

The business–peace nexus: ‘business for peace’ and the reconfiguration of the public/private divide in global governance

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Abstract This article explores the implications of ‘business for peace’ (B4P), a new global governance paradigm that aims to put international businesses at the frontline of peace, stability and development efforts in fragile and conflict-affected states. This article argues that B4P entails a shift in the balance between public and private authority across what we coin the ‘business–peace nexus’ and which comprises corporate peacebuilding activities across different spatial scales and institutional settings. We explore B4P’s agency across two distinct nodes in this nexus—in global peacebuilding and development architectures, and in local peacebuilding settings in the Democratic Republic of Congo—to articulate the B4P paradigm’s multiple and contradictory effects on the balance between public and private authority in contemporary peacebuilding. On the one hand, B4P tips institutional scales towards the public by embedding corporations within public accountability structures. On the other hand, by legitimising businesses as peace actors, the B4P framework risks institutionalising asymmetrical encounters between firms and people affected by their operations. We deploy the term ‘asymmetrical governance’ to explain how the amalgamation of global and national, public and private into the operational presence of corporations skews the balance of power in their encounters with local populations.

Keywords Asymmetrical governance · Business for peace (B4P) · Business–peace nexus · Corporate social responsibility (CSR) · Democratic Republic of Congo · Peacebuilding

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Situating B4P in international relations and global governance

The role of multinational corporations (MNCs) in fragile and conflict-affected areas is one of the most contested areas in contemporary international politics. Informed by the controversial expansion of Western companies into the Third World since the end of the Cold War, the activities of companies like Group4Securicor in Palestine, Barrick Gold in Tanzania, Chiquita in Colombia, De Beers throughout Africa and Talisman Oil in South Sudan are just a few of the cases that have received widespread scrutiny. Yet, it is exactly the omnipresence of MNCs in many fragile and conflict-affected areas that the United Nations (UN) attempts to harness through B4P. Inaugurated in 2013 by Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, this new UN initiative establishes MNCs and national businesses as partners in local peace. MNCs form the very fabric of the global economy, and their operations extend to most of the world’s conflict and crisis zones—currently affecting two billion people (World Bank 2016). B4P tries to harness this overlap by elevating MNCs to peace actors in these so-called ‘conflict-affected and high-risk areas’. B4P’s aim ‘to expand and deepen private sector action in support of peace—in the workplace, marketplace and local communities’¹ is centre stage of the United Nations Global Compact (UNGC) vision for the post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and is framed as a valid complement to traditional aid and development mechanisms originating from the global North.² B4P is the most visible public symbol of the broader effort by the private sector to become peacebuilders and global governance participants, a desire that has grown exponentially in scope since 2005. Today over €2 trillion in investments is benchmarked to the SDGs, and 20,000 companies are signatories to varied peace and development initiatives around the world (O’Connor and Labowitz 2017).

While multilateral institutions like the United Nations and the World Bank are promising that business stakeholders are ‘the way forward’ for peacebuilding, International Relations (IR) scholarship has remained relatively silent. As B4P encroaches upon domains that are typically theorised as the preserve of states, we aim to situate B4P and the broader business–peace thrust within current debates on the role of MNCs³ in IR and global governance. Given the strong traditional

¹ Source: UNGC B4P website, available at <https://www.unglobalcompact.org/library/381> [last accessed on 23 October 2017].

² The UN initiative aside, Norway launched a Business for Peace Foundation in 2007, European business leaders formulated the Ypres Manifesto on Business for Peace in 2014, and Sri Lanka has had a Business for Peace Alliance since 2002. Regional and national businesses as well as small and medium enterprises also participate in the UNGC B4P project, but we exclude them from discussion as MNCs are the primary focus and driver of B4P, and MNCs are typically more engaged with the global governance aspects of peacebuilding than national firms, which give MNCs outsize importance. B4P can thus be seen in this article as representative of a broader set of business ventures in peacebuilding.

³ There is, of course, significant variation in MNCs within sectors, between sectors, and even within departments of specific firms, thus making any generalisation about ‘what MNCs believe’ or ‘what MNCs do’ inherently problematic and potentially leading towards over-generalisation. To better inform our theoretical development, we thus use examples wherever possible to show the *trends* of MNC action, using relevant literature to illustrate how peace issues are reflective of broader changes in corporate culture.



association between peacebuilding and public authority on the one hand, and the widespread controversy around the impact of business in fragile and/or conflict-affected settings on the other hand, how does this emergent new paradigm reshape the balance between public and private authority in global governance? Beyond the legitimate concerns raised by the wisdom of making MNCs peacebuilders, we argue that it contains the seeds of a more substantial paradigm shift in global peacebuilding and development architectures, and by reframing corporations as peace actors, B4P also influences foundational controversies in global governance. The global politics of peacebuilding not only pertains to the sovereign praxis of deploying peace agents, but is also about defining who is a legitimate actor in this field of activity. Likewise, business–peace interactions can constitute a wide array of activities, from efforts to address ‘root causes’ of conflict, involvement in peace processes, development projects or even security and infrastructure construction. The expansion of the mandate of foreign business actors in vulnerable countries to also include development activities strikes upon core IR debates regarding relationships between states and companies through lenses of both politics and economics—positions that are as powerful as they are contested.

The premise of this article is that B4P analysis can provide new insights into some of the most intractable and urgent questions of international politics by exploring directly how the public and the private now intersect within a field of practice long associated with state sovereignty in global governance (cf. Abrahamsen and Williams 2014). In 2002, Hall and Biersteker (2002) noted the ‘emergence of private authority in global governance’ in an eponymous volume. In foregrounding the negative effects of a bigger role for private actors in global governance, the subsequent literature has sometimes conceptualised the ascent of private actors in international politics as a one-way street, in which private actors garner unaccountable and unwanted power in a sphere of global governance hitherto public (i.e. Leander 2005; Small 2006).

In situating B4P within broader transformations of the relationship between public and private authority in peacebuilding, we signal the emergence of what we call the *business–peace nexus*,⁴ which houses the many entanglements between two fields of practice that are usually considered distinct: formal private-sector profit-seeking and peacebuilding activities. We echo the conceptual development of the ‘security–development nexus’ (cf. Stern and Öjendal 2010) in order to explore analytically the distribution of authority at specific interfaces of public and private actors across the many scalar, spatial and institutional settings where peacebuilding gets shaped. Criticism of the security–development nexus emerged in response to the incorporation of development aid into security strategies of post-Cold War (and in particular post-9/11) interventions in conflict-affected and high-risk environments. As these same areas are now the focal point of B4P interventions, critiques on the merger of security and development logics as strongly echoing late colonial

⁴ We prefer the notion of the ‘nexus’ over the equally productive concepts of ‘network’ (Callaghy et al. 2001) and ‘assemblage’ (Abrahamsen and Williams 2009) as we aim to single out the interface between corporate and peacebuilding actors among the many associations that make up the tangled web of peacekeeping worlds. The notion of business and peace forming a nexus was first coined—but not developed further—in Ford (2015, p. 21).



practice hold particular import (Duffield 2007). Additional studies used the analytical purchase of the notion of the nexus to demonstrate how deep linkages across the domains of development and security were concerted attempts to create coherence at the level of transnational governance (Stepputat 2012) even as they led to contradictory effects on the ground.

In blurring the boundary between ‘security’ and ‘development’ politics, military means and logics usually associated with warfare are now found in development aid (Bachmann et al. 2015). We explore the business–peace nexus accordingly by investigating the redistribution of authority at, and their co-production across, different sites and scales, expanding studies of the tensions arising from global private security governance (Abrahamsen and Williams 2011). Informed by a burgeoning literature on that topic, the distribution of authorship at the interface of business and peace can take many shapes, concerning not only the capacity to ‘steer’ or set discursive agendas in global governance, but also comprising the ‘rowing’ or the exercise of authority through practical decision-making at the level of implementation (cf. Hall and Biersteker 2002, p. 4).

In this article, we explore B4P’s influence upon the balance between public and private authority in global governance by highlighting two nodes within the business–peace nexus: B4P’s role in global peacebuilding architectures; and the sociology of local governance in fragile and conflict-affected areas. We first situate the emergence of the B4P philosophy as a significant step in the reconfiguration of the public/private divide in global governance. We then illustrate how the framing of B4P within corporate governance has led to a restructuring of the public and private in conflict zones with significant corporate activity. We then explore the business–peace nexus in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) to show that if B4P can successfully embed MNCs into public accountability structures at the global level, locally the reverse can occur: by legitimising MNCs as peace actors, the B4P framework risks being co-opted in the institutionalisation and radicalisation of asymmetrical encounters between MNCs and the people affected by their operations. We conclude with a brief discussion on how to examine more fully the emerging business–peace nexus as it expands throughout conflict zones and fragile developing states.

Our primary argument is that beyond recognising B4P’s stated aim of extending private authority into peacebuilding, B4P is also an effort to extend public authority over MNC operations in volatile environments. This entails the development of a new position within liberal peace doctrines which, paraphrasing Ruggie (2003), can be designated as ‘taking embedded liberal peacebuilding global’—that is, advancing peace through the market but embedded in a novel, more diffused, global public architecture. In restructuring the global governance of MNCs, B4P is also thus complicit in a dislocation of the public—a relocation of the public governance of war and peace within and between states to a more diffuse global public architecture.

Ultimately, as Abrahamsen and Williams (2009, p. 6) argue, any investigation of the intersection of the global and the local in nexuses across the public/private divide will have to take the form of some kind of ‘grounded theory’, i.e. informing through analyses situated in concrete contexts. Thus, the final part of this article



explores the local impact of business–peace interactions in conflict-affected and high-risk areas. If distinctions between the corporate and private spheres seem to be clear-cut, their utility to describe the plurality of forms of power that increasingly mark corporate presence in practice is limited. Moreover, this plurality is not novel but rather a contemporary manifestation of institutionalised local governance asymmetries. And, as both action and impact by businesses on peace and peacebuilding lag well behind high-level rhetoric, the underlying motivations behind this thrust are worthy of exploration.

The emergence of the business–peace nexus

The intimate entanglement of the private sector and peacebuilding actors at the core of the business–peace nexus has been shaped by two separate tendencies, both of which proliferated after the end of the Cold War: UN outsourcing to the private sector; and increasing demands on MNCs to contribute positively in conflict zones. Peacebuilding agencies have involved the private sector as partners or subcontractors for tasks increasingly indistinguishable from their core areas and themes of operation. While a 1997 report by the UN Joint Inspection Unit establishes that outsourcing is as old as the UN itself (UNJIU 1997), these activities intensified after the end of the Cold War, when the UN started subcontracting an increasing number of tasks to private firms. Reasons included severe budget constraints, a search for cost-efficiency, and increasing donor pushes for contracts to be awarded to companies headquartered in their own countries (Pingeot 2012).

Today, UN activities ranging from expert consulting and auditing to logistics, camp management, security and even implementation and delivery of outputs are routinely outsourced to the private sector. If one considers US-led interventions as part of the business–peace nexus, the degree of outsourcing increases. In some conflict settings, there are even more ‘private’ boots on the ground than ‘public’ ones (CBO 2008, p. 1; DoD 2015). While outsourcing as such may not necessarily impinge on peacebuilding logics, it gains in significance when coupled with the UN’s new, more holistic understanding of peacebuilding. To wit, when asking the question ‘Who are peacebuilders?’ on its FAQ, the UN Peacebuilding Support Office answers, ‘Peacebuilding is a task for everyone’.⁵ Aware that the overburdened and under-funded UN cannot do it alone, a corporate-positive multilateralisation of peacebuilding has become the preferred forward engagement mechanism. Large contractors such as Adam Smith International, Mott MacDonald and DynCorp increasingly participate in high-level peacebuilding and peacekeeping forums, discussing what peacebuilding implementation and design should look like. And most UN agencies actively seek out private sector financing and partnerships to elevate the private sector’s role from implementer to that of a true ‘partner’.

MNCs have operated in conflict zones for decades, and have many times done more harm than good to local populations in the pursuit of their own agendas. By the 1990s, these tendencies were well known by both the international community

⁵ United Nations Peacebuilding Support Office, Peacebuilding FAQ, available at <http://www.un.org/en/peacebuilding/pbso/faq.shtml> [last visited on 23 October 2017].



and enlightened corporate actors themselves, and were made more visible after the increase of civil conflicts in extractive-rich developing countries. MNC claims, that they were apolitical actors outside the sphere of violence when operating in conflict areas, were increasingly rejected, along with earlier arguments, most famously made by Milton Friedman’s assertion (1970) that corporations’ only social responsibility should be to their shareholders. Extractive MNCs in oil, diamonds and gold bore the brunt of public critique for how their operations often made wars worse. In turn, they were the most active corporate sector in the 2000s in the emerging push by the UN, the World Bank, and international aid and development agencies to implement ‘conflict-sensitive’ business practices that recognised their role in local peace and conflict (Gündüz et al. 2006).

Beginning in the early 2000s, international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) and peacebuilding institutes including International Alert, Global Witness, the United States Institute of Peace and MercyCorps began to explore the peace potential of local, national and multinational firms (i.e. Gündüz et al. 2006). NGO criticism and lobbying against MNC activity in fragile and conflict-affected areas culminated in demands for firms to go beyond ‘do no harm’ in operational areas, translating into a push for positive business contributions to root causes of conflict, often consolidated under approaches called ‘conflict-sensitive business practices’. In response, firms asserted their positive contributions to peace, as when Talisman Oil responded to an incriminating Christian Aid report with a letter titled ‘How Talisman Oils Peace’.⁶ While first limited to ‘naming and shaming’ companies profiting from conflict, interest quickly shifted to the potential of local businesses in peacebuilding, and then to harnessing the much more powerful MNC community.

The foundations of this argument can be traced back to 2001, when then-director of the World Bank James Wolfensohn addressed a gathering of CEOs, promising

remarkable opportunities both for serious investing in growth markets but also, if I may say, an opportunity to contribute to the stability of our planet. I say [...] to you very seriously that *there is no way today that the issue of global peace and stability can be left to multilateral institutions or to governments*. The stability of our planet depends surely on international institutions, but it also depends on the private sector and civil society (Wolfensohn 2001, emphasis added).

To indicate how the discourse has shifted, even previously critical NGOs including International Alert and to a lesser extent Global Witness now ‘explore the potential of the private sector to contribute to peacebuilding’ rather than outright rejecting private sector involvement in conflict-related issues (Ismail and Nusrat 2014, p. 1). As a result, the private sector now engages extensively with the World Bank and INGOs in policy and practice; they, in turn, offer public–private partnerships to stimulate peaceful development through poverty reduction and socio-economic growth (Brainard et al. 2007; UNGC 2013b; Börzel and Risse 2005; Ford 2015).

⁶ Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/2001/mar/30/guardianletters2> [last accessed on 23 October 2017].



Internally, many large Western-owned MNCs that operated in such areas⁷ adopted these new (largely non-binding) mechanisms to at least give the impression that they were sensitive to local issues, including extractive firms such as Chevron, Shell, Barick Gold, Rio Tinto and Statoil. The consumer popularisation of terms like ‘conflict minerals’ became broad societal triggers that went beyond individual sectors alone, and subcontracting and supply-chain examinations became more common investigative fodder. In response, many MNCs began to adopt new and more extensive corporate social responsibility platforms, including Creating Shared Value, corporate diplomacy and ethics, human rights frameworks, or industry-specific initiatives like the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (Haski-Leventhal 2014; Kolk and Lenfant 2013, 2015; Oh and Oetzel 2016). However, often these initiatives were not housed in the operations departments of MNCs, but in their public relations wings. And these divisions did not tend to seek out improvements in the supply-chain minutiae that might create unseen but real benefits for conflict-affected communities; instead, as we will illustrate below, they prioritised creating high-profile engagements with the very critics that had been clamouring for change: international NGOs and the United Nations (Miklian 2018). In conflict zones, the promotion of peace and peacebuilding became a priority. MNCs provided funding for ‘do gooder’ initiatives, and INGOs and the United Nations provided direction and scope for many such initiatives, formally acting upon the notion that the private sector can indeed be a force for good if it is directed properly (Fort 2014; Miklian and Hoelscher 2017; Miklian and Bickel 2018).

Critics of these tie-ups have expressed unease about the wisdom of engaging businesses as peace and development actors. Gardner (2016) explores how the use of ‘partnerships’ has allowed Chevron to institute corporate social responsibility (CSR) programmes that imply mutual engagement but are often just as top-down and unresponsive to local needs as the projects that came before them. Shamir (2010) sees CSR as the manifestation of capitalism’s ability to turn critique into new commercial and managerial assets, and Garsten (2015) sees the internationalised ideological components of CSR as representative of increased universalisation of MNC legitimacy in public sphere activities more generally. Critiques have even extended to the notion of ‘development’ itself, with arguments that today’s working definition is too broad and it is too easy to incorporate projects that do not substantially improve the human condition (Ziai 2013).

Moore and Schmitz (2016, p. xxii) consider this a crisis for development and peacebuilding agents, ‘which seeks to be all things to all people’, especially when the language of sustainable development is used by corporations to positively pitch new projects to conflict-affected local communities. In the business community, ‘sustainable development’ often means in practice the policies and actions a firm takes to reduce energy footprints and become more neutral in local energy equations

⁷ Western-owned MNCs are of course not the only MNCs operating in such areas, and Chinese and Indian MNCs in particular have operational philosophies and action in conflict zones that are worthy of significant forward study. However, as they have had historically less engagement with international NGOs and the UN than their Western counterparts, we exclude these promising actors of study (and national/regional private sector actors as well) from the argument at hand for space and coherency reasons.



while maintaining growth (Aras and Crowther 2016). Thus, a firm can be both ‘sustainable’ and a ‘national-level peacebuilder’ while simultaneously contributing tacitly through tax payments and legitimacy through public–private partnerships to political calculations of violence, particularly by the state against vulnerable communities (Miklian 2017b). These critiques are often paralleled in discussions with rank-and-file employees of INGOs and the UN itself about where and when business should be involved in peacebuilding. But the growing push from elite quarters of the practitioner and academic development community to have the private sector become more significantly involved in peacebuilding through SDG implementation has often sidelined such concerns (UNGC 2013a, 2016; Ganson et al. 2016).

This paradigm shift is infused with theoretical innovations which promote linking the private sector and peacebuilding. Inverting the popular theory that conflict, poverty and economic motives (‘greed’) are tightly interlinked (Collier 2007), the World Bank now generally supports the argument that GDP influx is a crucial tool for stabilising fragile post-conflict societies, and ‘a thriving, legal, private sector is essential to development and peace’ (Peschka 2011, p. 1). Thus, the World Bank invokes a long-standing doctrine on the positive linkages between business and peace that includes advocates ranging from John Locke, Friedrich Hayek and Adam Smith to contemporaries Michael Doyle and a younger Francis Fukuyama. Yet, arguably, the idea that companies can foster peace was not considered seriously within the global peacebuilding establishment until the *opposite* happened. Several post-Cold War incidents involving extractive MNCs in conflicts prompted the World Bank, the UN and international NGOs to reconsider how to prevent future corporate failures in conflict zones (Banfield et al. 2003). The recognition that the private sector *can* play a positive role if given the right incentives or support (Peschka 2011) dovetailed with increasing donor frustration at stagnant outcomes of traditional development aid delivery. This encouraged donors to consider new development approaches, including reconsidering the role of business in conflict, and reassessing the belief that profit and peace are best kept at arm’s length.

Based on these developments, the UN now believes that it ‘needs to increase this momentum. The UN’s Peacebuilding architecture has a key role to play for this to become more systematic and to scale up that engagement so that including business in peacebuilding becomes business as usual for the UN’.⁸ The UN Global Compact is the most outspoken driver of the business–peace nexus, as it envisions that local peace governance can be improved by bringing businesses into the UN’s global peacebuilding architecture. The UNGC is structured to connect MNCs with civil society, with 101 local networks of civil society organisations from 140 countries.⁹ The UNGC’s idea was that large Western multinationals rely on reputations, and activist groups and international media can scrutinise their activities and bring them up to par.¹⁰ Launched in 2013, business for peace is a crown on the business–peace nexus, at once advancing the most radical version of this agenda as well as lending it

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ <https://www.unglobalcompact.org/what-is-gc/participants> [last accessed on 23 October 2017].

¹⁰ Source: interviews at UN B4P inaugural meeting, Istanbul 2014. Also see Gilboa et al. (2016).



the UN brand. Conceived as a ‘leadership platform which will expand and deepen private sector action in support of peace’, it aims to ‘mobilise high-level corporate leadership to advance peaceful development through actions at the global and local levels in order to galvanize progress and scale up positive impacts’ (UNGC 2013a). Today, 130 firms from 37 countries take part in the B4P platform alongside dozens of local and regional B4P networks, in addition to the 15,000 firms that are part of the broader Compact.¹¹ As signatories to B4P, companies like Talisman Oil, Barrick Gold and G4S—firms with documented negative impacts in conflict-affected areas—are now at the forefront of the business–peace nexus.

B4P and corporate global governance: reassembling the public and private

Exemplifying the unsettling of this convention, corporate participation in peace is broadly accepted by the international community in a way that would have been inconceivable twenty years ago. To understand where the significance of the B4P initiative resides, we must contextualise it within deeper interconnections between the public and private in global governance. This section contextualises the growth of the business–peace nexus within our understandings of the changing role of corporate actors in IR through B4P, highlighting how such debates are reframing the reconfiguration of ‘public’ and ‘private’, and the advantages and limitations of this shift in practice.

It is important to note that B4P does not constitute a fully fleshed strategy to send a MNC into a particular country in order to create peace. Instead, like the post-Cold War liberal peacebuilding project before it (Richmond 2006; Miklian 2014), B4P represents a new normative ideal for corporate intervention in a sphere of global governance that is as contested as it is in flux (Pegram and Acuto 2015). Most importantly, it reassembles the foundational divide between the public and the private, which delimits which actors can participate in and accrue benefits from different spheres of activities (Best and Gheciu 2014). The public/private divide is considered foundational in IR as a historically shaped tool to limit the exercise of legitimate violence to public authorities—a form of sovereignty only practically achieved to some extent, and only in some parts of the world, towards the end of the 19th century and now again under question (Ruggie 1993, p. 151; Thomson 1995).

Contemporary business–peace discussions aspire to replace the ‘race to the bottom’ that was associated with the spread of MNCs in the 1990s with a ‘race to the top’ in terms of positive corporate contributions. The UN and other B4P-affiliated organisations aim to contribute by creating a broad ‘epistemic community’ between business and peacebuilding actors, where development organisations and MNCs operate in a single discursive field to develop converging notions of ‘conflict

¹¹ The yawning gap between the number of signatories in the UNGC and B4P may be seen as a result of the B4P platform’s overlap with the UNGC (and company belief that UNGC participation is enough for peace and development), or there may be larger structural risk issues that influence such choices. The topic is unfortunately beyond the scope of this paper but future empirical research on firm choices to participate in such ventures may prove insightful. Thanks to anonymous reviewer for this point.



sensitivity’ and of the importance of corporate contributions in volatile environments (UNGC 2013b; Dahan et al. 2006; Miklian and Rettberg 2017). By extension, we argue that B4P’s significance resides in reframing the role of corporations in global governance frameworks. While the UN system before generally shunned businesses or approached them as actors that needed increased guidance to ‘do no harm’ (Ford 2015, p. 40), B4P now heralds them as potential peacemakers. B4P thus represents a concrete rapprochement between business and the UN, after decades of hostilities (Thérien and Pouliot 2006). But B4P also provides new inputs into fundamental IR controversies over what kind of agency private actors should have in the international system today. The debate has tended to take a zero-sum form—with scholars like those noted above either critical or supportive of a bigger corporate role in the business–peace nexus—but we argue that while B4P heralds a definitive movement towards more private ‘rowing’ in matters related to peace, this at the same time entails an expansion of the public ‘steering’ of corporate activities in conflict-affected zones.

B4P intervenes in contemporary debates on the crucial question of whether a ‘corporation’ is exclusively an economic actor or also has other political roles (Abrahamsen and Williams 2014; Ford 2015; Welker 2014). In order to be attractive to corporations, B4P needs to appeal to the corporate self-image of doing good by doing well.¹² This echoes liberal peace theories that corporate activities such as growing GDP and expanding markets are the key drivers of peace (Oetzel et al. 2010; Oetzel and Miklian 2017). This creed is illustrated in the opening sentence of a 2013 press release at the unveiling of the UN B4P platform: ‘The neutral grounds of workplace and marketplace, and the natural desire of businesses large and small to operate in settled conditions and as part of strong societies, are tools for a new initiative on business for peace.’¹³

Yet, a critical literature has questioned these innovations in global corporate governance, arguing that involvement of MNCs with such high-profile development initiatives leads merely to ‘ceremonial commitments’ (Lim and Tsutsui 2010, p. 1): voluntary, non-binding and under-enforced initiatives that legitimate corporate expansion into volatile environments but have little positive impact on peace *or* development (Gereffi et al. 2001). Or, as Whitman (2002, p. 45) has characterised it, ‘global governance [is] the friendly face of unaccountable power’.¹⁴ Detractors of B4P have mobilised this literature—and cases of corporate involvement in human rights abuses—to criticise the paradigm as a legitimisation of corporate expansion into conflict zones (Hönke 2014). The implication is that instead of business activities creating peaceful development, B4P may become a mechanism to embolden MNCs by defusing criticism of corporate expansion into conflict zones

¹² Miklian (2018); also see Carroll (2015).

¹³ <https://3blmedia.com/News/CSR/Business-Peace-Platform-Unveiled-UN-Global-Compact-Leaders-Summit> [last accessed on 23 October 2017].

¹⁴ Note that of the thousands of UNGC business signatories—including 1200 UN–business partnerships for conflict-affected regions under the ‘Responsible Businesses Advancing Peace’ program (UNGC 2013b)—none have yet been considered to have violated the ‘Guidance on Responsible Business in Conflict-Affected & High-Risk Areas’ framework, indicating the persistence of discrepancies between such discursive politics and on-the-ground practices.



(Banerjee 2008). Underpinning this critique is a broad academic engagement mapping the contradictions inherent in contemporary neoliberal rule (Mansfield 2004). While neoliberal policies argue against government interventions that might restrain a free market, in practice vast global governance structures are put in place to facilitate the expansion of markets (Braithwaite 2005). More importantly, this liberal order has profoundly illiberal effects on the ground (Bachmann et al. 2015), something we return to below.

B4P also reframes our notions of the amalgamation called ‘the corporation’ as a *political* actor, recognising the *de facto* role that corporations play in that corner of the public sphere that is assumed to be the preserve of states. By expanding the UN’s visible hand to questions of corporate peace contributions, B4P is part of a broader resurgence of the public in global governance (Best and Gheciu 2014). Borrowing an argument from John Ruggie, in reframing corporations as peace actors B4P then paradoxically also circumscribes private authority by folding it into a more inclusive global public realm (Ruggie 2004). While critics of MNCs in conflict zones rightly point out that MNCs can be human rights violators (Ratner 2001), the novelty and promise of corporate governance initiatives like B4P is that they hold the potential to subvert the long-standing premise of the international system that only states can be held accountable for corporate impact in conflict zones (Muchlinski 2001).

B4P’s effect on the business–peace nexus resides in the fact that it extends a form of governance previously applied in Western development partnerships with African states, in which the ‘partner’—be it an African state or a MNC—is governed through self-adopted commitments. Rather than working through imposition, the strength of such liberal mechanisms resides in the self-disciplinary effect of the promise of incorporation of MNCs into the UN fold (Abrahamsen 2004). By promoting the identity of MNCs as peace actors, B4P’s power resides in influencing the interests that firms operating in conflict zones come to hold. It is premised on a branch of liberal peace theory that emphasises the role that liberal institutions can bring for peace rather than working through the agency of markets (Ruggie 2003). It holds that transnational institutions and regimes can overcome the collective action problems and transaction costs that lead to conflict by promoting interdependence, and that the externalities of unrestrained free markets can be curbed by embedding them within an institutional architecture. With John Ruggie as a principal architect behind the UN agency that set up B4P, this version of liberal peace theory directly informs the contemporary B4P agenda.

If B4P could be portrayed as a mere discursive blind for the continuation of human rights abuses under neoliberal hegemony,¹⁵ such criticism disregards the implications that such a discursive or representational shift at the transnational level could have for mechanisms of accountability. Situating corporations as peace actors

¹⁵ Nonetheless, in foregrounding ‘the West’ as a locus of this agenda, they also overlook that many B4P corporations are non-Western. While B4P might be seen as an archetypical neoliberal (Western) strategy to consolidate corporate footholds in conflict settings, three of China’s largest extractives—China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC), China Petroleum & Chemical Corporation (SINOPEC), and China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC)—have participated in B4P since its inception, although they have not been significantly active members. See footnotes 3 and 7.



with roles in the public sphere tilts the balance of power in favour of outside stakeholder control over corporate governance *vis-à-vis* insider stakeholders (Backer 2006). In this way, B4P creates hooks onto which NGOs and other stakeholders can latch to scrutinise corporations *as* peace actors, by engaging the debate about exactly which definition of the contested concept of ‘peace’ we will judge corporations by. B4P exemplifies what can be approached as an instance of global ‘soft power’, ‘social construction’ or ‘discursive politics’, and reframing corporations as political actors places them in the realm of accountable political action.

However, there are important limitations to how B4P can shape the business–peace nexus. If John Ruggie (2003) advocates a global governance agenda where free market liberalism would be embedded in international institutions, B4P fails to take this premise and shift its focus from prosperity to peace. It is possible to pinpoint one key moment in which the level of corporate embeddedness within global peacebuilding structures was determined. If Ruggie’s influential academic framing of ‘taking embedded liberalism global’ is intended to lodge corporate activity within a transnational institutional framework, Ruggie in practice renders the UNGC toothless in 2003, by publicly taking a stand against developing mandatory norms for corporations to subscribe to if they are to be truly ‘embedded’ within a global institutional structure. Because of opposition from business and governments alike to a legal code at the heart of the UNGC, Ruggie calls the Norms a ‘trainwreck’, ‘dead’ (Ruggie 2006), and in 2014 reiterates the arguments against an international legal instrument on business and human rights (Ruggie 2014). Nevertheless, the B4P platform has paved the way for the new UN Business and Human Rights framework discussions to proceed, and these may even become binding by end 2016 (UNHRC 2016). More importantly, B4P does not ‘embed’ corporate peacebuilding, but it does something new that is as subtle in character as it is all-encompassing in scope: now *all* businesses are reframed as inherently political entities with an *a priori* effect on peace.¹⁶

States have hitherto been reluctant to allow the UN to develop supranational norms for MNCs—leading to the demise of projects like the United Nations Commission on Transnational Corporations (UNCTC). In upholding that corporations can only be held accountable within their own legal bounds, states reconfirmed that the public interest is contingent upon and can only exist within national sovereign and legal orders, and corporate accountability can only be effectuated upon the explicit invitation of host states. The dominance of the state in affairs of war and peace is itself the outcome of long historical efforts to determine what is public and how it relates to the private (Abrahamsen and Williams 2014; Thomson 1995). By contrast, B4P rearticulates the public as global and not necessarily embodied by states, and recognises forms of agency in the realm of peacebuilding (a core aspect of sovereignty) that are *not* contingent on host state recognition, just as the security–development nexus did in its own way.

In this way, B4P portends more than a reframing of corporations as significant in the public realm; it is a reconfiguration of what we understand to be the public realm

¹⁶ Author interview, Sir Mark Moody-Stuart, B4P chair, Istanbul, September 2014.



itself, raising the question of whether B4P is not more important for its effects on the UN than for corporations or peace in volatile environments. In recognising corporations as peacebuilders via B4P, the UN risks eroding the very principles it was meant to enshrine—namely a commitment to contain agency in matters of war and peace to a limited forum composed principally of great power states. Global politics is not only about substantive questions of war and peace, but also about defining what kind of actors are considered legitimate in these theatres. For the UN, this includes the global peace architecture that it was created to defend. Yet, B4P also represents a more nuanced reassembly of the public/private divide in ways that give rise to complex articulations of global governance in which agency is distributed across a nexus that challenges Manichean distinctions between the public and the private (Owens 2008). To unearth how such global configurations of power are equally contingent on a local operational presence, we now turn to the manifestation of the business–peace nexus in the concrete setting of one of the most convoluted cases, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

The business–peace nexus in the DRC

In this section, we show that while MNCs are framed as ‘top-down’ peace actors through B4P, this move coexists with the increasing corporate role of exacerbating imbalanced local access to security and justice in high-risk and conflict-affected environments. MNCs are increasingly involved in the local delivery and maintenance of UN peacebuilding efforts, affecting not only their own operational equations but also subverting the local articulation of UN-led peacebuilding efforts. To articulate this aspect of the business–peace nexus, we adapt the term ‘asymmetrical governance’¹⁷ to explain how the amalgamation of global and national, public and private into the operational presence of corporations further skews the balance of power in their encounters with local populations. The notion of asymmetrical governance has two aspects. Mirroring how Anna Tsing has characterised today’s global supply chains as exploiting the gap between formal corporate enterprise and more varied economic forms which predominate in less-developed countries, it first highlights the fact that the global chains through which multinational corporations and peacekeeping missions connect to volatile environments have a tendency to channel benefits upwards while discharging the externalities of conflict onto those downstream. Second, it also points to the discrepancies in power positions which structure the local manifestation of the business–peace nexus of MNCs in such areas, which can be characterised as a ‘global assemblage’ (Abrahamsen and Williams 2011)—the clustering of a network of actors around MNC and UN operational sites, leading to hybrids of governance and security that defy the local/global, public/private and security/commercial divides that usually structure categorisations in IR. In the following, we will

¹⁷ First coined in Holman (2004, p. 417), who mentions it once as a (further undefined) umbrella term for the tendency of ‘asymmetrical regulation’, whereby upscaling of economic regulation to the EU level is accompanied by social deregulation at the national level.



illustrate these two aspects of asymmetrical governance in the business–peace nexus by zooming in on two B4P signatories in Congo: the global private security company G4S and the electronics company LG.

We situate these individual examples into the broader business–peace nexus in Congo. The DRC is a representative, if complex, case. It is home to a number of intractable and interlocking conflicts, involving tensions with neighbouring countries as well as nearly a hundred of armed groups. It also hosts the longest-standing and costliest UN peacekeeping mission in the world, costing around \$1 billion per year since 1999. The private sector is profoundly entangled within the official UN-led peacebuilding network. For one, the UN outsources large parts of the immense supply chain required to sustain the world’s largest peacekeeping mission to dedicated logistics suppliers such as the Bolloré Group, which controls a large share of the African logistics market. The UN is also the largest single consumer of private security services in the DRC, hiring over 2000 private security guards to secure its peacebuilding infrastructures (Schouten 2014, p. 130). Second, over the past few years extractives have been forced to become a ‘partner’ in UN-led efforts to address the ‘conflict mineral’ conundrum which is understood as a root cause in the DRC conflict, by complying with UN-driven mineral certification schemes. Finally, beyond accepting the private sector as a *de facto* element of peacebuilding, the UN also labours actively to attract private sector investment in fragile and conflict-affected areas including the DRC. For example, the Office of the Special Envoy of the United Nations Secretary-General for the Great Lakes region convened a Private Sector Investment Conference for the Great Lakes region of Africa in Kinshasa in 2016. Ban Ki-moon attended the opening ceremony, and insisted on good governance as a way to attract the private sector and to promote peace and stability in the Great Lakes region (UNSEGLR 2016).

NGOs associated with stabilisation efforts in the DRC vie with the extractives sector as the private security sector’s largest source of income. In the eastern DRC humanitarian hub of Goma, around 80 % of the city’s 5000 private security guards are hired by INGOs or other international actors.¹⁸ Since private security at compound gates is the first and often the only thing that Congolese see of the ‘international community’, private security is the local public face of the UN system (Schouten 2011, p. 71). As international actors across the business–peace nexus deploy private security companies for their operations in the DRC, we can point to the broader convergence of how multinational corporations and aid organisations secure their operations ‘abroad’. One marked effect of the evolving business–peace nexus in the DRC is that the local operations of MNC and the UN look increasingly alike, as they deploy the same mix of private security and bunkerisation to enclave their compounds from their surroundings (ibid.). As Avant and Haufler (2012, pp. 255–256) put it, ‘Although we agree that their missions and motivations are distinct, we are struck by intriguing similarities in their trajectories over the past 20 years in their overseas operations’.

This is further illuminated through the example of the global private security giant G4S, one B4P signatory currently operating in the DRC. G4S is a

¹⁸ Source: interview G4S, Goma, November 2015.



controversial firm globally for actions like its services to Israel's occupation of the Palestine Territories and abuses in prisons it manages, but it promotes its B4P associations to profile itself as committed to peace. 'As a socially responsible company,' their website reads, 'G4S reinforces its commitment to business for peace through working alongside governments and non-governmental organisations in high-risk environments to support humanitarian, stabilisation and economic reconstruction efforts.'¹⁹ Holding around 20 % of the market, G4S is a key vehicle through which transnational actors secure their local operations. As a private security company, its activities irrevocably influence the distribution of and access to a good usually associated with the 'public' (security) which is highly contested and privatised in the DRC.

In the DRC, public authority is heterogeneous and widely considered part and parcel of conflict dynamics, hosting 'bubbles of public authority' that manifest themselves around the operational infrastructures of MNCs. In such enclaves, the exercise of public authority is geared towards selectively upholding a rule of law that is not enforced outside such pockets (Schouten 2017, p. 146). This means that when local citizens are confronted with a corporation, they see both state power and corporate activity through the unified concentration of weapons and profits, repression and opportunity. Public authority is folded into the hierarchy of G4S's clients via DRC police who are for hire and as a rule accompany private security services to corporate or peacebuilding clients. By folding public security agents into the G4S hierarchy, the company and its clients have a profound negative impact on security provision in Congo by supporting fortified expat enclaves that emphasise mistrust and insecurity (Duffield 2010). While public security agents operating under privatised hierarchies tend to respect the rule of law (and receive regular pay), their 'public' counterparts are the key source of human rights abuses in Congo, forming a quantitatively larger source of insecurity for the population than the many rebel movements do. As a result, the contrast is thus rather between disproportionately securitised international spaces on the one hand and criminalised public space on the other (Schouten 2016; Reyntjens 2005).

The activities of both extractive and private security actors in the DRC show how merging business and multilateral institutions through the business–peace nexus makes it hard for local communities to differentiate who they are dealing with, rendering security, government and the international community as all part of one impenetrable and unaccountable conglomeration (Schouten 2017, p. 157). While such tie-ups allowed G4S to articulate its peace contributions, they also abolished the supposed independence of multilateral institutions like the UN as they repeatedly and visibly partner with corporations in contexts where corporate engagement itself is not neutral. It raises the crucial question of whether or not B4P adds to corporate leverage by not only endorsing MNC presence in zones of contested rule, but also by siding with and promoting business as a peace actor to local communities—implicitly framing detractors of the political order driven by corporate operations as challengers of the liberal peace. Since such practices are

¹⁹ <http://www.g4s.com/en/Social%20Responsibility/Our%20commitment%20and%20approach/Case%20Studies/Business%20for%20peace/> [last accessed on 23 October 2017].



replicated across volatile environments worldwide (Abrahamsen and Williams 2011), the unintended consequences of expanding the business–peace nexus to deliver inclusive development to the world’s most fragile societies may vastly outweigh the short-term benefits. In unpacking private security as a form of authority that MNCs draw upon to structure and secure their operational presence, the notion of asymmetrical governance at once challenges the idea that corporate activities thrive without political intervention—for they often seem to require this accompanying assemblage of public authority in order to be able to operate—and points towards the unequal distribution of public authority between corporate actors and populations affected by their operations.

As a second case, at the top of the global mineral supply chain we find the B4P signatory LG Electronics, the South Korean technology giant best known for its mobile phones. LG followed the many publicly listed companies that use the minerals, who have been obliged since 2012 to declare to the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) whether or not they come from the affected region and, if so, whether or not they are ‘conflict-free’ under the Dodd Frank Wall Street Reform and Costumer Protection Act—itself an effort which emerged out of pressure from the UN, OECD and non-governmental organisations to delink mineral extraction from armed group financing in the DRC.²⁰ The technology that LG produces relies heavily on exactly the kind of minerals—tantalum, gold, tin—that come from Congo’s mines, a portion of which is controlled by armed groups. Not obliged to do so because it is not publicly listed in the US, LG nevertheless aims to use its sway over mineral supply chains to impact positively on conflict in the DRC. Far upstream a complicated global layered cake of subcontractors, suppliers and affiliates, LG identified the downstream level of smelters—where raw ores get transformed into untraceable but quality-controlled industry materials—as the ‘choke point’ to responsible sourcing. As LG is not directly in business with smelters, it then told its suppliers to identify smelters and to encourage them to join a Conflict-Free Smelter certification scheme, adding that ‘When there is a sufficient number of certified, conflict-free smelters/refiners, LG will require all its suppliers to source their minerals from these smelters’ (UNGC 2013b, p. 38). LG admits, however, that ‘many suppliers were difficult to contact and answer LG’s survey’ and that it was furthermore ‘difficult’ to ‘convince smelters and refiners to join the Conflict-Free Smelter programme’. LG concluded that it gained ‘considerable knowledge’ of its supply chain while finding out that it had ‘little leverage’ (ibid., p. 40).

LG is no isolated case. The Government Accountability Office, in its 2017 annual review of the SEC Conflict Mineral Rule, concluded that ‘Almost all of the companies that reported conducting due diligence in 2016 reported that they could not determine whether the conflict minerals financed or benefited armed groups, as

²⁰ Such initiatives may themselves be increasingly vulnerable in the coming years to corporate influence with the USA’s current withdrawal in leadership and participation. A morphing from the current framework is likely regardless, perhaps shifting back to national-level oversight as Canada has recently attempted with its Canadian Ombudsperson for Responsible Enterprise (CORE) watchdog (guided by John Ruggie).



in 2015 and 2014' (GAO 2017, p. 7). Contacted for an interview, a smelter who wishes to remain anonymous for commenting on sensitive topics, commented that

they want us to bear the brunt of very expensive certification which imperils our business model, especially since we're one of the few sourcing from Congo. And actually, behind all the public talk of commitments and change, what they most want is for the flow of cheap minerals to go on unabated—they're not willing to pay higher prices for responsibly sourced minerals.²¹

In other words, for global technology companies such as LG, B4P is a beautiful commitment as long as it does not impinge on its own profit margins, all the while being encouraged by the UN through B4P and the SDGs more broadly that such tactics are 'win-win'—and can be publicly presented as such to customers and shareholders. Illustrating what Anna Tsing has called 'salvage capitalism' (2015, p. 62), characteristic of today's global supply chains is that they actually thrive by reaping the profit margins over sourcing from unregulated, stubbornly opaque and 'un-capitalist' forms of supply such as those practised downstream in Congo's mineral sector. These chains are governed asymmetrically: pressure to adapt, be accountable and pay the price to conform is pushed upstream while profits accrue downstream. While it might be asked what the extractives and private security sectors in the DRC can tell us about the workings of B4P more broadly, the point here is exactly that these are often exactly the only MNC operating in the contexts which would arguably benefit most from corporate contributions to peace.

Building meaning within the business–peace nexus

Explorations of the nexus between business and peace often single out either its negative or positive aspects, focusing on corporate misdoings or governance innovations. In this article, we have tried to present a more nuanced picture of the business–peace nexus by exploring the multiple and contradictory implications of the emergence of a new paradigm, business for peace. Corporations have had local impact dating back to their colonial origins, but B4P represents the most systematic attempt thus far to elevate corporate participation explicitly within the domain and approval of multilateral institutions. We have argued that B4P presents an innovation of the association between corporations and peacebuilding, one that extends public authority over corporate conduct in conflict zones by reframing corporations as peace actors. While the UN's adoption of B4P contains the promise to extend public authority over corporate activities in conflict zones, B4P also redefines peace as a field beyond the domain of states and their IGO proxies. This transition risks blurring the lines of authority and accountability, and undermines the restriction of participants in matters of peace and war that the UN was founded to defend. The public/private divide that is constitutive in IR thus risks being dismantled by the very multilateral institutions tasked to defend it, but our analytical frameworks to address these externalities lag. Instead of siding either with or against

²¹ Source: author interview, Paris, 2015.



corporations as peacebuilders, we argue for a grounded approach to study the composite entanglements that make up the fabric of the business–peace nexus as it today manifests itself across the global South.

Based on the case of the DRC, we illustrated how rather than signifying *either* an expansion of private authority *or* a reconfiguration of the public realm, B4P heralds a new hybrid form of global governance in conflict areas that inserts MNCs as peacebuilders. However, B4P may lead to a ‘peace’ that is highly uneven and contested locally, especially if the criteria are set in multi-stakeholder meetings in the global North. This echoes a lesson not learned (or at least not applied) from the debates over the ‘security–development’ nexus. As seen in the DRC, local manifestations of contemporary corporate-driven business–peace action often prove to be a locus of asymmetrical governance, at times complicit in unaccountable violence (Miklian and Schouten 2013; Miklian 2017a). If Charles Dunlap (2011) argued recently that the American military–industrial complex, which for Eisenhower presented a clear danger to the public good in 1961, is in decline, perhaps B4P heralds the emergence of a new type of complex association that stretches wider and reaches further than Eisenhower could have imagined. If the military–industrial complex referred to a single centre from which legal and political authority emanated, today’s structures of asymmetrical governance in volatile environments are entangled with much more opaque and plural lines of authority—pathways leading to national subsidiaries, corporate headquarters in home states, UN headquarters and host governments—that make it ever harder for engaged persons to attribute accountability within the business–peace nexus.

This article advanced an analytical approach to capture these blurred lines, as a framework premised on the public/private divide is of insufficient utility to capture the expanding footprints of corporate entanglement within peace and conflict equations. While recognising that upholding the public–private divide may be viewed as a laudable *normative* aspiration to organise violence in an accountable way, any real engagement with the predicament of those in conflict-affected societies needs to start from the grounded recognition of how agency is allocated and redistributed across the business–peace nexus. Future research on the business–peace nexus can draw major value from the country case, corporate case and institutional levels of analysis to further tease out the theoretical implications of this emerging paradigm, and we welcome a significant expansion of such in IR, development studies, business ethics and area studies, among other relevant fields.

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Interviews

- Interviews with business leaders at UN B4P inaugural meeting, Istanbul, September 2014.
- Interview, Sir Mark Moody-Stuart, B4P chair, Istanbul, September 2014.
- Interview with mining executive, OECD supply chain meeting, Paris, April 2015.
- Interview G4S, Goma, November 2015.

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