International approaches to governing ethnic diversity

Jane Boulden and Will Kymlicka

While decisions about the governance of ethnic diversity remain primarily in the hands of national governments, a wide range of international actors often seek to influence those decisions, or to shape their implementation. These ‘international actors’ include not only traditional intergovernmental organisations like the United Nations, but also international advocacy groups and philanthropic organisations as well as a range of third-party actors, such as the foreign aid programmes of Western states. The modern Commonwealth itself, based on inter-governmental consensus, has ‘respect and understanding’ among its peoples as a stated objective and principle.

Governing diversity: Some key questions

• To what extent, or under what conditions, are international actors attentive to the ethnic dimension of their activities? Do these actors have specific policies or guidelines that instruct them to be sensitive to ethnic issues (in the way that many actors have gender sensitivity as part of their mandate)?
• Insofar as they are sensitive to ethnic issues, what assumptions do these actors make (implicitly or explicitly) about the appropriate models for governing ethnic diversity? Do they tend to favour more ‘multiculturalist’ models of democracy or more familiar (majoritarian and unitary) models of ‘nation-building’?
• What are the main goals of international actors when making decisions about how to approach ethnic issues? Are they primarily governed by security considerations (peace and stability), or by democratisation and human rights, or by more economic considerations of development or profit?
• What tools do international actors have available to promote their preferred models of governing ethnic diversity? We can imagine a continuum here from very gentle forms of persuasion (such as organising workshops to discuss ‘best practices’) through various forms of norm-setting (for example international declarations on minority rights) to various diplomatic sticks and carrots or even coercive military intervention (as in Kosovo).
• What are the intended and unintended effects of these international activities? What sorts of domestic ethnic politics do they legitimate or encourage, and what sorts do they delegitimise or marginalise? When do they contribute to the peaceful and democratic governance of ethnic diversity, and when do they exacerbate conflict and instability?

Although the influence of international actors is widely noted, there remains deep disagreement about their motivations and effects. Many critics charge that the international community is bent on imposing idealised versions of Western models of liberal-democratic multiculturalism on parts of the world where they are inappropriate, while dismissing local modes of ethnic co-existence as backward or illiberal. Other critics argue, by contrast, that the international community is too willing to accept any settlement that avoids ethnic bloodshed, even at the expense of individual freedoms and democratic equality. Still other commentators argue that, on balance, the international community serves as an honest broker, gently nudging local actors towards more inclusive and democratic outcomes that are responsive to the needs of the local population.

The reality, of course, is that the ‘international community’ is itself a heterogeneous collection of very different actors, each with its own distinctive motivations, beliefs and strategies. Yet remarkably few studies to date have attempted to unpack these different components and think about the important differences between them. We share the Commonwealth’s concern for looking at ethnic diversity not just as a factor in violent conflicts but as a dimension of peaceful and democratic (routine) governance, and in this article we sketch a few lines of enquiry that international actors need to consider if they are to have positive results. Given the diversity of types of international actors and ethnic relations around the world, we do not expect to find any universal laws or rigid formulas here. On the contrary, our aim is precisely to get a better sense of the range of possibilities, in terms of the motives, tactics and effects.

International law: Conflict literatures

Of the body of literature that relates to this topic, perhaps the most developed is that on the international law of minority rights, which includes studies of the United Nations’ regime of minority rights and indigenous rights, as well as studies of the regional regime of minority rights adopted by the Council of Europe and the European Union, and the more specialised studies of such issues as the international law principles regarding language rights or secession. This literature has exploded in part to keep up with the expansion of new international declarations and conventions on the topic, including, to name just a few:

• UN Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities (1992)
• UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007)
• UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity (2001)
There is a growing body of literature on the role of international organisations in dealing with violent ethnic conflict

- Council of Europe European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (1992)

While each of these documents differs in detail, they all share a commitment to the idea that diversity should be seen as a normal and natural feature of contemporary societies; that the distinctive identities of minorities and indigenous peoples must be recognised and accommodated; that minority and indigenous rights are a part of human rights; and that peaceful and democratic political mobilisation in pursuit of such claims is legitimate. And, precisely because these official statements can be seen as representing the will of the international community, they have quickly become the currency of claims-making by minority and indigenous political actors around the world. Even when these international norms are not legally enforceable in any domestic or international court of law, they still provide important political resources to legitimise minority claims-making.

However, the existing literature on these international norms suffers from important limitations. It is written almost entirely by and for international lawyers, who tend to treat international law as an autonomous, self-enclosed system, and so provide little if any insight into why these international declarations have been adopted now, or how they are related to larger sociological trends or political ideologies, or what geopolitical agendas are served by them. They explain what international declarations mean by a right to enjoy one’s culture, for example, but provide no account of why (some) international organisations have decided that there is such a right, or of how domestic actors use (and abuse) this right in their political mobilisations, or how this does or doesn’t contribute to improved governance.

A second relevant body of work focuses on the role of international organisations in dealing with violent ethnic conflict around the world. This literature, dominated by political scientists, focuses on a set of high-profile cases of international interventions in situations of ethnic violence, and hence on how international organisations can maintain peace, rebuild trust, organise elections, decommission arms, reintegrate paramilitaries, and so on, so as to avoid further violence and help rebuild a ‘failed’ state. Much of this literature is case-oriented and focused on a short time frame (i.e. international involvement in the immediate period around the signing and implementing of peace agreements). It also tends to be very strategic in orientation, focusing not on how to build a societal consensus on certain norms (such as minority rights), but on how to defuse threats to peace, particularly from the hard-line ‘spoilers’ of any proposed resolution to the conflict. Indeed, where offers of amnesties or even jobs and positions of power are used as available levers, the strategic pursuit of conflict resolution may directly undermine efforts at promoting international norms of respect for diversity. 1

Such high-profile crisis-management issues are obviously very important, but here again the literature is isolated from broader debates about the larger and longer-term dynamics and processes by which international actors shape everyday assumptions about the appropriate and normal governing of ethnic diversity. International organisations are not just involved in trying to strengthen ‘fragile’ or failed states; they are also involved in shaping our everyday understandings of what a ‘normal’ state looks like, and we need to better understand how approaches to failure or crisis are informed by perceptions of success.
Linking diversity and development

The literature on post-conflict reconstruction merges into a third relevant set of writings on the link between diversity and international development. We can see two streams of work here. First, beginning in the early 1990s, academics and policy-makers explored the role that ethnic diversity played in mediating the link between underdevelopment and violent conflict, and how development aid can affect that dynamic. A second stream focused on the way that community development projects could take advantage of pre-existing ethnic identities and ethnic solidarities as a source of ‘social capital’. This idea, sometimes known as ‘ethnodevelopment’, turns on ethnic group leaders and organisations as actors and partners in the process of formulating and implementing development. Both streams are important, but again they tend to be restricted to the development field (economically conceived), disconnected from larger debates about the role of ethnic diversity in democratisation and human rights.

We argue that the insights of these different literature silos should be brought together. Each captures an important part of the story of how international actors can contribute to the peaceful and democratic governance of ethnic diversity, but each on its own also threatens to prejudice that question, offering one-sided and incomplete interpretations of international involvement.

More research is needed to map the full range of international actors and approaches. Even based on a small sample of case studies, however, we can draw some preliminary conclusions. One finding concerns the actors involved. A diverse group of international actors are involved in the governing of ethnic diversity, often in an ad hoc and uncoordinated way. There is no single position or institution that serves as the dominant voice or authority on issues of diversity in the way that, say, the World Health Organization dominates international discussions of public health. This partly reflects the fact that few if any of these organisations were initially designed and mandated to deal with issues of ethnic diversity. In that sense, concern for ethnic diversity is almost always an afterthought, a contingent result of personalities and events.

To the extent that changes of mandate are an arduous undertaking, we might say that these organisations are not ‘fit for purpose’ in relation to the governing of ethnic diversity. But the

Civic or ethnic?

Among the contributions to our co-edited volume, International Approaches to Governing Ethnic Diversity, Raffaele Marchetti and Nathalie Tocci assess the EU’s approach to peacebuilding in ethnically divided societies. The EU’s involvement in conflict resolution is driven by its belief in the ‘liberal peace’ principle: peace is achieved through the consolidation of liberal democracy and human rights. This has led the EU to pursue peacebuilding, not only or primarily through agreements between armed groups, but rather by supporting and empowering local civil society actors, who are seen as the most likely bearers of liberal values. However, not all civil society groups are seen as worthy of support. Rather, the EU privileges those groups it sees as ‘civic’ in their orientation, focusing on individual rights, rather than ‘ethnic’ organisations or movements defined on an ethnic or religious basis that demand collective rights. Civic groups are seen as most likely to contribute to the desecuritising of ethnic relations, whereas ethnic organisations are seen as likely to securitise the conflict.

Drawing on four case studies – Israel/Palestine, Turkey, Bosnia and Cyprus – Marchetti and Tocci demonstrate that this choice has a number of detrimental consequences. First, as has often been noted, EU funding leads to the development of an artificial civil society, a proliferation of professional NGOs that are disconnected from ordinary citizens and grass-roots movements. Second, the authors suggest that the approach can backfire because it rests on false views about the link between ‘civic’ and ‘ethnic’ organisations, and about the link between individual and collective rights in the sequencing of conflict resolution. It ignores both the dangers of majoritarianism hiding behind so-called ‘civic’ NGOs, and the democratic potential contained within so-called ‘ethnic’ organisations or movements. A more effective approach to conflict resolution and peacebuilding, they argue, needs to overcome some of the conceptual blinders associated with the ‘liberal peace’.

Elisabeth King examines a related conceptual blind-spot in the way international development organisations think about post-conflict development. In poor, conflict-affected and ethnically divided societies, she argues, international development donors and practitioners have largely ignored ethnicity in what she calls a form of ‘wilful ignorance’, working on the assumption that economic growth is conducive to inter-ethnic peace. Donors are often aware that development aid can have disparate and distorting effects on ethnic relations in divided societies, but are reluctant to explicitly add any form of ‘ethnic sensitivity’ or ‘ethnic auditing’ to their programmes.

The UN Security Council

Jane Boulden argues that although the council was designed with state-to-state conflict in mind, over time it has increasingly taken action in intra-state conflicts, particularly since the end of the Cold War. Since the council’s involvement in ethnic conflict occurs in a reactive and ad hoc way it does not operate on the basis of any explicit principles or policies on issues relating to the governance of ethnic diversity. As one would expect, in responding to conflict situations that are ethnically divisive its prime concern is to choose solutions that favour international stability and order, rather than to promote any particular model of how ethnic diversity should be governed. In that context, however, the council’s decisions reveal a trend towards endorsement of the principles of liberal peace, a commitment to human rights, accompanied by opposition to non-consensual secession.

Through its creation of international criminal tribunals in the aftermath of the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda, the council has played an important role in establishing greater accountability for individual violations of international humanitarian law, including ethnic cleansing. And its increased attention to the humanitarian consequences of war has led it to take the lead in developing principles and practices focused on the protection of civilians in conflict.
problem is not simply the lack of a clear mandate. A deeper issue is that there remains a lingering uncertainty amongst many international decision-makers about whether greater sensitivity to ethnic diversity really is desirable or necessary. Even if no one today believes in 1950s-style theories of modernisation and nation-building (according to which ethnic differentiation should disappear as societies develop), it remains the case that ethnic politics is often implicitly perceived as both retrograde and dangerous, rather than a natural and normal part of any free and democratic society. The result is not just a lack of co-ordination between international organisations, but also inconsistency or even paralysis within them.

And yet, alongside the evidence of ad hoc inconsistency, there is also evidence of remarkable consistency or isomorphism across international organisations regarding the governing of ethnic diversity, at least at the level of discourse. Everyone today acknowledges that claims to national homogeneity or unanimity can only be sustained by the brutal suppression of dissent and diversity, including ethnic, national, religious and indigenous diversity, and hence that the public expression of this diversity is an inevitable feature of a free society, and indeed a marker of its freedom. There is also greater awareness of the dangers – both to peace and to justice – of older ideologies of racial or religious supremacy, and the practices of coercive assimilation, imperialism, ethnic cleansing, or even genocide that they can give rise to.

This suggests that we should be wary of oversimplified or overly-deterministic categorisations of international actors as either for or against multiculturalism, neoliberalism, collective rights and so on. To be sure, there are differences in approach amongst these international actors. One would expect a development bank, for example, to have different priorities than a human rights organisation, and non-governmental advocacy or philanthropic organisations to have different priorities than intergovernmental organisations. Yet these differences are perhaps more subtle than often assumed. What we see are efforts to work within common vocabularies, discourses and principles that attempt to link human rights, pluralism, development, peace and the nation-state.

After all, while pluralism may now be an integral part of the ‘global models of nationally organised progress and justice’ (Meyer et al., 1997), these models are precisely nationally organised – that is, they take the existing world order of nation-states as the starting point within which progress and justice is to be achieved, including progress and justice for minorities. Insofar as this is so, the very models that support pluralism also provide ample latitude for states and international organisations to emphasise the importance of stability and security, alongside respecting diversity. Hence, both security organisations and human rights bodies can partake of this shared discourse, and can draw upon the same epistemic communities.

**Conclusion**

The fact that a diversity of international organisations are active players in this field creates both opportunities and challenges for minorities. On the one hand, minorities have been able to take advantage of the multiple access points that arise from the very diversity of international actors. On the other hand, because all of these international forums were initially designed with other purposes in mind, and are typically structured by states with a view to upholding the world order of nation-states, advocates for diversity often face an uphill battle. Groups appeal to the international level to help overcome resistance to diversity at the national level, but to ensure success in their objectives these groups ultimately need to gain the support of other state actors. The international realm is no less subject to the logic of state power and raison d’état than the national level, even if it operates in a somewhat different form. This helps explain the very mixed record of modest gains for some minority claims combined with decisive rejection of others.

Underlying all of this is a theme familiar to all theorists and practitioners of governance: ‘context matters’. Whether they are international actors or other actors seeking to engage and motivate international actors, all do so within a particular historical moment that provides the opportunity for action while also framing it. For Commonwealth countries, those moments have included decolonisation; ‘third wave democratisations’ after the Cold War; and the transition to a multipolar world which is ongoing – including spheres of trade and aid. Even if diversity and rights protection are now recognised values (intergovernmentally, and by the UN and Commonwealth ‘of the peoples’), the outcomes are always the result of political contestation and negotiation, not the unfolding of any universal logic of justice.

**Endnotes**

1 This is a familiar refrain in the literature on international intervention in Bosnia, which combines affirmation of international norms of minority rights while simultaneously empowering the very actors that had brutally violated such norms during the civil war.

2 Ideas about the pursuit of national homogeneity and ‘unanimist’ political ideologies, of the sort that dominated both Communist regimes and military dictatorships during much of the Cold War, have been thoroughly discredited.

**References**


**JANE BOULDEN** is a professor at the Royal Military College of Canada. During 2004–14 she held the position of Canada Research Chair in international relations and security studies. She is also currently a research fellow at the Queen’s University Centre for International and Defence Policy. From 2000 until 2004 she was a MacArthur Research Fellow at the Centre for International Studies, University of Oxford. Her recent books include *Responding to Conflict in Africa: The United Nations and Regional Organizations, The United Nations and Nuclear Orders and Terrorism and the UN: Before and After September 11th*.

**WILL KYMLICKA** is the Canada Research Chair in political philosophy at Queen’s University in Kingston, Canada, where he has taught since 1998. His research interests focus on issues of democracy and diversity, and in particular on models of citizenship and social justice within multicultural societies. He has published eight books and more than 200 articles, which have been translated into 32 languages, and has received several awards, including the Queen Elizabeth II Diamond Jubilee Medal in 2012.