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An empirical take on the debates on peacebuilding's failure: the case study of the Ivorian Dialogue Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2011–2014)

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ABSTRACT

Why does peacebuilding keep on failing? A large body of academic literature tackles that question, through the lenses of liberal peace and its 'local turn', and with categories, such as 'the local' and 'the international'. This article offers to question the terms of the debates on peacebuilding failure in lights of an empirical research conducted in Côte d'Ivoire on the Dialogue Truth and Reconciliation Commission, set up by the victor of the 2010–2011 electoral crisis after at least a decade of a 'fragmented civil war' in the country. The empirical method makes it possible to grasp exactly how power relations, first between very heterogeneous domestic actors, then between them and external actors, shape the announced reconciliation process. Despite the role they are given in the literature, the internationals' hold on the process empirically appears ambiguous and tenuous in Côte d'Ivoire.

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Why does peacebuilding fail to complete its own objectives? Or, more adequately, why does it keep on failing?¹ A large body of academic literature tackles that question. I also asked myself that question several times. In fact, I had the opportunity to reflect on it from two different perspectives: first as a practitioner, later as a social sciences researcher. Between February and August 2014, I was a programme assistant within the Abidjan office of an international organisation offering renowned expertise to the Commission.² Several months later, in the course of a professional retraining from peacebuilder to researcher, I came back to Abidjan for two months to conduct a scientific empirical fieldwork on the Dialogue Truth and Reconciliation Commission [CDVR].³ At the same time, I started exploring academic literature on peacebuilding and reconciliation issues.⁴ This paper emerged from the encounter between these two experiences. It insists on the necessity of an empirical take on peacebuilding and reconciliation issues.

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¹Goetze, *The Distinction of Peace: A Social Analysis of Peacebuilding*.

²In order to preserve anonymity, here we will call them the Blue Organization.

³In the English language, the acronym used to discuss the Commission is the same as the original French one: 'CDVR', standing for 'Commission Dialogue, Vérité et Réconciliation'.

⁴In this paper we embrace a broad definition of peacebuilding: 'Peacebuilding' serves as a catch- all term to describe efforts by an array of international organisations, nongovernmental organisations, and even agencies of foreign states to restore or construct a peaceful society in the wake – or even in the midst – of conflict.' (Goetze, *The Distinction of Peace: A Social Analysis of Peacebuilding*, i). Also, we consider transitional justice and reconciliation processes as part of a shared nexus with peacebuilding (Baker and Obradovic-Wochnik, 'Mapping the Nexus of Transitional Justice and Peacebuilding').

The literature dealing with failed peacebuilding or reconciliation objectives is part of a broad discussion on the liberal peace agenda.⁵ It generates an important number of papers, debates and positions. A large part of it focuses on technical solutions to technical problems⁶ and sometimes defends liberal peace against criticism.⁷ Those positions are often occupied by *reflective practitioners*.⁸

On the other hand, for more than 10 years now, the promoters of a 'local turn'⁹ or of 'an ethnographic approach to peacebuilding'¹⁰ are producing a growing body of criticism and responses to the liberal peacebuilding 'crisis' and 'failure' to engage with the local.¹¹ *'It locates the causes of failure in the imposition of pre-conceived liberal templates based on political and economic liberalization, which clash with local concerns and values. The local turn opposes the models and values of liberal international interveners to those of non-liberal local populations, and proposes to transcend the divide through "post-liberal" hybrid forms of peace'*¹²

Another range of studies tackles indirectly the divide between peacebuilders and locals.¹³ They are interested in 'opening the black box' of intervention¹⁴ through a sociological analysis of interveners. These analysis focus on peacebuilders' work and personal lives, habits, values, and trajectories.¹⁵ It highlights that peacebuilders rely on preconceived frames and values because of an organisational impossibility to learn and to resort to local knowledge. These frames and values are well aligned with liberal peace, and the product of rather homogeneous educational and socio-economical backgrounds.¹⁶ These analysis represent a 'sociological turn' in peacebuilding analysis.¹⁷ Although some of these authors do not advocate for a 'better' intervention, in their work, Bliesemann de Guevara, Goetze and Autesserre still do engage with the liberal peace debate, in terms similar to the local turn.¹⁸

In this paper, we partly feed on the same literature of those two bodies of literature critical of the liberal peace. More importantly, noting that this debate is in great majority theoretical, we thought to take the opportunity of this special issue to confront the liberal peace debate to the ground, thriving on an empirical study of the CDVR. In doing so, we understand rapidly that the gap between two categories – the international peacebuilders and the locals – in the Ivorian post-conflict setting shows much more nuances and complexity than suggested in academic considerations. Coming back and forth between empirical research and theoretical literature, we engage with approaches questioning

⁵Overall, the liberal peace can be understood as a set of particular ideas and practices intended to reform and regulate politics in the global South so as to avoid both poverty and conflict.' (Sabaratnam, 'Avatars of Eurocentrism in the critique of the liberal peace': 259–60).

⁶Chandler, *International statebuilding*.

⁷Paris, 'Saving liberal peacebuilding'.

⁸Sandrine Lefranc, '14. Pacifier, scientifiquement', 248.

⁹Mac Ginty and Richmond, 'The Local Turn in Peace Building'.

¹⁰Millar, *An ethnographic approach to peacebuilding*.

¹¹Pingeot, 'International Peacebuilding as a Case of Structural Injustice': 268.

¹²Ibid; Richmond, *A post-liberal peace*.

¹³For the sake of readability, I will no longer put quotation marks around the categories of "the local" or "locals" and "the international" or "internationals". It is still one of the purposes of the article to deconstruct these categories.

¹⁴Bliesemann de Guevara, *Statebuilding and state-formation*.

¹⁵Goetze, *The Distinction of Peace: A Social Analysis of Peacebuilding*; Autesserre, *Peaceland*; Lefranc, 'Convertir le grand nombre à la paix'; Smirl, *Spaces of aid*.

¹⁶Goetze, *The Distinction of Peace: A Social Analysis of Peacebuilding*.

¹⁷Daho, Duclos and Jouhannau, 'Political Sociology of International Interventions'.

¹⁸Pingeot, 'International Peacebuilding as a Case of Structural Injustice': 269.

those categories and their actors' impact on peacebuilding. Some work on hierarchies and 'decolonizing' post-conflict studies¹⁹ or on deconstructing categories of the international and the local in peacebuilding.²⁰ They take a new and more nuanced look at the actors involved in peacebuilding and the relationship between them. Other focus on the impact of domestic actors, as well as the impact on the relationships between external and domestic actors. These two aspects are understudied. *'The majority of studies on democracy promotion and post-conflict democratisation focus on external actors to explain the effectiveness (or the lack thereof) of democracy promotion and state-building, thereby reducing the agency of domestic actors to "compliance", "partial compliance", or "non-compliance" with external demands. In turn, the role of domestic elites and in particular the power struggles between domestic elites and international actors (as well as power struggles among domestic elites) have largely been neglected.'*²¹

This paper's engagement with these understudied issues within the peacebuilding's failure debates constitutes an important contribution to this field of study. But more importantly, this paper brings an empirical take on this subject that is almost always absent in the literature.²² In the end, it shows that it is by confronting our theoretical assumptions to empirical research that we will renew our answers to the same questions.

Indeed, by looking closely at the CDVR's process and the sociopolitical configuration around it, we highlight three dynamics that would suggest a reorientation of the terms of the debates. First, the CDVR case shows a 're-localisation' of transitional justice, which ends up fully immersed in prior political dynamics and future electoral stakes.²³ Then, we focus on the categorisation of the local in order to bring to light its nuances and complexity. Eventually, we dive into the preconceived opposition between the local and the international and show that the existing relationships in the transitional justice landscape do not always fit this frame. One of the implication of such deconstruction is to reassess who and what actually shape the part of the reconciliation process supposedly carried out by international guidelines on post-conflict transitions. We develop one by one these three ideas in the discussion part of this paper, after setting the scene of the CDVR's implementation and of the sociopolitical configuration of actors in place around the Commission. We conclude by insisting on the potential nuances and contributions drawn by empirical research on the liberal peacebuilding's failure theoretical debates.

Methodologically, I developed my analysis by constantly going back and forth between inquiry materials and the theoretical readings mentioned above. The fieldwork itself is based on a mixed method, both ethnographic and comprehensive. The ethnographic immersion has the particularity of being carried out as an insider. I am not yet trained as a researcher at that time. The materials is then taken for what it is, a non-systematic and instinctive 'observing participation'.²⁴ During my time as a programme assistant, I quickly realised the magnitude of the discrepancy between my scholarly appreciation

¹⁹Sabaratham, 'Avatars of Eurocentrism in the critique of the liberal peace'; Pingeot, 'International Peacebuilding as a Case of Structural Injustice'.

²⁰Kappler, 'The dynamic local'; Paffenholz, 'Unpacking the local turn in peacebuilding'.

²¹Grimm and Weiffen, 'Domestic elites and external actors in post-conflict democratisation': 262.

²²Paffenholz, 'Unpacking the local turn in peacebuilding'.

²³'Re-localisation' refers to the work of Kappler on 'local' and 'international' identities in the peacebuilding landscape. Their use 'can be considered as taking on the form of "delocalisation" (the deliberate attempt to avoid one's identity being framed as "local") or "(re-)localisation" (the decision to frame one's identity as "local"), or even both at the same time.'

Kappler, 'The dynamic local': 878.

²⁴Atlani-Duaault, *Au bonheur des autres*.

of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the reality of the CDVR process. This discrepancy urged a need to understand and reflect on the political arena around me as well as my own work, while doing it. I started to document both. I paid special attention to what was happening in Côte d'Ivoire, in and around the CDVR; to who its members and international supporters were; and to why they did what they did. At that time, I held a journal on my work, daily activities and conversations. While I am not at liberty to disclose internal documents or information from my time at the Blue Organization, I base this paper partly on my experience of it, my notebooks from that time, as well as published reports, documents and public discourses. Although analysed retrospectively, it gives a view of the CDVR process from the inside and from the point of view of a worker in an international organisation.

The comprehensive dimension is to be taken in its sociological sense.²⁵ In the spring of 2015, as a full researcher, I conducted 30 semi-structured interviews with workers of the Dialogue Truth and Reconciliation Commission; members of international organisations; members of the national NGOs and associations working in the transitional justice field; and a few political activists and officials. The interviews, from two-to-six hours long, aimed at retracing personal and professional experiences, as well as stories of their participation in the Commission or their discourses on it.

To set the scene

From the end of a crisis to the implementation of the CDVR

Since 1990, and the return of the multi-party system in Côte d'Ivoire, no elections have been held without some degree of violence. The everyday lives of a large part of the Ivorian population have become intimately entangled with the climate of warfare at the national level.²⁶ On that political arena, from 1990 until 2015 when we conducted our investigation, the same political figures²⁷ have kept fighting over power or shadowing over this fight.²⁸

In 2002, the political field took a step further in its brutalisation. A military rebellion against Laurent Gbagbo's government and coming from the North marked the beginning of 'a fragmented civil war' and the partition of Côte d'Ivoire into two territories and two sides.²⁹ Until 2011, the period was marked by military violence, civilian militias, human rights violations, death squads, repression, but also by periods of relative status quo and two internationally sponsored peace agreements made in 2004 and in 2007.³⁰

²⁵Kaufmann, *L'entretien compréhensif*.

²⁶Vidal, 'La brutalisation du champ politique ivoirien, 1990–2003'.

²⁷First of four essential characters to this story is Felix Houphouët-Boigny, leader of the independence and first president of Côte d'Ivoire, ruled the country until he died, in 1993. The forty years of its unshared ruling structured political life in Côte d'Ivoire for a long time and kept on structuring it after his death. Moreover, in spite of the strong hand he used with its opponents, he is remembered in popular culture more than anything is as the 'father of the nation' and as a man of dialogue. As such, most of Ivorian politicians still claim his legacy as a political advantage. The other three are Henry Konan Bédié, Laurent Gbagbo, and Alassane Ouattara. Henry Konan Bédié, then head of the Parti Démocratique de Côte d'Ivoire (PDCI) ruled until 1999, when he was deposed by a military coup led by General Robert Gueï. Laurent Gbagbo, founder of the Front Populaire Ivoirien (FPI) and historical opponent of Felix Houphouët-Boigny defeated the General in democratic elections in 2000. In 2011, after a five years delay in organising new elections, he lost his seat to Alassane Ouattara, head of the Rassemblement des Républicains (RDR), a dissident faction of the PDCI.

²⁸Piccolino, 'Peacebuilding and statebuilding in post-2011 Côte d'Ivoire'.

²⁹Dozon, *Les clefs de la crise ivoirienne*.

³⁰Ibid.

In 2010 and 2011, an open and bloody crisis exploded as Alassane Ouattara and Laurent Gbagbo competed for the presidency. On 11 April 2011 the pro-Ouattara military, with the support of the ONUCI and the French armed forces, arrested the latter. In doing so, they put a formal stop to the deadly combat between the civil and military supporters of both sides. Even though violence has not stopped in the country – militias still operate in the West and armed forces caused several mutinies in recent years – it has been to this day the last spike of massive violence of the civil war.

*Today, we turn a new leaf. And together, we will be writing the story of reconciliation.*³¹ On the night of the arrest, Alassane Ouattara delivered a speech in which he renewed his commitment to implementing a Truth and Reconciliation Commission in the country.³² Two weeks later, the government received a letter from the UN stating it would financially support the mechanism. The following month, President Ouattara officially announced its creation. At that time, only one piece of information was available: Charles Konan Banny would lead it. He is a former governor of the Central Bank of West Africa, as well as a former prime minister to Laurent Gbagbo in 2005 during the civil war. He is also a prominent member of the PDCI.

With the support of the international community, Charles Konan Banny's team elaborated a mandate following the UN guidelines.³³ It assigned to the Commission the following tasks: researching truth and assigning responsibilities for 'past socio-political events'; hearing victims; establishing a process where perpetrators of violence acknowledged the truth of their acts and victims provided forgiveness; proposing a means to heal the trauma endured by the victims; and a way to foster social cohesion and national unity.³⁴ Three years later, the CDVR organised victims' auditions across the country. It staged hearings in which central commissioners and a happy few heard the stories of victims in 81 selected cases. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission presented a final report to President Ouattara in December 2014.

A political game of multiple players

In the following segment, we continue to set the scene of the CDVR and the actors around it. We portray multiple groups present in the peacebuilding field and the relationships between them. Thus, we outline what we see on the ground beyond the transitional justice showcase: a mere political game of several players. Group by group, we draw the socio-political configuration revolving around the CDVR. We consider four groups of actors: the government, the Commission itself, the Ivorian grassroots organisations in the transitional justice landscape, and the international experts around the Commission.

³¹ 11 April 2011. End of President Ouattara's first speech, hours after his opponent's arrest. 'Le discours de Ouattara après l'arrestation de Gbagbo'. *Libération*, 11 April 2011. We translated speeches from French to English throughout, but titles remain untranslated to indicate the original language.

³² 'Le jour où Gbagbo a été arrêté'. *Libération*, 11 April 2011.

³³ The model has been enshrined by UN guidelines: see for example UNHCHR, 'Rule-of-Law Tools for Post-conflict States. Truth Commissions', United Nations, New York and Geneva, 2006. The literature on transitional justice includes many handbooks and practical guides: see for example Eduardo Gonzalez, 'Drafting a Truth Commission Mandate. A Practical Tool', International Center for Transitional Justice, New York, 2013.

³⁴ Decree 2011-167 of 13 July 2011 creating the Dialogue Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Republic of Côte d'Ivoire.

The government

The government's views on the past conflict and the reconciliation process are quite distant from the transitional justice guidelines. First, rather than considering his country as being in 'post conflict', President Ouattara insists on its economic development and 'emergence' (the term is at the centre of his electoral campaign in 2015).³⁵ Secondly, Alassane Ouattara's governance shows an asymmetrical take on the political game, which mirrors the way the conflict ended: by the military victory of one side over the other.³⁶ In this context, and going back to the CDVR, the government's attitude towards the process is made of both control and self-assured indifference for the transitional justice reconciliation agenda.

Since the beginning of his presidency, Alassane Ouattara appeared careful to control the story told about the 2002 rebellion and the 2010 post-electoral crisis. For instance, if the Commission technically completed most of their assignments, the produce of this work remains secret to the public. Two years passed before the government made one of its final report's three volumes accessible to the public. The published version of this first volume appears to be an edited version of the Commission's report, stripped of its most problematic elements for the power in place.³⁷ Similarly, the 81 cassettes of the CDVR hearings, which were edited for the national TV channel, remain unbroadcasted to this day.

As for the lack of regards for the reconciliation process, the nomination of Charles Konan Banny is the first of many signs of a political diversion of the CDVR.

*Naming Charles Konan Banny was a mistake he [President Ouattara] deliberately made for political reasons. They have the weirdest relationship. They know each other but they also fear each other, sort of. They watch each other, keep their distance. They stayed far away during the three years of the mandate; it cannot be.*³⁸

Charles Konan Banny's presidential ambitions and the idea that Alassane Ouattara wanted him there for electoral purposes was public knowledge. In the end, while managing a potential adversary for the next presidential race, setting up a CDVR allowed Alassane Ouattara to gain trust from the international community while maintaining the upper hand in the process.

The CDVR

*"He relied on his technicians for everything, without any meeting with the commissioners."*³⁹

³⁵As a Houphouetist and a former economist, the president's actions imply that economic progress can foster peace-building and reconciliation between communities. Much of the discourse of the government tends to de-emphasise Côte d'Ivoire's post-conflict status and instead focuses on a potentially glorious future, presenting Côte d'Ivoire as a 'pays émergent' (emerging country). (Piccolino, 'Peacebuilding and statebuilding in post-2011 Côte d'Ivoire': 503.

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷At the time of my investigation in 2015, I obtained a copy from the UNOCI of the first volume of the final report written by Banny's staff. I was also allowed to consult, on site, the second volume, which gathers the results of a national consultation on the crisis and on reconciliation. To illustrate the sensitivity of its content, one of the results points at Alassane Ouattara for the crisis (60% of interviewees blame him first for what happened in the country) and others at Guillaume's Soro for the human rights violations. For a more detailed analysis of the final report, victims' auditions and public hearings, see Delphine Griveaud, 'Chapitre 11. « Parfaire la construction de la nation ivoirienne »: justice transitionnelle et récit national en Côte d'Ivoire.' *Parfaire la construction de la nation ivoirienne ...* Also, read the concurring conclusions of Giulia Piccolino on the same question after conducting a similar empirical research (Piccolino, 'Peacebuilding and statebuilding in post-2011 Côte d'Ivoire'.

³⁸Interview with the head of the UNOCI's transitional justice unit, Abidjan, April 2015.

³⁹Interview with the head of the UNOCI's transitional justice unit, Abidjan, April 2015.

From the beginning, the Commission has been a ‘one-man job’. Banny centralised CDVR powers and activities in his hands and those of his special advisors. Most of them have been following him since his time as Prime Minister. The CDVR became rapidly and quite obviously a personal mission. A lot of the work of the Commission was done at Banny’s personal residence, even after the Commission eventually got a separate dedicated building in Cocody in February 2012. Described by one of the President’s special advisors as the ‘folklore of the Commission’, the Commissioners have been completely ignored and their few attempts at resistance have been moot.⁴⁰

*President Ouattara wanted the Commission to fall within the duration of its mandate. A kind of trap for Charles Konan Banny. Banny used to say with a lot of humor that a trap, when you know it is a trap, is no longer a trap.*⁴¹

Charles Konan Banny’s ambition to be President was not new. Already, in 2004, he declared he would run for office the following year,⁴² but the elections did not take place.⁴³ In 2013, talking in a radio show as president of the CDVR, he made a noteworthy speech claiming Houphouët’s legacy and barely veiling his future presidential candidacy.⁴⁴ Years later, in September 2014, before handing the Commission’s final report to the government, Charles Konan Banny hastily renewed this candidacy. In this context, the Commission was both a place of work on its official missions and a political arena immersed in electoral logics linked to the 2015 presidential race.

Whether Charles Konan Banny diverted the CDVR to its political benefit remains to be confirmed, although interviews on the ground suggests it quite strongly.⁴⁵ This being said, it is undeniable that the Commission could create distance between him and the other protagonists of the crisis and allow him to pass as a man of dialogue and reconciliation, thus claiming the disputed and powerful heritage of Félix Houphouët-Boigny. In that regards, the many references to Houphouët in the CDVR may not be a coincidence, including the official

⁴⁰In a letter we obtained from Me Offoumou, Central Commissioner, and written on 23 April 2014 she asks directly to the President of the Commission to be included in its work. Charles Konan Banny never answered.

⁴¹Interview with the CDVR president’s special advisor in charge of relationships with international partners, Abidjan, April 2015.

⁴²‘Election Présidentielle 2005: réaction sur la candidature annoncée de Charles Konan Banny’ *Ivoir’press*, 11 October 2004.

⁴³Elections that should have been held in 2005 according to the legal electoral agenda were regularly postponed on various grounds, until 2010.

⁴⁴‘Born like Félix Houphouët-Boigny in a family of growers [...]. That is why, as president of the CDVR, I cared to rekindle a certain number of our symbols. Our slogan: “perfect the construction of the Ivorian nation” is inspired by the vision of the task Felix Houphouët-Boigny knew was going to be ours for this century. [...] I too am seized by the fever of the builders. That is why I cannot conceive that, with my experience, they would forbid me to have an ambition for Côte d’Ivoire.’

Interview given by the President of the CDVR to a radio show called *Kokoyalé* in September 2013 and transmitted on Abidjan.net.

⁴⁵‘At one point, I had to talk to M. Banny to stop instrumentalizing the victims. I am an area coordinator inland; I realize that these members of local commissions are at the same time outreach representatives on behalf of the candidate Banny. I did not like that. If I come to you, I am listening to you as a CDVR officer. But the others they say “money will come, but not with the one at the government right now. If you vote for M. Banny your situation will be fixed the most quickly, because there will be actions towards victims”. Everyone leaves feeling politically courted by people they could have approached for a catharsis ... It is something I witnessed, and victims would tell me the same.’

Interview with a CDVR civil society field coordinator in Daloa (west of the country) during victims’ auditions, Abidjan, April 2015.

slogan of the Commission, *Perfect the construction of the Ivorian Nation*, which is a direct reference to ‘a task to which President Félix Houphouët-Boigny bound us shortly before he disappeared’.⁴⁶

People and organisations involved in the sociopolitical configuration around the CDVR

There are multitudes and we can only cast light on a few. During our fieldwork, the most visible ones were NGOs involved in the transitional justice field, and public opponents to the CDVR, which usually identify with Laurent Gbagbo’s side. Both widely criticised the CDVR process. The choice of the Commission’s president, the opacity of its work, the absence of communication with local communities and their intermediaries outside of a closed circle around the Commission all drew fire. *‘I am involved in some activities and I can only confirm that the information does not go beyond a closed circle. We, working on the CDVR auditions are all here by affinity; the rest of the civil society is left aside’*.⁴⁷

The last parties with a stake in reconciliation are segments of the population that simply do not want to reconcile under an asymmetrical peace. A few western communities refused to greet Banny during his tour as president of the CDVR. The Front Populaire Ivoirien and a considerable part of the Ivorian population employed boycott tactics against the CDVR and more generally against all government-associated operations, like the 2014 national census and the 2015 presidential elections.⁴⁸ The CDVR has been associated with the existing powers and the crushing hegemony of the RHDP, the alliance of Alassane Ouattara’s RDR and of Henri Konan Bédié and Charles Konan Banny’s PDCI.

‘We can’t talk about reconciliation as long as Gbagbo is not present. There is the story of the elections, but in the end, he defeated Gbagbo militarily, with the assistance of the international community. Now either he kills us all or he makes us part of the process, but he did neither’.⁴⁹

Far from being ‘an ongoing mutual process based on common consent’,⁵⁰ the reconciliation initiatives appear to a significant part of the population as asymmetric operations enforced by those who won the war. In that sense and in many others, the CDVR’s process is a ‘mirror of the original conflict’,⁵¹ and of the power relations inherited from the outcome of the last post-electoral crisis.

⁴⁶Last words of the first volume of the final report, p. 125. Emphasis added to what is the official slogan of the Commission, ‘Perfect the construction of the Ivorian nation’.

⁴⁷Conversation with various civil society organisations involved in transitional justice, Abidjan, April 2014.

⁴⁸To have an estimate of the extent of this boycott, we can refer to the Piccolino’s estimation of the FPI’s electoral boycott of 2015, which represented approximately a quarter of the registered voters, that is to say more than a million and a half people.

⁴⁹Interview with Sébastien Dano Djédjé, member of the Front Populaire Ivoirien, April 2015.

⁵⁰Cole, ‘Reconciliation as a peacebuilding practice: New Questions, New Ideas’.

⁵¹Ibid.

External interveners in the Ivorian transitional justice field

At this point in the paper, it already appears that the local is a very heterogeneous category. The external interveners in the transitional justice field are more homogeneous. When sociologically considering peacebuilders, their academic and professional backgrounds, their cosmopolitanism and geographic circulations,⁵² as well as their values, agendas, and cultural references,⁵³ present a majority of similarities.⁵⁴

In Côte d'Ivoire, the internationals brought funding, frameworks, standards, and expert personnel. They created post-conflict transition standards, norms and occupations. They placed on the table an official recommendation regarding reconciliation and a financial envelope to go with. And because on the other side of this table Alassane Ouattara has never hidden that he had other priorities for the country, it is safe to say that he would not have done it itself without this international configuration and the structural place occupied by peacebuilding in international politics.

Yet, the government and the CDVR rapidly cast them aside. Indeed, Charles Konan Banny's team did not only ignore most of the CDVR appointed commissioners, but also the international experts attached to the Commission, coming from various UN agencies or other international organisations in the transitional justice field. *'Management and finances were opaque. Even for me, who is supposed to follow every activity of the CDVR. I never knew what he [Banny] was doing.'*⁵⁵

A rather odd dynamic has settled in between 2011 and 2013, during the Commission's first mandate. International organisations organised workshops and edited guides destined to the CDVR officials, who would accept it and ignore it at the same time. In 2014 at the Blue Organisation, we have discussed the situation several times in various meetings between international experts. To paraphrase them, some found that they were considered by the CDVR as a bank rather than as a technical partner. Some were both offended and embarrassed that the CDVR did not share its interim report with them. The common view was that the CDVR was making only the bare minimum for the country to allow them to justify their activity to the funders, while advancing their own interests.⁵⁶

By the end of the first mandate of the Commission, some international interveners, also part of a larger and well-institutionalised international political and financial system, felt obligated to save face. Based on my experience as a practitioner, and paraphrasing an international expert again, some organisation did not want to work with the CDVR anymore, but were funded to do so, which was considered as coming with constraints. Also, with regard to the government, publicly withdrawing their support to the CDVR was perceived as politically impossible.⁵⁷

⁵²Griveaud and Lefranc, 'La justice transitionnelle, un monde-carrefour.'

⁵³Goetze, *The Distinction of Peace: A Social Analysis of Peacebuilding*.

⁵⁴Evidently, this does not mean they are all the same and all consider intervention in the same way. One notable counter example is given by the internal statement signed by 1,000 current and former members of staff of the medical NGO Médecins Sans Frontières stating the organisation is 'institutionally racist and reinforces colonialism and white supremacy in its humanitarian work'. See The Guardian, issue of 10 July 2020.

⁵⁵Interview with the head of the UNOCI's transitional justice unit, Abidjan, April 2015.

⁵⁶Personal notes on my time at the Blue Organization, February 2014.

⁵⁷Personal notes on my time at the Blue Organization, February 2014.

At the end of this period, the Commission had not yet planned victims' auditions and public hearings, nor advanced on a final report. Criticism began to thunder. Whether it was unofficially, for international partners, or officially, for Ivorian civil society organisations, victims' associations, and marginalised members of the Commission, everyone reached a shared opinion: the CDVR failed.⁵⁸ If peacebuilding literature do not conflate TRCs and reconciliation,⁵⁹ the CDVR was still one of the most publicised political signal towards reconciliation sent by the political power in place. With its very open and wide bashing, political and media discourses shortcut quickly to declare the failure of reconciliation as a whole.

At the Blue Organization, an assessment visit from headquarter's experts in 2014 provoked an 'institutional soul searching', as one of them called it, that lead to a radical shift in strategy. Without publically disavowing the CDVR or questioning this transitional justice mechanism's blueprints, and in an attempt to save funding and appearances, they ended up taking a discrete and compelled 'local turn'. Their new strategy then focused on capacity building, on empowering civil society organisations and working 'from the bottom up'. This shift illustrates an unusual power balance in peacebuilding. In some ways, the internationals remained powerless in front of the Commission and the government during the process.

The blurred lines of international intervention

A discussion about the local, the international, and their relationships

The 'nationalisation' of international intervention

Throughout the previous section, we exposed the multiple signs of prior and present political dynamics saturating the sociopolitical configuration around the CDVR. There, a lot of political stakes and conflicts seem to replay, only on new grounds and with new resources made available by the opening of a transitional justice field. Transitional justice, or at least its showcase in Côte d'Ivoire, the CDVR, is deeply immersed in national political logics that shape its process and impact, or more adequately absence of impact, much more than UN guidelines on post-conflict tools. Rebalancing powers and responsibilities for past violations between both sides of the conflict, opening spaces of fair dialogue, liberating Laurent Gbagbo and other losing side prisoners, but also preparing for the 2015 presidential race, are some of those stakes.

In our context, this type of agency is more relevant for the shape of the CDVR landscape than UN reconciliation guidelines and its on-site experts' agency. In his study of the State in West Africa, Bayart theorised this dynamic as 'extraversion', that is to say 'cunning, in the sense of maneuvering hostile forces, too powerful to be directly controlled, but that you can use despite them, without ever confronting them upfront, to achieve your own interests'.⁶⁰ First, it invites us to reconsider the terms of the debates on liberal peace failure that tend to de-historicise the situation and render invisible local agency, attributing 'to the West an historical "hyperagency" in terms of world-historical

⁵⁸Reports on the CDVR from the Group for Research and Information on Peace and Security (2015); from the Institute of advanced studies on justice (2016). Reports from the following Ivorian NGOs: 'LIDHO-MIDH-FIDH' (2014); 'Action pour la Protection des Droits de l'Homme' (2015); and 'Observatoire de la Justice Transitionnelle' (2013).

⁵⁹Greiff, 'Report of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion of truth, justice, reparation and guarantees of non-recurrence'.

⁶⁰Bayart, 'L'Afrique dans le monde'.

development'.⁶¹ Second, it supports the idea that the aftermath of civil war may not be as a pivotal moment as it is suggested in the literature. Instead, post-conflict settings merely show a perpetuation of previous power relations and political dynamics. In that context, using handbooks and toolkits in the search for technical solutions to what is perceived as a technical problem cannot succeed. The CDVR, and thus an important piece of the reconciliation puzzle, fails because they did not take into account in practice that the politics that drove the conflict and its aftermath are still at play. With this failure, here, another essential element to the reconciliation process defaults: trust between the people and their state institutions.⁶²

Are locals all the same?

The CDVR makes an interesting case to interrogate the local identity. First, if peacebuilders as a rather homogeneous group sharing similar educational backgrounds and socialising among themselves, however, these features are not specific to this group. For instance, we can easily portray the CDVR members in a very similar way. Based on my empirical research, I reconstituted their socioeconomical backgrounds, educational and professional trajectories. It appears that the CDVR has the same elitist characteristics than peacebuilders but also as any high public administration. All CDVR central commissioners and advisors are member of the national elite. A review of their academic studies and professional careers, their multiple positions, their salaries and privileges, their travels and cultural practices, their fathers' professions, show high economic, social and cultural capitals, as well as similar trajectories. A lot of them lived several years abroad. Some have family in France or in the United States. They all mentioned many travels abroad, and speak several languages. They all have a high degree obtained partly or integrally in a foreign occidental country. As for their economic and social capitals, they already are high just by working in the CDVR, but still, it appears it was already the case before that. They often own businesses on the side and enjoy several parallel positions in the academic, business or legal worlds. Also, they belong to a shared network of acquaintances shaped prior to their gathering within the Commission. I will illustrate that with one example. Despite being the only opposition-affiliated member of the Commission, Commissioner Sery Bailly mentions old connections to four other members of the Commission: a childhood friend, three university and work acquaintances. Having in mind that elite is both about characteristics and network, the commission shows a certain continuity of the public action, far from the supposedly extraordinary nature of a TRC, and far from the mainstream exotic and miserabilist understanding of the targets of the intervention, or the locals.

⁶¹Sabaratnam, 'Avatars of Eurocentrism in the critique of the liberal peace': 261 In reference to the work of Hobson published in 2012 'The Eurocentric Conception of World Politics: Western International Theory, 1760–2010.' at Cambridge University Press.

⁶²Simpson, 'Reconciliation Beyond Conceptual Debates': 5.

From another perspective, if it is strictly ‘ordinary people’ who are considered as the locals (naturally you would first have to manage to find where to draw a line between the elite and the ordinary) the category still is problematic. As any categorisation would do, it erases the multiplicity of personal experiences of who is a local or a stranger.

*The people auditioning are strangers, and locals were not included in the process. So, a lot of victims did not go. It took us eight months to get some people to speak, and they still change sidewalks when we cross paths because we know what happened to them, so if they don't see anyone they trust they just don't come.*⁶³

For instance, in this quote from an interviewee, the stranger is another ordinary citizen, one of many listeners for the CDVR probably coming from Abidjan or the nearest important city, to complete his work. It definitely points to ‘the contested nature of the local, which is never homogeneous, but complex and contested’.⁶⁴

Third perspective on the complexity of notions of the local, but also the international: actors may willingly position themselves in different identities in front of different interlocutors, in different spaces and at different times, or even decide to display both identities simultaneously. Here, we demonstrate that ‘identity can become an economic and political resource’ and that ‘actors are therefore never just local or international, but move along’.⁶⁵ In my first email exchange with the CDVR President chief of staff and special advisor, I asked to meet him on the grounds of an investigation on transitional justice in Côte d’Ivoire. He strongly replied ‘what does my work have to do with that?’ The day of our interview, he told me about the setting of the CDVR: ‘I had studied conflict resolution in traditional societies. I never thought I would have to reflect on it in the context of a modern conflict, since I started this in 1999. Then, when Banny told me ‘reconciliation’, I explained him ‘I have thought about this. We must not do what the United Nations want us to do because it will lead nowhere. We must look at how conflicts have been treated in Ivorian cultures and start from there’.⁶⁶ Two days earlier I was speaking with the CDVR special advisor on international relations. He too was expressing a strong reject of the international and framing his identity and practices as local. He assured that ‘they oversaw everything’ and that the Commission has nothing to do with a foreign concept. ‘Be aware, it is a cultural tool’, he asserted. Only it is just one of the two sides of the discourse displayed by the CDVR members. If they use national roots and rites to legitimate their actions over their ‘international partners’ prescriptions’ – particularly in a context where ‘local identity serves as a gateway to peacebuilding legitimacy’⁶⁷ – they can also play with their international identity for the same legitimacy purposes during the same interview. In the same discussion, the CDVR chief of staff also spend time explaining me that he welcomed transitional justice as ‘a perfectly rational and fair norm’. ‘It was absolutely normal: National consultations, seeking truth, reparations ... it is useful frame and we abide’. In the end, when it comes to the norm itself, they position as part of the international, and when it comes to relationships between transitional justice experts and them, they reject the way international standards are asymmetrically imposed on

⁶³Conversation with a coalition of various victims’ associations, female member talking, Abidjan, April 2014.

⁶⁴Kappler, ‘The dynamic local’: 882.

⁶⁵Ibid., 885.

⁶⁶Interview with the CDVR President chief of staff and special advisor, Abidjan, April 2015.

⁶⁷Kappler, ‘The dynamic local’: 881.

them. This ambivalence, the overturn of the imposition of transitional justice standards and experts by the CDVR members, and their ability to play with local and international identities for their own benefit certainly counter clichés on the local.

The problematic construction of the local and the international as binary opposites in current debates lead to ‘an excessive focus on Western actors within the international; a romanticised interpretation of hybrid peace governance structures; a blindness towards the dominant role of local elites’.⁶⁸ In this line of work, and through providing evidence from the ground, our study aims at adding to these debates by looking more closely at local elites and the governance of a recent transitional justice mechanism. Indeed, as described in this section and in the following one, the reality of the Ivorian peacebuilding landscape goes far beyond the local/international binary. Here, focusing on the local shows parts of its diversity and a more nuanced reality than suggested in the majority of these debates.

Relationships in the Ivorian transitional justice landscape: a matter of hierarchies rather than differences

It is undeniable that, structurally, peacebuilding is premised on unequal positions that allow ‘one group of people coming into another group of people’s country to “build peace”, and this relationship is not about to be reversed’.⁶⁹ Yet, on one hand, this relationship may take ambiguous shapes, and on the other, this relationship is not specific to these groups. As we develop these two ways of looking at the relationships in place, it becomes clear that in any case, they are a matter of hierarchies rather than differences between all groups involved.

In our setting, peacebuilders show different relations to the local, and various hierarchies are in place, in which they do not always have the upper hand. Indeed, they are blindsided by their first target of intervention, the Commission. To get out of the spectator seat, they are more or less compelled to a ‘local turn’, that is to say, in their terms, to engage more deeply with grassroots peace and victims organisations. Siding with this end of the local is a way for the internationals to regain agency, both in legitimacy of their action and in power over a target group.

More than that, this structurally unequal relation between peacebuilders and targets of intervention is not specific to these groups. The situations is similar in domestic contexts, and ‘social structural processes position some groups in a way that enable some to govern and others to be governed, be it “at home” or “abroad”’.⁷⁰ Indeed, in the CDVR case, another type of hierarchy shows in the transitional justice landscape, still engaging the powerful or the resourceful and the powerless or the resourceless, but exclusively between domestic groups targeted by the intervention.

In our setting, deep divides oppose nationals. They appear on three levels. First, a core opposition exists between civil society, victims associations, and the CDVR. Second, at its periphery, another opposition exists between political opponents and the government who put the CDVR in the middle as another tool of an authoritative and asymmetrical

⁶⁸Paffenholz, ‘Unpacking the local turn in peacebuilding’.

⁶⁹Pingeot, ‘International Peacebuilding as a Case of Structural Injustice’: 279.

⁷⁰Ibid.

governance of the country. Third, an opposition plays out between the CDVR and the government, both regarding the content of the CDVR's work and regarding the competition between their two heads, the two being entangled.

If NGOs positioned in the transitional justice domain are in conflict with the CDVR about resources proper to this field, the other relationships existing in this part of the peacebuilding landscape go far beyond those stakes. While the setting of the peacebuilding landscape and distribution economic and symbolic resources primarily remain international, in Côte d'Ivoire they mostly allow for a replay of local political conflicts on new grounds and resources, being between local elites and local populations or between local elites themselves. Here, we put our finger on a 'massively understudied' group in critical peacebuilding research: national elites.⁷¹ Yet they are explicitly targets of the intervention, and above all, their power and relationships to other groups deeply shape its landscape.

On that note, if we consider the CDVR relationships to groups of both the international and the local we continue to discover hierarchies above else. The same words are used by the CDVR members to describe their international partners and by the grassroots organisations working in transitional justice to describe the CDVR members. While a CDVR special advisor tells me that such transitional justice expert attached to the Commission « *was acting as we must do things only the way he thought we should do* », ⁷² grassroots organisations describe the president and the ways of the CDVR as quoted earlier in this paper: '*they did not try to listen to the people*', '*nothing has been taken into consideration*', etc. In that sense too, local targets such as CDVR members may be much closer to international interveners than other local targets. Furthermore, in our context, these grassroots organisations are joined by international organisations to try to counter the CDVR. In that sense, once again, the core distinctiveness posited in peacebuilding literature between internationals and locals and the focus on their opposition are to be questioned. In other words, local elites are not automatically more legitimate than external interveners.⁷³ Their governance is no less conflictual than other types of governance. Also, to add to a previous section of this discussion, it contributes to demonstrate that their local identity does not set them apart from foreign peacebuilders or western political elites.

With the local turn or the sociological turn, 'studies of "the "encounter" between international peacekeepers, statebuilders, and the recipients of intervention" often focus on "the cultural divides between local and international actors"'.⁷⁴ It may be true in some ways, but it does not capture the potential complexity of both local identities and configurations of powers shaping the peacebuilding landscape. Furthermore, when oriented towards solving the problem of the intervention failure, these approaches tend to 'see intervention failure as a failure of interaction, driven by the difference between interveners and local populations', implying many times that it 'could be made better if interveners knew local populations better and respected their difference'.⁷⁵ Against this background, we argue with others 'that foregrounding power relations rather than cultural differences not only makes better sense of a reality that is undeniably complex, but also provides a more solid basis for critique'.⁷⁶

⁷¹Paffenholz, 'Unpacking the local turn in peacebuilding'.

⁷²Interview with the CDVR president spokesperson and advisor, Abidjan, April 2015.

⁷³Pingeot, 'International Peacebuilding as a Case of Structural Injustice': 275.

⁷⁴*Ibid.*, 271.

⁷⁵*Ibid.*, 271–3.

⁷⁶*Ibid.*, 273; Sabaratnam, 'Avatars of Eurocentrism in the critique of the liberal peace'.

Conclusion

This article offers to question the debate on peacebuilding failure in lights of an empirical research conducted in Côte d'Ivoire on the Dialogue Truth and Reconciliation Commission. This Commission was set up by the victor of the 2010–2011 electoral crisis after at least a decade of fragmented civil war in the country. This paper represents a significant contribution to this debate mentioned above in two ways. First, it cumulates knowledge from 'the local turn' and 'the sociological turn' to reflect on two aspects understudied in the existing literature in general. One of these aspects is hierarchies and categories of the international and the local. The other is the impact of domestic actors, relationships amongst them, as well as with external actors. Second, and more importantly still, this article explores this debate based on original empirical data. This perspective is far from widespread in the existing literature, even when it suggests a reorientation of the terms of the debate. In doing so, we show that what has been taken for granted as the categories of the peacebuilders and the locals, as well as the relationships between all actors present in the peacebuilding field, are more nuanced than they appear. Taking an empirical stand sheds light on the heterogeneity and sometimes-even porosity of these two 'groups'. It puts in perspective the very process of categorisation of all actors involved in peacebuilding, and the meaning of this process.

Who shapes the transition? *'The overwhelming majority of qualitative studies on post-conflict democratisation focus on the contribution of external actors in peace-building missions'*.⁷⁷ When studying the CDVR process, it becomes obvious though *'that an explanation of the outcomes of post-conflict democratisation requires more than an examination of external actors, their mission mandates or their capabilities and deficiencies. In addition, there is a need to study domestic elites, their preferences and motivations, as well as their perceptions of and their reactions to external interference'*.⁷⁸ Despite the role they are given in the literature, in Côte d'Ivoire, the internationals' hold on the process is both ambiguous and tenuous. In the end, it is by taking a closer look on power dynamics and interactions on the ground that we may have a stronger grip on the dynamics in place, that is to say on who, and what, shape the transition, and in what way. The empirical method makes it possible to grasp exactly how power relations, first between very heterogeneous domestic actors, then between them and external actors, affects the announced reconciliation process.

Though an empirical case study presents limits in terms of generalising results, surely it allows us to question the current mainstream terms of the debates on liberal peace. In Côte d'Ivoire, more than a criticism at a disconnection between international peacebuilders and locals an ethnographic turn could solve, the CDVR case of failure invites us to consider that the existing gaps in the reconciliation process may lie between nationals, and may be more than anything else a matter of hierarchical positions between the powerful and the powerless. This paper intends to contribute to another way of looking at cases of failure and their study in peacebuilding literature. Most importantly, it intends to make a point in favour of empirical research and of confronting those debates to groundworks, as the only way of being able to find debate terms and analytical categories close to the experiential reality of those investigated.

⁷⁷Grimm and Weiffen, 'Domestic elites and external actors in post-conflict democratisation': 260.

⁷⁸Ibid., 258.

Why does intervention keep on failing? I asked at the beginning of this paper. If the local is at best an idealised category that interveners rely on without further investigation; if it is a rhetoric device used in various ways; if ‘the local turn’ distracts peacebuilders from ‘the structurally unequal social positions that make intervention possible to begin with’⁷⁹ how could it not?

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Delphine Griveaud is a doctoral researcher at the Fund for Scientific Research in Belgium, working under joint supervision of the Université Catholique de Louvain and the Université Paris Nanterre. From a sociological and political perspectives, her PhD unpacks the international circulations of restorative justice, its structuring in France, its developmental trajectories within the French criminal justice system and explains how it continues holding on within it. She is the co-author of « La justice transitionnelle, un monde-carrefour. Contribution à une sociologie des professions internationales » Cultures & Conflits, n°119-120, 2020 ; and the author of « Justice transitionnelle et récit national en Côte d’Ivoire » in Camille Goirand, Angélica Muller, Construire la mémoire historique : usages publics du passé dans la justice transitionnelle, 2020.

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⁷⁹Pingeot, ‘International peacebuilding as a case of structural injustice’: 267.: