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Review of Mediation and Governance in Fragile Contexts: Small Steps to Peace

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***Mediation and Governance in Fragile Contexts: Small Steps to Peace.* Dekha Ibrahim Abdi and Simon J.A. Mason. 2019, Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 241 pp. (paper). ISBN: 1978-1-62637-776-9**

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This book written by both Dekha Ibrahim Abdi and Simon J.A. Mason, gives an elaborate perspective on the diverse peace mediation interventions in fragile states, while relying on concrete experiences of mediation. The book bridges experiences from Kenya advanced by Dekha and those from Europe expounded by Mason. Dekha was a gallant peacebuilder who worked amongst communities in conflict in northern Kenya. In a strictly patriarchal society where only men are allowed into the council of elders tasked with resolving conflicts, Dekha (as she was popularly known) went against the odds and rallied communities for peace. The big highlight of the book is Dekha Abdi's peace interventions in different conflicts in northern Kenya: Wajir peace process between the Ogaden and Degodia clans in the early 1990s; Pokot and Samburu conflict in 2004; Garre and the Murulle in 2006. In addition, Dekha was actively involved in the mediation support efforts following the post-election violence in Kenya in 2008. The book thus incorporates gender perspectives to conflict mediation in culturally sensitive contexts.

Mediating in fragile situations of conflict can be a daunting task. The mediator has to be trusted by both sides to the conflict. This book explains how to develop *small steps to peace* by gradually building trust on both sides of the conflict, what John Paul Lederach (1995) refers to as 'confianza' in Spanish, deeper than just trust, more of building a closer relationship with the parties in conflict. The authors suggest a mediation strategy that can be applied at different levels of conflict. They state that: "the methods we propose focus on how to deal with violent societal conflict and thus are suited to intercommunity, community-state, and nationwide ethnopolitical conflicts" (p.1). The uniqueness of the method proposed by the authors lies in the attention it draws to both insider and outsider mediation approaches, while paying attention to the sensitivities of the peace processes. The insider mediator is much more informed of the situation and brings in a lot of contextual experience, while the external mediator plays a more neutral role of building trust and holding the parties in conflict to commit to the peace agreement.

The authors do not get into the discussion of partiality and neutrality of the mediators. In peace studies reference is often made to insider-partial, one who is an interested party to the conflict but also trusted enough to be part of the solution.² (Moore, 2004). It is difficult to have an entirely neutral mediator, a blind goddess who will ensure that justice is achieved. However, neutrality is still a value that is important in mediation and is critical in certain types of conflicts. Wehr and Lederach suggest that a neutral mediator as one who has no stake in the conflict nor in any

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² Christopher Moore, *The Mediation Process: Practical Strategies for Resolving Conflict*, 3rd ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2004).

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particular outcome that may emerge out of the mediation intervention. (Wehr and Lederach, 1996). It is important that such a person holds skills of social, cultural and political sensitivities as well as deeper understanding of the conflict.

This book is divided into two parts. The first part proposes a methodology of mediation in fragile contexts. The authors define fragile states as situations where there is inadequacies in governance structures. Such is the case in northern Kenya where Dekha conducted her peacebuilding work. The region is mostly inhabited by nomadic communities, marginalized and poor, bordering Somalia, which has known conflicts for decades (Odhiambo, 2003). Besides, there is massive proliferation of arms in this region due to cattle rustling and inter-community conflicts. The region is more than 500 kilometers from Nairobi, the capital city of Kenya, and has been marginalized for years. The government has not had a strong presence in the region, and intercommunity conflicts have largely been resolved through cultural mechanisms of conflict resolution. To address the problem of proliferation of arms, the government has sometimes been heavy handed, using police and military force. These strategies have often not worked. This is why this book proposes a methodological process to mediation.

Part I begins with Chapter Two which outlines the diverse approaches to conflict intervention, while noting the challenges that mediators face in fragile contexts. The authors propose that short term interventions need to take into consideration medium and long term objectives of peacebuilding, and similarly long term solutions need to build their efforts around the immediate and short term resolutions. The authors draw attention to four dynamic aspects in conducting mediation in fragile contexts. First is the *changing space of mediation* given the fact that conflict fluctuates due to different socio-political factors, marked with moments of high and low intensity. Second is the *complexity of issues and actors in mediation* because of the changing trends of conflict, instability, displacements and new emerging actors. Third is the *challenge of sustainability of mediation outcome* often hampered by constant flow of emerging new elements of conflict that may derail the mediation exercise. It is therefore important to integrate the interests and needs of the affected population in both immediate and long term time frames. Fourth is the importance of *building relationships* in order to optimize the level of ownership of the peace agreement. These four dynamic aspects point to the fact that it is important to be modest in peace mediation exercise in fragile states, and that small steps of achievement count and tend to build into larger steps for peace sustainability.

The authors suggest a contextualized approach to mediation that takes into account the historical trends of conflict; key actors involved in conflict and mediation process; the process of mediation and how it will take place; location and timeframe of mediation as well structures that support the process from administration, funding to internal and external support mechanisms. However, in order for such an intervention to be effective, it is critical that there be a clear conflict analysis process that identifies the core of the problem, and where one needs to start from. Given the dynamic nature of conflict, it is vital that the analysis draws attention to the immediate, short and long term impacts of conflict in order to design a more effective approach to mediation.

To engage more effectively in medium term solutions to conflict, the authors suggest four approaches to development of medium-term peace structures. First, *local peace committees* that can either be established by the government or local communities to address existing conflicts.

Second, *joint asset development committee* that draw focus on the need to have common economic projects that bridge communities in conflict while at the same time address economic needs of the communities. In Kenya, just like in Uganda, the government for a long time has used a more militarized approach to resolving conflicts among the nomadic communities. Odhiambo, for example, faults such securitized approach to conflict resolution by the Uganda government against the Karamoja, and pleads for development-oriented intervention (Odhiambo, 2003). Eventually the government of Uganda opted for an integrated development approach that held the values of nomadic communities while proposing new development projects that can improve the quality of livelihood for the community. This is in line with the joint asset approach suggested by the authors. Third, are the *peace structures* built around the remnants of the political structures, especially in situations where conflict has disabled the hitherto existing government structures. Fourth, development of *interim structures* that fill the gaps of the governance vacuums in order to build social cohesion through conflict resolution. The authors then give contextual examples on how these peace structures have been used in different countries to create mediation spaces against conflict.

To address long-term solutions to conflict, the authors explain the difference between statebuilding and peacebuilding, and how the two can complement each other in achieving or derailing peace. They observe that statebuilding approach that is not inclusive can generate other conflicts, whereas peacebuilding efforts that have weak structures and not connected to the larger governance structures can apply unsustainable solutions to the conflict. Even more importantly for the sustainability of mediation process is for the peace practitioner to consider the outer and inner aspects of peace. The outer aspects may include mediation efforts, contacts with the actors, conflict analysis, acquiring mediation skills, among others. For inner aspects, one needs to build internal energy to persevere by developing spiritual, psychological and personal transformation. Dekha is quoted in the book as having said that: “peace starts with the individual then moves towards the other. Understanding one’s own soul is the beginning and primary goal of development” (p. 84). In reference to community reconciliation and forgiveness in Kenya, Dekha, in a quotation from her previous publication on ‘Community Reconciliation and Forgiveness in Kenya’, proposes clear steps to be followed: preparation to the process which involves building trust; identification of the key issues to be addressed; realization that trauma healing ought to be part reconciliation and forgiveness; acknowledgement of the truth, beginning with oneself then the other. She reiterates that: “Reconciliation and forgiveness is a process and comes gradually; it is an essential integral part of transforming society to arrive at just and sustainable peace” (p.86)

In the second part of the book the authors outline four case studies that show application of the outlined concepts of mediation above. The cases are based on short-term approach to mediation work, which is then linked to broader concepts and approaches to medium and long term mediation. The section begins with a contextual analysis of the social political history of Kenya, and later the conflicts around Kenya-Somalia border region. This section helps the reader in situating the case studies that follow. The first case focuses on Dekha’s engagement in the Wajir peace process that led to ending of the conflict between the Ogaden and Degodia clans. The case demonstrates how small steps to peacebuilding can grow into positive results. It equally brings out the gender implications to peace mediation in highly patriarchal society. Hence, team work and broad engagement with diverse actors is key to the success of such a process. In another book on Dekha by her friends, family and former colleagues, *No Failure for Peace. The Life and Teachings*

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of Dekha Ibrahim Abdi, Darweish and McGregor note that: “Dekha always sought the value base of peace work, and this included the importance of working with others. She co-facilitated workshops with others in the team, and enabled participants in the workshops to develop their own questions and plans.” (Darweish, et al., 2014). Dekha acknowledged that the collaboration between the government, peace practitioners and community was key to realizing the positive results for peace.

The second case study looks at the Pokot-Samburu conflict that have been rivalries for years over competition for grazing land and accusation and counter-accusations over cattle rustling. The two communities would normally share common grazing land especially during the drought season. As part of resource management in Pokot-Samburu region, the government came up with the idea of developing conservancies which are solely for the wildlife such as giraffes, zebras, cheetahs and antelopes. The conservancies are meant to be income generating projects for the community. However the establishment of the Amaiya conservancy in 2004 on a shared community land meant that the grazing land portion was reduced. The Samburu supported the conservancy idea and saw it as an income generating project for the community, especially if the project applied eco-tourism that involved allocation of some land for grazing. On the other hand, the Pokot were against it. However, the conflict between the two communities was larger than simply the use of the conservancy. There had been perennial conflicts, and the hope was that with new economic projects peaceful co-existence could be achieved in the region. Dekha was involved in the process of mediating the two communities in a two-day mediation meeting that involved more than 500 participants from both sides. She acknowledged her limitations as an outsider mediation, but also realized the potential she had in bringing the parties to an agreement. She ends by highlighting some key elements that are important for drafting a peace agreement, with the emphasis on the buy-in from the two parties in conflict.

The third case study looks at Dekha’s engagement in the Mandera mediation process. The main conflict here had been between the Garre and Murulle between 2004-2005 over competition for grazing land. Tens of people had lost their lives. There were different layers to the conflict: ethnic divisions within communities, politicians and government officials; migration of different Somali communities (within Kenya and from Somali) into the region; periodic cycles of drought which heightened competition for grazing land. Dekha narrates in details how she mobilized women to persuade the communities in conflict to agree to peace, and at the same time worked with the government officials, politicians, clan elders, religious leaders and external actors like NGOs and funders to bring the conflict to an end. Religious leaders, as inside mediators, led the formation of the Mandera Mediation Council that played an important role in responding to conflicts at different stages.

The fourth case study analyses Dekha’s role in Kenya’s post-election violence in 2008 in which the opposition claimed that they had been robbed of victory in the presidential elections. In this multi-actor process, both national and international, Dekha worked with different actors in mobilizing for peace from the grassroots. Due to past election related violence in 1992 and 1997, there was already an effective network of peace actors³ in different parts of the country monitoring

³ Kirimi, Stephen. *Local Networks for Peace: Lessons from Community-Led Peacebuilding*. Report. Edited by Connolly Lesley and Powers Laura. International Peace Institute, 2018. 38-46.

conflicts and alerting key players to respond to the conflicts on the ground. Dekha joined the peace intervention initiative known as ‘Concerned Citizens for Peace’ (CCP) that brought together NGOs, civil society, donors, politicians, retired army officials and diverse influential persons as well as the general public. The CCP was an open forum that met every morning for two hours to do the analysis of the situation in the country, then move swiftly into action. It was a multi-track initiative that linked with the grassroots communities, middle level leadership and top level leaders involved in the political mediation process between the government and opposition, which ended with a peace agreement that formed a coalition government made of the two parties in conflict.

In conclusion, this book is very much grounded on direct experience from different contexts of conflict. It brings in new perspectives to mediating in conflict at different levels, particularly linking the inner and outer peace work. The authors note towards the end of the book that “a key step when adapting insights from this book to other contexts is to analyze the various conflict levels and how they interact and then to identify ‘wiggle’ room where actors are willing to engage across conflict cleavages or prepare for such activities” (p.215). Hence, discussions here demonstrate that mediation process design has to take into account good analysis of the context, bridge short, medium and long term initiatives for peace; develop consensus building for peace sustainability; link inner and outer strategies to peace; and foster multi-level collaboration across different conflict cleavages.

This book would be useful to peace practitioners, academics in peace studies, peace mediators and persons interested in learning conflict mediation at different levels.

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