

This In Brief introduces the malleable and contested concept of ‘hybridity’ with a view to establishing its heuristic value for academics and practitioners working in the fields of peacebuilding and development. It draws on discussions that occurred over the course of nine thematic panel presentations on the theme ‘[Interrogating Hybridity: History, Power and Scale](#)’ organised by the Coral Bell School of Asia Pacific Affairs, ANU, in 2015.

### Growing Prominence of Hybridity in the Peacebuilding Literature

In its literal sense, the term ‘hybrid’ is used to refer to the product of a process of mixing or combining two or more distinct elements. While the concept originated in the biological sciences, it has appeared in many other disciplines. This has included its highly controversial appropriation into the pseudoscientific theories of race that informed debates about European imperialism in the nineteenth century. Less divisively, hybridity has been associated with areas of anthropology, sociology and postcolonial studies that explore interactions between different social, political, legal and economic orders. Scholars of legal pluralism are also interested in the ways in which different conceptions of legality ‘clash, mingle, hybridize, and interact with one another’ in colonial and postcolonial settings (Merry 2006:103).

The term hybridity has acquired increasing prominence in the contemporary peacebuilding and development literature and has been used in critiques of the spate of ‘liberal’ peace interventions that occurred during the second half of the 1990s and first decade of the new millennium. Focusing on the externally driven, state-centric, technical and formulaic orientation of these interventions and their neglect of local contexts, some recent critiques have adopted the notion of ‘hybrid peace’ (Mac Ginty 2010). This usage seeks to capture the ‘intertwined relationship between the global and the local, the formal and informal and the liberal and the illiberal’ in contemporary peacebuilding (Björkdahl and Höglund 2013:293). It is argued that the outcome of these interactions — the hybrid peace — has more legitimacy than the

liberal peace because it taps into local knowledge and broadens the peace constituency (ibid.).

In drawing attention to the interchanges that take place between diverse actors, and the ways in which multiple sources of authority and legitimacy shape local social and political orders, the notion of hybrid peace also serves to question the ‘deficit’ orientation of much of the policy discourse addressing international engagements in post-conflict and ‘fragile’ settings. This orientation tends to frame the problems and remedial interventions required in post-conflict societies in terms of the deficiencies of state, with local sociopolitical institutions and practices viewed as obstacles to be overcome in the pursuit of linear pathways to development and modernisation. By contrast, the concept of hybrid peace allows for a focus on the strength and resilience of informal practices, the ‘positive potential of hybridity, generative processes, innovative adaptation and ingenuity’ (Boege et al. 2008:16), and opens up possibilities of alternative imaginings of peacebuilding and development.

### Descriptive and Prescriptive Approaches to Hybridity

The concept of hybridity is used in two quite different senses in the literature on international peacebuilding and development. First, it is used in a descriptive sense to shed light on how things actually work on the ground from a local perspective, rather than seeing things exclusively from an outsider perspective. Here, hybridity offers a portal for viewing the interchange between external actors and complex local contexts, and for understanding the critical role of local agency in mediating external interventions. In doing so it enables a broadening of the conventional focus on state to the full spectrum of actors, institutions and practices — state and non-state — involved in peacebuilding practice.

Hybridity is also used in a second and more prescriptive sense, as an outcome that can be deliberately engineered by ensuring that international and state-based approaches take local practices into account. For example, ‘hybrid courts’ that combine features of formal courts and customary practices of dispute resolution have been devised as socially

appropriate instruments of conflict resolution in legal pluralism contexts. This prescriptive use of hybridity has had considerable appeal in policy circles. A notable example is the 2011 World Development Report, in which the World Bank acknowledges that in societies in which state institutions are weak and much of the population lives according to local sociopolitical practices and institutions, it might be necessary for international actors to move away from unilinear processes of institutional transfer to utilise flexible 'best fit' approaches that draw upon 'combinations of state, private sector, faith-based, traditional, and community structures for service delivery' (World Bank 2011:106).

### Critiques of Hybridity

Alongside its emergent prominence in the peacebuilding and development fields, the notion of hybridity has attracted growing critique, particularly the prescriptive use of the term. A key criticism relates to how hybridity can serve to mask underlying injustices and power differentials between international and local actors, as well as within each of these spheres. For example, a pure focus on the hybrid features of a hybrid court can detract attention from the constrained political circumstances in which these courts are established or from questions about whose interests these models serve. There are also concerns that attempts to instrumentalise 'hybrid governance' can be appropriated as part of broader neoliberal agendas and used to hollow out already 'weak' states by outsourcing the provision of public goods to international actors, private providers or, indeed, to poor communities themselves (Meagher 2012). Likewise, there are concerns about 'romanticising the local' and downplaying significant power differentials at the local level based on gender, age, ethnic or other significant divisions.

A second critique focuses on the ways in which the concept of hybridity may reinscribe a problematic binary between the 'global' and the 'local' by viewing them as separate spheres rather than acknowledging their fluid and overlapping boundaries. This critique points to the extent to which, given the historical influences of colonisation and globalisation, both 'international' and 'local' actors and institutions are the products of earlier processes of hybridisation. While nuanced analyses seek to do justice to these

complexities, the very term hybridity often works to reinscribe binaries even as it seeks to unpack them.

These critiques have led to suggestions that more attention is needed to the conflictual elements and power dynamics of peacebuilding, which can be overlooked or obscured by the concept of hybridity.

### Conclusion

Despite the elastic and contested nature of the term, hybridity may nonetheless be a valuable analytical tool for scholars and practitioners working in the field of peacebuilding, particularly if used with attention to conflictual elements and power dynamics. Its particular value lies in its capacity to encourage a questioning of the boundaries between apparently fixed categories (e.g. state/non-state, formal/informal, traditional/modern, local/global) and its potential to shift the focus of analysis to the interstices and potential sites of cooperation and conflict between — as well as within — different social and institutional forms. Used in this way, the concept of hybridity might encourage the emergence of a more nuanced and accurate picture of the dynamic nature of peacebuilding — including its diverse actors, ideas and practices.

### Author Notes

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