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016).

3. Meadows, Donella. Leverage Points: Places to intervene in a system (Hartland: The Sustainability Institute, 1999).

4. For more about the Training for Peace project, see: https://trainingforpeace.org

5. de Coning, Cedric. Complexity, Peacebuilding & Coherence: Implications of Complexity for the Peacebuilding Coherence Dilemma, PhD dissertation, Applied Ethics, Department of Philosophy (Stellenbosch: University of Stellenbosch, 2012), available at: http://scholar.sun.ac.za/handle/10019.1/71891

6. de Coning, Cedric. Adaptive Peacebuilding, International Affairs, Volume 94, Issue 2, March 2018, Pages 301–317, https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iix251

7. For more on the Effectiveness of Peacekeeping Network (EPON), see: https://effective-peaceops.net

8. de Coning, Cedric, and Emery Brusset. Towards a Comprehensive Results-based Reporting and Performance Assessment Framework for UN Peacekeeping Operations (Oslo: Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, 2018), available at: https://www.nupi.no/en/publications/cristin-pub/towards-a-comprehensive-results-based-reporting-and-performance-assessment-framework-for-un-peacekeeping-operations

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