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Cedric de Coning  
*Norwegian Institute of International Affairs*

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## **Coping with the Complexity of the Changing Character of War: Toward a New Paradigm of Adaptive Peace**

**Cedric de Coning**

*Norwegian Institute of International Affairs*

### **Abstract**

The world has entered a period of heightened geopolitical instability that is compounded by climate change and the emergence of new technologies. The number of conflicts and related deaths are increasing. Dramatic failures in Afghanistan and elsewhere show that the mainstream approach to peace and conflict is no longer effective. The aim of this article is to contribute to re-thinking peace and security in two ways. First, by explaining why trying to influence complex social change process with a determined-design approach is self-defeating. Second, by introducing adaptive peace theory as a normative and functional approach to ending violent conflicts and sustaining peace in specific contexts, that is aimed at navigating the complexity inherent in trying to nudge societal change processes toward peace, without causing harm.

*Dr. Cedric de Coning is a research professor in the research group on peace, conflict, and development at the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI). He is also a senior advisor for the African Centre for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes (ACCORD) in South Africa.*

The collapse of the internationally backed government in Afghanistan in August 2021 made for dramatic news, but it also forced the international peace and security community to recognize that they must seriously reflect on the effectiveness of the theories of change they have employed to try to bring about peace and stability in places such as Afghanistan, the Balkans, the Middle East, and Africa. These interventions represent highly concentrated international efforts to build state and social institutions according to predetermined international best practices and standards, in some cases backed by large peacekeeping or other military forces. However, despite billions of dollars spent, these international efforts have failed to transform the underlying drivers of violent conflict in these places. As a result, it is today increasingly less clear what types of problems, if any, could be resolved through such international peace and security efforts.<sup>1</sup>

Some argue that this is due to the changing character of war, and that as a result, our methods for ending wars and managing conflict have become outdated.<sup>2</sup> In this article I will pursue a different line of inquiry. Instead of focusing on the changing character of war theory, I will argue that an additional reason why the international peace and security community's efforts have failed, has to do with the shortcomings of the mainstream approach and related methodology that this community has employed to try to make, keep, and build peace in societies that experience conflict. I will explain this mainstream approach and why it is problematic in the next section, but in short, it is a determined-design approach, i.e., the outcome and theory of change is predetermined. I focus on the need to change the way we understand conflict as well as our approach to sustaining peace.

Donella Meadows argued that when influencing a complex system, having an effect on higher order system factors like principles and rules is more effective than influencing lower order factors like stocks and flows.<sup>3</sup> In her system of levels of influence, the second highest order of influence is having an effect on the paradigm of the system, and the most influential level is changing your own paradigm, i.e., your own underlying understanding and approach to the system in question. My aim with this article is to contribute to the larger process that is underway to re-think international peace and security by helping the peace research, policy, and practitioner community understand the shortcomings of the determined-design paradigm, and to introduce adaptive peace theory as an alternative method for making sense of conflicts and an approach to supporting societies in their efforts to sustain their own peace.

I will build my argument by first explaining how I understand and use peace and what I mean by the changing character of war and peace. I will argue that in the current geopolitical context, adapting our understanding and approach to peace is not only relevant, but urgent. I will then introduce complexity theory and employ it to explain why we need a theory of peace that is designed to cope with, rather than attempt to gain control over, the uncertainty inherent in sustaining peace. Last, I introduce adaptive peace theory as a new approach to and method for understanding and influencing peace processes.

## **Sustaining Peace**

In this article I use peace in its broadest possible framing to include all policy instruments aimed at conflict management, conflict resolution, or conflict transformation, as well as bringing about stability, ensuring security, and making, keeping, and building peace. I use sustaining peace as a concept that implies that there are always some pockets or elements of peace in a society, even amidst violent conflict, and that the purpose of peacebuilding is to increase and expand this peace, while also safeguarding and protecting the peace that exists

Peace is an ambiguous concept that can mean different things for different people, but in the context of this article, a society that effectively constrains direct and structural violence, and that is self-governed by social institutions that promote social justice, as understood by the society in question, would be regarded as more peaceful than a comparable society where this is not the case. This concept of peace combines what Johan Galtung referred to as negative peace (absence of violence) and positive peace (presence of social justice).<sup>4</sup> On a spectrum of more or less peaceful, violence between states is today rare, but violence among interest and identity groups remains a challenge in many countries. The overall number of conflicts, and their victims, has declined since the end of the Cold War, but over the last decade this trend has been reversed and is now increasing.<sup>5</sup>

The puzzle that peace studies grapple with is threefold. First, how can societies prevent violent conflict and sustain peace. Second, where violent conflict is occurring, how can societies end war and transition toward peace. Third, what can external actors like the United Nations, the African Union, or international non-government organizations do to assist these processes.

Peace manifests in a specific socio-ecological context. I will most often refer to societies, but when I do, I use society in the broadest possible and most inclusive way, implying households, villages, communities, states, and communities of states or regional and international organizations. I understand society as a social system that is emergent from a patterned network of relationships that constitute a coherent whole that exists between individuals, groups, and institutions.<sup>6</sup> I also recognize that societies are embedded in ecologies and that all social systems are also social-ecological systems.

## **The Changing Character of War and Peace**

Séverine Autesserre has coined the term Peace Inc. for what can be thought of as the peace industry, i.e., those researchers, policy makers, and practitioners that make a living out of international peace and security.<sup>7</sup> The critical school in peace and conflict studies argues that in our contemporary condition, Peace Inc. understands its role as transferring Western liberal norms and institutional models that sustain peace in the West, to societies affected by conflict, in the belief that adopting these norms and institutions will help them to end conflict and sustain peace.<sup>8</sup> The underlying paradigm that informs Peace Inc.'s understanding and approach is that international peace and security experts have the agency to analyze a conflict and identify its causes, design interventions based on international knowledge and best practices, and then execute these interventions through instruments such as peacekeeping and aid, with a high likelihood of success. Peace Inc. thus has a predetermined value system, a belief that it has the agency to end wars and introduce peace and has the organizations and instruments needed to act on its values and beliefs. When results have been unsatisfactory, evaluators have rarely been tasked with reviewing the underlying theory of change. Instead, the focus has been on poor implementation, insufficient resources, or local spoilers.<sup>9</sup>

The subjects in this paradigm are seen as passive, or at best their agency to act on their own is weak. When left to themselves they are fragile, poor, and conflict prone. They therefore need external help to maintain their stability and guidance to build their nations and states. They are thus framed as recipients or beneficiaries of international peace, security, and development assistance.

One reason why this dominant determined-design approach is so resistant to change is because most international peace work has been financed through official development assistance (ODA). Donors, and their parliaments, prefer theories of change that posit a linear cause and effect

relationship between the volume and quality of ODA invested in a particular society affected by conflict, and its impact on peace.<sup>10</sup> I will explain why their expectations are unrealistic, but I recognize that their interest in achieving a positive return on their investment is not unreasonable. It is unrealistic because, as I explain in the next section, the very act of intervening in another society with the intent to bring about a predetermined effect desired by a donor nation or external peacebuilder, undermines the ability of that society to achieve and sustain a self-sustainable peace on its own. It is thus a self-defeating aim. If donor agencies cannot free themselves from providing support framed in ways that are conditioned on norm transfer and linear theories of change, then freeing peacebuilding from its ODA yoke may be one of the steps needed to break free from the determined-design paradigm and to decolonize Peace Inc.

Another reason why there is so much structural inertia that prevents a move away from a determined-design approach is because a lot of effort has been invested in professionalizing mediation and peacebuilding over the last two decades. As a result, much of the international effort to improve the effectiveness and sustainability of Peace Inc. has been inward looking. For example, the effort to improve mediation outcomes has primarily focused on the role of the mediator, rather than on, for example, enhanced understanding of the interests, behaviors, and relationship dynamics among the parties to a conflict. Because the dominant focus has been on the mediator, and the international standards and expectations they have to meet, rather than on the realities and context-specific drivers of conflicts, the result has been that many peace processes, and the agreements they generate, resemble each other.<sup>11</sup> This is not because many of the conflicts the international community have mediated over the last decades have suffered from the same causes and drivers, but rather because the mediators all have to comply with the same international standards and are guided by the same guidance and toolkits. The motive behind professionalizing international mediation and peacebuilding is perfectly understandable and reasonable, but it has produced a top-down determined-design approach to international mediation.

It is thus not surprising that there is a growing gap between how Peace Inc. makes sense of and acts to bring about peace, and how ordinary people experience conflict and international mediation and peacebuilding. For people in Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, or Somalia, most of the international effort has had little tangible effect on their everyday lived experience of conflict or peace.<sup>12</sup> Peace Inc. has been slow to recognize this gap, but the peace research community identified it two decades ago and has vocally criticized what they call the liberal peace model.<sup>13</sup> In response, the academic literature has experienced a local turn, i.e., a focus on studying and understanding conflict and peace from the bottom up, rather than from the top down.<sup>14</sup> Hybrid peace proponents have also pointed out that in reality, peace processes generate complex outcomes.<sup>15</sup> Peace Inc. needs the consent, compliance, and cooperation of national and local actors and thus needed to make compromises to accommodate the local. Local actors on the other hand need international recognition and support, and thus needed to make compromises to accommodate their relationship with the international.

However, despite these criticisms, Peace Inc. has been resistant to change, and it is perhaps only now—spurred by the dramatic failure of the American-led Western intervention in Afghanistan—that a wider recognition is emerging among the policy and practitioner community that there is an urgent need to re-assess how they have understood and tried to influence peace.

This recognition of the need to re-think how we understand peace comes at a critical time. We are living in a period of great uncertainty and risk. The human species faces the possibility of extinction if we are unable to significantly change the ways in which our civilization is destroying our ecosystem. At the same time, the geopolitical balance of power is in flux as we transition from

a unipolar world order into some kind of polycrisis.<sup>16</sup> Historically such transitions are characterized by tension, competition, and mistrust and thus come with a heightened risk of conflict. The conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and Syria have intensified the scope and speed of the transition. Since the fall of Kabul two new major conflicts—the Russian war on Ukraine and the Israeli attempt to defeat Hamas by going to war with the Palestinian people—further risk local, regional, and international escalation. Our collective anxiety has been further exacerbated by fast-paced technological developments, including the emergence of artificial intelligence, that have radically changed the way we generate and process information and communicate, with significant implications for the interconnectedness of the world as well as increased risks for the social cohesion of our societies. All of these developments, separately and even more so when compounded, can further increase the risk of conflict, depending on how we—as individuals, societies, states, and international organizations—choose to respond.

We are thus living in a period of significant uncertainty, and this increases the risk of social and economic upheaval that can be harmful for human security and can trigger violent conflict. International, regional, national, and local capacities to prevent and manage conflict will thus be critical to sustain peace during the coming decades. However, our collective failure to resolve several major conflicts over the last few decades have triggered the need to reconsider whether our understanding of peace and our theories of change for sustaining peace are still fit for purpose. There is thus an urgent need to review and adapt our collective understanding of what peace means in the context of the changing character of war brought about by the compounding effects of the changing global order, climate change, and new technological developments.

### **Uncertainty, Unpredictability, and Irreproducibility**

As the experiences in Afghanistan and elsewhere have demonstrated, it is not possible to undertake a project, for example a community violence reduction initiative in Iraq or security sector reform in Somalia, and predict the outcome with any certainty. Nor can we use a model that has performed relatively well, for instance the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa or Northern Ireland's Good Friday Agreement, and repeat it elsewhere with the expectation that it will produce the same result.

This uncertainty, unpredictability, and irreproducibility are characteristics of complex system behavior, not a result of insufficient knowledge or inadequate planning or implementation.<sup>17</sup> Complexity theory describes the characteristics and functions of a particular type of holistic system that has the ability to adapt and that demonstrates emergent properties, including self-organizing behavior. Such systems emerge and are maintained by the overall system-level effects of the dynamic and non-linear interactions of its elements. Interactions between elements are based on the information available to them locally and the results of their interaction with their environment, as well as on the modulated feedback they receive from the other elements in the system.<sup>18</sup>

One way to highlight the unique characteristics of complex systems is to contrast them with complicated systems. A complicated system can potentially be fully understood and predicted, provided sufficient information is available. Designing, building, and launching a rocket into space is highly complicated, but once it is mastered, the same process can be repeated with a reasonable degree of certainty and predictability. In contrast, social systems are complex, meaning they continuously adapt and self-organize based on non-linear positive and negative feedback dynamics. As a result, it is not possible to replicate the design elements that contributed to the relative successful outcomes achieved in one peace process in another context with the expectation that it will produce the same result.<sup>19</sup> This is why the study of peace and conflict have to integrate

an understanding of how complex adaptive systems function under stress and adapt to change, and why determined-design, linear cause and effect theories of change should be reserved for rocket science.

International peace efforts have long suffered from an engineering inspired model that international experts have the agency to diagnose a conflict, plan, and execute a linear-causal step-by-step peace intervention that can ‘build’ peace and ‘fix’ failed states.<sup>20</sup> States are, however, comprised of complex social systems that differ in fundamental ways from structures like bridges that can be built from a plan, or mechanical systems that can be fixed if they break down. Because social systems are complex, they continuously adapt and self-organize, and they are thus constantly building and fixing themselves.

If we apply these insights from complexity theory to how we make sense of conflict and peace, we will recognize that ending a violent conflict and sustaining peace are not problems that can be solved by a specific time-bound external intervention. Peace emerges and is sustained over time through the dynamic interaction of numerous self-organizing processes. It is not a static state of equilibrium or harmony that can be obtained and then preserved. In complexity theory terms we can say that peace does not have a stopping rule. Sustaining peace is a continuously evolving process that can never be finally attained.<sup>21</sup> However, the level of peace attained in a given context (time and space) can generate a meaningful working level of everyday peace for the society involved. We can compare societies and conclude that, for example, contemporary Norway is more peaceful than the United States, or that Zambia is more peaceful than its neighbor the Democratic Republic of the Congo. And while we are aware that these comparisons are only valid for a limited period of time, we can learn from them and identify characteristics and indicators that can help us to make more consistent and systematic comparisons. For example, the Global Peace Index has identified indicators that can help us understand why some societies are more peaceful than others.<sup>22</sup> Such indicators can never tell the full story, but we can use them to trace elements of the dynamic processes that result in some societies becoming more or less peaceful over time.

If ending wars and building peace is so uncertain, unpredictable, and complex, how then can peacebuilders meaningfully contribute to ending wars or sustaining peace? One would need an approach to social transformation that is designed to cope with the uncertainty, unpredictability, and irreproducibility inherent in complex social change processes. In the next section I will introduce one such approach, namely adaptive peace theory.

## **Adaptive Peace Theory**

Adaptive peace theory is a normative and functional approach to ending violent conflicts and sustaining peace in a specific context. It is aimed at navigating the complexity inherent in trying to nudge societal change processes toward peace, without causing harm. Adaptive peace theory is a conscious effort to decolonize peacebuilding by moving away from an approach based on predetermined values, models, and standards selected by those power structures that dominate Peace Inc. Instead, the focus is on empowering the agency of the affected communities and societies to learn from their own attempts to sustain peace.

Adaptive peace theory is based on four premises: first, a recognition that social systems are ontologically complex. That implies that the behavior of social systems is highly dynamic and non-linear. As a result, it is not possible to make sense of or predict specific future behavior of such systems using deductive theoretical approaches based on the past behavior of similar systems, or even the same system in a different context. That also means that one cannot attempt to influence the behavior of such systems using pre-planned linear cause and effect theories of change, and

realistically expect that it will produce a predetermined outcome. Instead, making sense of these systems, and attempting to influence them, requires an inductive epistemology that generates and continuously adapts knowledge through a concerted effort to learn from context-specific and iterative attempts to purposefully engage with the system. One can summarize this approach to knowledge generation as learning from doing and doing from learning. This adaptive approach to developing and continuously revising the knowledge that emerges from the process of acting and learning is what the ‘adaptive’ in adaptive peace theory refers to.

Second, understanding social systems as complex implies a recognition that they emerge, evolve, and are sustained by the self-organizing effects of the relationships between the elements that make up the system, which in social systems are individuals, groups, and institutions. The elements respond to the information that they have locally and that they gain from their relationship with others, and this generates negative and positive feedback loops that ultimately self-organize the overall behavior of the system. This process of continuous adaptation is vital to the health of any society just as evolution is vital to the survival of any species and ecosystem. Insights derived from how self-organization maintains and transforms complex systems suggest that for peace to become self-sustainable, resilient social institutions that promote and sustain peace need to emerge from the active participation of the society in the process of sustaining peace, including reflecting on and learning from both successes and failures. From a conflict management perspective, self-organization refers to the processes and devices a society uses to sustain peace, i.e., the overall ability to manage its own tensions, pressures, disputes, crises, and shocks without relapsing into violent conflict.<sup>23</sup> For peace to be self-sustainable a society needs to have a network of mutually reinforcing institutions that can manage disputes peacefully. Peacebuilding is thus essentially about stimulating and facilitating the capacity of societies to sustain peace themselves, i.e., to assist a society to develop a sufficiently robust and resilient network of social institutions so that it can self-organize and evolve peacefully, despite social competition, environmental stress, and unexpected shocks.

Third, recognizing societies as complex, emergent, and self-organizing implies a recognition that peace is not something that can be imposed or administered by an external peacebuilder or a mediator.<sup>24</sup> Peace is a continuously emerging process that is generated and sustained by the active participation of the society in sustaining its own peace.<sup>25</sup> The people affected by, and involved in, any given conflict situation are thus the critical knowledge holders who have the primary agency to make and sustain their own peace. The empowered agency of the people involved is critical for the effectiveness and sustainability of any peace initiative.<sup>26</sup> Initiatives to prevent or manage conflict or to sustain a peace process must emerge and evolve from a collaborative and experiential process in which the people affected by the conflict have the agency to direct the process. This also implies that the peace process must be context and time specific and helps to explain why peace processes based on standards and norms exported from elsewhere have usually been less effective and unsustainable. External peacebuilders can support and stimulate the process, but the critical agency needs to emerge from the social institutions of the affected communities or societies. The robustness and resilience of the self-organizing capacity of a society determine the extent to which it can withstand pressures and shocks that risk a (re)lapse into violent conflict. Peacebuilding should thus be about safeguarding, stimulating, facilitating, and creating the space for societies to develop robust and resilient capacities to self-organize peacefully.

Fourth, complex systems exist and function in relationship to other systems. The boundaries between systems are porous. As a result a system can be influenced by developments elsewhere in the larger system-of-systems that they may not have control over. For example, a society in



Somalia whose livelihood depends on livestock may be affected by climate change that has its origins elsewhere in the larger global socio-ecological system. The society in Somalia can attempt to adapt to the effects of climate change, but it cannot control or influence climate change itself. This implies that in addition to the indigenous factors within a given system that are ordered through the self-organizing process of that system, there are also exogenous factors that influence any given system. Peacebuilding also involves building relationships and networks with partners in other systems that may have an effect on your own system's ability to sustain its peace. Through these relationships peacebuilders can form networks of change that can try to influence the behavior of the international peace and security system across local to global scales. Social systems are thus always embedded in other systems, or have sub-systems, and these vertical relationships also influence the ability of a given system to sustain its peace.

External peacebuilders represent exogenous interests, and while their aim may be to support sustaining peace in a given context as both a local and global good, they need to understand their positionality vis-à-vis the system they are trying to influence and factor that into their role in the peacebuilding process. They, knowingly or unknowingly, represent the values and interests of their host systems and the systems that fund their work. In many cases there may be shared values and interests, but that should not be assumed. Similarity can easily hide isomorphic mimicry or other subtle but important differences.<sup>27</sup> The relationships between external peacebuilders and the societies they support thus need to be carefully managed. External peacebuilders can assist the process of sustaining peace, but if they interfere too much—if they start to direct the process and attempt to control the outcomes to serve their interests—they will disrupt the feedback processes critical for self-organization to emerge and to be sustained. This typically happens when peacebuilders attempt to engineer the process in order to generate predetermined outcomes desired by their host system or the system that funds their work.<sup>28</sup> Trying to control the outcome produces the opposite of what peacebuilding aims to achieve; it generates dependence, it undermines self-sustainability, and it can prolong instability.<sup>29</sup> That is why, as I pointed out earlier, determined-design peace and aid is self-defeating. State and social institutions develop resilience through iterative trial and error over generations. Too much filtering and cushioning slows down and inhibits these feedback processes. Every time an external peacebuilder 'solves a problem' it denies internal social institutions an opportunity to learn from doing, including learning from failing. Getting it wrong and trying again stimulates the learning and adaptation processes necessary for social institutions to develop and become robust. Too much external interference distorts these system dynamics. For example, a stabilization dilemma emerges when an international peace operation is so effective in providing stability that the ruling political elites such as government officials, business leaders who influence the government, and institutions that hold power in the system, have little incentive to invest in the political settlements necessary to bring about self-sustainable peace.<sup>30</sup>

### **From Theory to Practice: The Adaptive Peace Methodology**

The methodology that adaptive peace theory employs to make sense of and influence complex social systems can be summarized in three iterative steps: assess, act, and adapt.<sup>31</sup> The assess step consists of the affected people making sense of the situation that their community or society finds itself in, historically, holistically, and from multiple or pluralistic perspectives and methodologies. This can be a spontaneous process or it can be facilitated by peacebuilders. Making sense of the present and past usually also leads to envisioning or imagining alternative futures over the longer-, medium-, and short-term.

The act step consists of identifying actions that can start to change the drivers that are causing the conflict and that can contribute to bringing about those imagined futures. As adaptive peace theory recognizes that it is not possible to pre-design a causal path that can bring about a desired future state, the methodology is inductive and experiential. One element of the adaptive approach is variety; as the outcome is uncertain, one must experiment with a variety of initiatives across a spectrum of probabilities. The theory of change that informs each alternative needs to be clearly understood so that one can assess and learn from the effects it generates in each time and context-specific iteration.

The adapt step consists of a process that enables learning and selection; one has to actively monitor and evaluate the effects of the initiatives undertaken by paying close attention to the feedback they generate. The adaptive peace methodology thus requires an active participatory decision-making process that reflects on and learns from the feedback generated by past actions, to make decisions to stop those initiatives that perform poorly or have negative side effects, while those that show more promise can be further adapted to introduce more variety, or can be scaled-up to have greater impact.

As the socio-ecological environment within which the system functions is continuously evolving, the three steps need to form an iterative process that facilitates continuous evolution and adaptation. Any effect achieved is temporary and subject to new emerging dynamics. To summarize, in order to sustain peace amid complexity and uncertainty, the adaptive peace methodology generates actions that are intended to bring about and sustain peace, multiple initiatives are undertaken simultaneously, assessed, and adapted in a continuous and iterative process of purposeful inductive learning from doing and doing from learning.

The adaptive peace methodology is scalable from local programs to national campaigns or to international operations and strategic frameworks.<sup>32</sup> At the operational and strategic levels this implies an iterative and collaborative process of reviewing conflict analysis and theories of change, and adapting planning in an ongoing process of institutional learning.<sup>33</sup> The approach can be applied to a wide range of peace efforts, for example a mediation process between states or an initiative to manage a resource shared between communities.

## **Lessons from Applied Adaptive Peace Experiences**

In order to assess some of the underlying pathways of the adaptive peacebuilding approach, the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) undertook a research project in partnership with the author. The project analyzed context-specific, participatory, and adaptive approaches to peace across a number of countries and policy contexts, based on the experiences and outcomes of peace interventions in the recent past. The case studies included Colombia, Mozambique, Palestine, Syria, and Timor-Leste, which represent different conflicts in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East, and involve a diverse range of peacebuilding actors and different types of peace processes and conflict situations.<sup>34</sup>

The research project found that when context-specific approaches to mediation and peacebuilding empower local agency, it is a key element that influences the self-sustainability of peace processes.<sup>35</sup> Context-specific peacebuilding in this context refers to bottom-up or homegrown approaches to achieving and sustaining peace based on local or national cultural, historical, and political understandings of peace. It differs from approaches to peace where the values and concept of peace are imported from elsewhere. The people affected by the conflict determine the ideas or content, priorities, and values, and the peacebuilding process is aimed at (and limited to) facilitating a participatory process that helps to strengthen or generate new social

institutions through local and national ownership and leadership. The research found that there is a link between the extent to which a peace initiative is context-specific and adaptive, and the level of self-sustainability attained.

This empirical evidence is consistent with adaptive peace theory that posits that the capacity for self-organization in a complex system, such as a society affected by conflict, has a direct bearing on its social cohesion, resilience, and adaptive capacity. The implication is that investing in strengthening the self-organizing capacity of communities and societies—in other words, helping them to strengthen their social institutions and social networks—will help build the resilience, adaptive capacity, and social cohesion they will need to prevent or recover from conflict, and to consolidate, further grow, and sustain the levels of peace that they have been able to achieve.

The overall finding of the research project, based on results of the case studies that provided the empirical basis for the research, was that context-specific and adaptive approaches to peacebuilding—ones that invest in people and encourage the active participation of affected communities—are more effective than top-down and determined-design approaches because they stimulate the emergence of local social institutions that work to promote and sustain peace.<sup>36</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The aim of this article is to contribute to the larger process that is underway to re-think international peace and security by helping the peace research, policy, and practitioner community understand the shortcomings of the dominant determined-design approach, and to introduce adaptive peace theory as an alternative method for making sense of conflict and an approach to supporting societies in their efforts to sustain their own peace.

Re-thinking how we make and sustain peace is urgent, as we are now in a period of increased geopolitical instability, compounded by climate change and new technologies. As a result of these developments and a range of related factors, the number of conflicts and related deaths are increasing while the mainstream approach to peace and conflict is no longer effective. There is thus an urgent need to review and adapt our collective understanding of what peace means, and how to achieve and sustain it, in the context of the changing character of war.

International peace efforts have long suffered from an engineering inspired model. I have used complexity theory to show that states and societies are complex social systems that differ in fundamental ways from structures like bridges, or mechanical systems that can be fixed if they break down. Because social systems are ontologically complex, they continuously adapt and self-organize, and they are thus constantly building and fixing themselves.

I then introduced adaptive peace theory as a normative and functional approach to ending violent conflicts and sustaining peace in a specific context. Adaptive peace is aimed at navigating the complexity inherent in trying to nudge societal change processes toward peace, without causing harm. The ‘adaptive’ in adaptive peace theory refers to the inductive methodology of developing and continuously revising the knowledge that emerges from the process of acting and learning.

Peace is an emerging process that is generated and sustained by the active participation of the society. The people affected by, and involved in, any given conflict situation are thus the critical knowledge holders who have the primary agency to make and sustain their own peace.

External peacebuilders can assist the process, but if they interfere too much—if they start to direct the process and attempt to control the outcomes to serve their interests—they will disrupt the feedback processes critical for self-organization to emerge and to be sustained. Trying to

control the outcome produces the opposite of what peacebuilding aims to achieve; it generates dependence and it undermines self-sustainability.

For peace to be self-sustainable a society needs to have a network of mutually reinforcing institutions that can manage disputes peacefully. Peacebuilding should thus essentially be about stimulating and facilitating the capacity of societies to sustain peace themselves. The resilience of a society determines the extent to which it can withstand pressures and shocks that risk a lapse into violent conflict. Peacebuilding should thus be about safeguarding, stimulating, facilitating, and creating the space for societies to develop robust and resilient capacities to self-organize peacefully.

## Notes

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<sup>4</sup> Johan Galtung, "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research," *Journal of Peace Research* 6, no. 3 (1969): 167–91.

<sup>5</sup> Anna Marie Obermeier and Siri Aas Rustad, *Conflict Trends: A Global Overview, 1946–2022* (Oslo: PRIO, 2023).

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