

An insider's guide to changing the world

by Gordon Peake

30 November 2021



Community development volunteer in Cambodia

Photo Credit: [DFAT/Flickr](#)

After recent heavy labour in the salt mines of technical report-writing, engaging with this inspiring book stirred in me an intense feeling for which there is no one single word in English. A Portuguese word captures it best: *saudade*, happiness tinged with melancholy. The joy came from reading a scholar on top of their game writing persuasively and engagingly about how much there is to learn from innovative and nuanced peacebuilding efforts across the globe. The sadness emanated from doubting whether the guards of the salt mines – the institutions that manage the funding flows within the world of peacebuilding and aid – are truly up to taking on the book's conclusions and implications.

Severine Autesserre is a professor of political science at New York's Barnard College, Columbia University. This is her [third book](#). The first [The Trouble with the Congo](#) showed how, by wilful blindness to micropolitics, international efforts to build peace in the central African nation proved costly and fruitless. Her second, [Peaceland](#) examined how the everyday lives and work routines of expatriates on the ground impacted the effectiveness of their endeavours. That book skewered their frequently ludicrously elevated notions about their place in post-conflict situations and the retinue of training programs they came up with as simple solutions to complex problems. The value of both contributions was heightened by Autesserre inserting herself into the texts, not exempting herself from critique, self-reflection and self-deprecation about her own missteps and foibles. She too (as I am), is part of [Peaceland](#), and we both share a healthy sense of irony and the absurd.

In [The Frontlines of Peace](#) Autessere sets herself a more difficult intellectual challenge: to chart out *how* peace can be built. She explores the issue through recounting the stories of individuals and groups working at grassroots peacebuilding levels which is, she argues, the only level that truly counts. It is a global journey that takes her to an island on the Congolese-Rwandan border as well as places in Colombia, Somaliland, Timor-Leste and the United States. Her argument, in short, is that relationships matter and that peace can most reliably be built with local

materials. This peace is not utopian, made in conference halls in capital cities but localised, provisional, messy and built from the bottom-up.

What's striking about many of the people identified in the book as effective peacebuilders is their common characteristics. They are low profile, prone to rumination and all-too-human. All pay close attention to micro-details that are of macro importance: the interplays of human interactions, relationalities, histories, prevailing belief systems and their collective impact upon the everyday. In my mind's eye I imagined many as slightly shambling sorts, unlikely to make an invite list to the ambassador's civil society cocktails. Sometimes these individuals and organisations succeed, sometimes they don't. Many times, these individuals get burnt out.

Some hail from the countries themselves, some are expatriates. One such person that Autesserre references as an exemplar was my friend, the late scholar of Timor-Leste, [James Scambary](#). She writes, accurately, how James was one of the few foreigners in Timor-Leste to feel the tremors of conflict when other interveners were larking around with fellow foreigners at the beach. Her warm words (prepared before he died) make for a poignant obituary to a life that ended too soon. I remember James telling me how chuffed he was by them in one of our last conversations. He would be amused at Autesserre raising her eyebrows when a representative of a peacebuilding NGO cannot provide a single instance when training contributed to anything. He'd raise his own eyebrows at the claim from a major organisation's representative that a feature of their community policing program in the country was "taking the logo off". There's thousands of logo-resplendent t-shirts that indicate otherwise.

There are obvious resonances in Autesserre's dissection of what works, and what doesn't, in peacebuilding for how international development projects are managed more generally. Autesserre's existential reflections about how jejunely she comported herself in Kosovo – "sharing security information or sensitive papers ... with foreign contacts but not my local colleagues" – have parallels with how more poorly-paid locally engaged staff are always sidelined in aid programs. In diplomatic posts where such programs are managed, most sensitive conversations tend to take place on the other side of the airlock, in rooms where local staff can't venture without an escort. This part of the book bellows a challenge about whether this ingrained approach to aid management is either morally correct or defensible in terms of actual results.

What to do about it? The solution – according to an unnamed female Australian diplomat that Autesserre interviews in Dili – is simple. "We should change the rules" she avers and allow organisations greater latitude, impose fewer shackling

restrictions and empower local staff more than they are at present.

This diplomat, as Autesserre says, was obviously correct. But is the bureaucracy she works within up for it? Embracing Autesserre's "let a thousand seeds bloom" approach on an open-ended timetable requires tidal waves of courage and fortitude as well as an authorising environment.

I thought of this Australian diplomat in the days after I finished reading the book and wondered whether, for all her clarity about what needed to be done, how much rule changing had she had been able to make happen, or tried to make happen. Where is she now? On a posting in the Pacific? Lobbying for a local peacebuilder to be front-of-stage in communication products instead of the head of mission? Penning a brisk memo to the new secretary of the department about what rules should change? Bottom-up bureaucracy-change might be even more taxing and impossible-seeming than bottom-up peacebuilding. It requires prioritising the local, accepting differences and being less worked up about national level politics. It requires changes on the part of many of us.

For anyone who really cares about improving the work of this flawed but still all too necessary field, Autesserre's book makes for essential and uncomfortable reading.

Author/s:

Gordon Peake

Gordon Peake is a writer, podcaster and consultant, and a campus visitor at the Development Policy Centre. His first book was an award-winning memoir of life in Timor-Leste, his second was on the would-be nation of Bougainville.

Link: <https://devpolicy.org/an-insiders-guide-to-changing-the-world-20211130/>