

The UN Peacebuilding Commission: Benefits and Challenges

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Introduction

Contrary to popular perception, since the end of the Cold War, there has been a decline in the number of civil wars raging worldwide. This is primarily due to the ending of many existing wars through negotiated settlements.¹ Yet, a startling and now oft-cited statistic paints a bleaker picture: over the same period, almost fifty percent of peace agreements have collapsed within five years, sending countries spiraling back into conflict.² A recent study concluded that countries that played host to post-conflict UN field missions since 1988 have been just as likely to revert to war as countries where the UN had no presence.³

These statistics indicate that the opportunities presented by peace agreements are not being realized. When insufficient attention is paid to the needs of societies emerging from conflict, the consequences are severe for all concerned. The societies themselves risk poverty, population displacement, a reversal of development gains and renewed violence, sometimes at levels worse than the prior phase of war. If only two peace agreements of the 1990s – the 1991 Bicesse Agreement for Angola and the 1993 Arusha Accords for Rwanda – had been successfully implemented, some two million lives would have been saved. The effects on neighboring states can be severe as well, from refugee and arms flows, to long-term economic costs. For the international community as a whole, weak post-war states can threaten global security by serving as attractive milieus for terrorists and transnational crime. Clearly, there is a collective stake in improving this record.

The current international response in the aftermath of civil war suffers from several persistent weaknesses. Some of these are problems of commitment. Too often, there is a lack of sustained political attention to post-conflict countries: after peace agreements are signed, or after a peacekeeping mission draws down, countries cease to attract the attention of the UN Security Council and donor governments. Related to this, there is difficulty in securing sustained and predictable financing for peacebuilding activities, which often occupy a grey area between peacekeeping and development. In particular, there is a lack of early funding, as donors are slow to mobilize, and there are gaps in funding for activities that donors consider sensitive, such as those linked to political reform or the country's security architecture. Even when sufficient funds are pledged for

¹ Havard Hegre, 'The Duration and Termination of Civil War', *Journal of Peace Research* 41:3 (2004), p.244.

² Paul Collier et al, *The Conflict Trap* (World Bank and Oxford Univ. Press, 2003), p. 7.

³ Charles T. Call, *Institutionalizing Peace: A Review of Post-Conflict Peacebuilding Concepts and Issues for DPA*, 31 January 2005, p. 8.

peacebuilding, funding flows may be inconsistent and unpredictable, and recipient governments may be forced to navigate conflicting donor demands and priorities.

An additional set of problems relates to the poor coordination of the international community in dealing with post-conflict environments. The UN system is itself difficult to coordinate, and lacks agreed goals to which the entire system can work. There is a disconnect between perceptions in the capitals of member states and UN country teams in the field, which exacerbates the problems of political and financial support for even the strongest field operations. But the bigger picture involves a wider range of actors: the UN, the international financial institutions (IFIs), regional organizations, bilateral donors, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and, most importantly, the government and civil society in the country in question. These different actors often lack a shared strategic framework that outlines priorities, coordinates roles, and sequences activities to guide their operations.

The creation of the Peacebuilding Commission

In response to the resource shortfalls and organizational weaknesses of the international community in peacebuilding, the UN High-level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change proposed the establishment of a Peacebuilding Commission (PBC) as a new intergovernmental body at the United Nations. The PBC will be responsible for addressing a critical gap within the UN and global system by providing a coordinated, coherent and integrated approach to post-conflict peacebuilding and facilitating dialogue amongst key actors. This proposal was strongly promoted by UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan and agreed by Member States at the September 2005 UN summit. In December 2005, the United Nations General Assembly (GA) and Security Council (UNSC) passed corresponding resolutions to establish the new organ as an intergovernmental advisory body, as well as a Peacebuilding Support Office, which will be housed in the UN Secretariat and will serve as a focal point for UN peacebuilding efforts, and a multi-year standing Peacebuilding Fund.

The PBC will be composed of a 31-member Organizational Committee, as well as country-specific configurations to address specific country cases on the PBC's agenda. Membership for the Organizational Committee will comprise seven Member States selected from the UNSC, seven from the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), seven from the GA, and five each from a list of the ten largest troop contributors and financial donors. The Secretary-General and IFIs will be invited to participate in all meetings of the Organizational Committee. (Elections of the 31 members were completed on 16 May 2006 and a full list may be found on the last page of this paper.) The country-specific configurations will include the country itself and, where relevant, neighboring states, regional and sub-regional organizations, financial, troop and civilian police contributors, the senior UN representative in the field and regional or international financial institutions.

The PBC's agenda will be established by the Organizational Committee on the basis of requests for advice from the Security Council, ECOSOC or the GA in specific situations, member states on the verge of lapsing or relapsing into conflict in cases in which the Security Council is not already seized, and the Secretary-General. The PBC's

recommendations will be publicly available as UN documents and all relevant actors will be invited to take action on the basis of these.

The PBC's added value

The GA and UNSC resolutions laid out three main purposes for the PBC. First is to bring together all relevant actors to marshal resources and to advise on and propose integrated strategies for post-conflict peacebuilding and recovery. Second is to focus attention on the reconstruction and institution-building efforts necessary for recovery, bridging the gap between the immediate post-conflict phase and sustainable development. Third is to provide recommendations and information to improve the coordination of all relevant actors within and outside the UN. The bulk of the PBC's substantive work will be done on country-specific cases, and it is expected that the first case will be selected soon after the PBC's inaugural meeting in late June 2006.

Despite these laudable aims, the resolutions establishing the PBC are imprecise as to what the body will do and how it will function. Translating this mandate into concrete activity is complicated by the intergovernmental nature of the PBC and by its status as an advisory body. The PBC will not operate in a policy vacuum but will co-exist with multiple existing arrangements: to differing extents, post-conflict countries already have national leadership, strategies and benchmarks, and systems of coordination and resource mobilization. Rather than simply adding a separate layer of complexity to existing processes, the PBC must define its 'added value' in relation to existing arrangements.

A commonly agreed element of the PBC's added value concerns the need for 'integrated strategies' for peacebuilding, based on genuine partnerships between international and national actors. Most agree that the role of the PBC will not be to write strategy as such, but to inform the design of high quality strategies in partnership with national governments and experts in the field, and to promote their implementation by helping to mobilize a coalition of international interests around a country. To the extent that the PBC has a coordinating role, it is an overarching one of ensuring that all actors operate from the same strategic framework and realistic plan for implementation that links political, security and development goals and develops clear transition benchmarks to bridge the 'relief' to 'development' gap.

Key to the long-term sustainability of peacebuilding is the creation and strengthening of a citizen-focused, functioning state that can protect and provide for its population. If the PBC is to help achieve this, it must first promote a broad understanding of the international resources brought to bear on assisting countries in transitions from war to peace. Such resources include diplomatic attention and security assistance in addition to development aid.

Second, sustainability must entail a more realistic sense of duration. There is emerging evidence to indicate that peacebuilding results must be measured in decades or even generations, not years. Research has demonstrated that aid to post-conflict countries typically surges in during the first few years after conflict, when the economy is not yet able to absorb those resources, and diminishes just as the capacity to use that aid

effectively has been developed. The PBC must ensure that long-term durations of ten years or more are the basis for designing strategies or assessing outcomes.

Third, sequencing is critical. Peacebuilding strategies must be broken down into manageable phases, with a credible set of actions. Designation of critical tasks becomes hugely important; and leaders and managers must be mandated to perform these tasks. A 'living' strategy requires constant reflexive monitoring so that adjustments can be made as contexts shift. This requires a degree of flexibility in decision-making. The PBC can help to play a mediating role to ensure that goals are realistic and that progress is well understood.

Fourth, although the international community has a vital role to play, sustainability in peacebuilding ultimately relies on the work done by national governments and societies. Armed with the most rigorous analysis and best intentions, international actors have not succeeded where they have attempted to bypass national ownership or fail to understand local contexts. The key to a successful transition and sustainable results is early engagement with the functioning of the state, such that strategies are rooted in a shared compact between the society and the international community. The PBC must have the credibility to pressure donors to orient attention to areas that are chronically under-resourced, for example reform of the security sector and justice.

The PBC's relationship with regional actors

Regional actors are valuable interlocutors and play a key role in post-conflict peacebuilding. Some regional organizations are themselves adapting institutionally to meet the current challenges of fragile states and civil war, and in many conflict cases, the UN is no longer the main operational actor on the ground. There is hope the PBC will provide further tools, guidance and resource mobilization and will actively engage all who can contribute at the regional and sub-regional levels. However, although the resolutions establishing the PBC explicitly mention the involvement of regional and sub-regional actors in the country-specific committees, it is still not clear what form such involvement will take.

At the practical level, there are many stages at which the partnership could develop and, in this, the contacts with the Peacebuilding Support Office (PBSO) will be essential. This includes early consultation and strategy formulation, and importantly, implementation of particular peacebuilding tasks by regional actors. The PBC should also incorporate a regional approach to post-conflict situations by giving ample consideration to regional linkages in country-focused work. Regional organizations are often much better placed to assess such linkages, and would play an important role in helping to counter the cross-border dimension of many conflicts, such as the Great Lakes region in Africa, the Balkans, and Central Asia.

However, it is also important to note that 'regional actors' is a broad term covering a variety of entities, including the governments of neighboring states, NGOs active in the region, regional development banks, and regional and sub-regional organizations. Success at peacebuilding will require combining the expertise and assets of a multiplicity

of these players in any one case. But successful engagement will also require a realistic assessment of the capacities of all actors to implement the tasks assigned to them.

NGOs are in a particularly ambiguous position with regards to the PBC. Although the resolutions establishing the PBC call for it to 'consult with civil society, nongovernmental organizations, including women's organizations, and the private sector engaged in peacebuilding activities, as appropriate', civil society groups are not included as members or observers of the Organizational Committee and country-specific configurations. However, it is important to keep in mind that the PBC meetings in New York are only one element of the new UN peacebuilding architecture. Engagement with the PBSO in strategy discussions will also be an important entry point for civil society.

When it comes to its country-specific work, the PBC should help to encourage national governments and international actors in the field to adopt broader consultation strategies with civil society leaders to foster broad support throughout the country. NGOs could play a key role in ensuring these linkages on the country level, regardless of their role in formal PBC meetings. Regional NGOs also have a critical role to play in helping to organize national civil society groups, advocating for their involvement at the earliest possible stages, and ensuring links with the PBSO.

List of 31 Members of the PBC Organizational Committee for 2006

a. Security Council (7 seats):

China
Denmark
France
Russia
Tanzania
United Kingdom
United States

b. Economic and Social Council (7 seats):

Angola
Belgium
Brazil
Guinea Bissau
Indonesia
Poland
Sri Lanka

c. Five of the top ten providers of assessed contributions (5 seats):

Germany
Italy
Japan
Netherlands
Norway

d. Five of the top ten providers of military personnel and civilian police (5 seats):

Bangladesh
Ghana
India
Nigeria
Pakistan

e. General Assembly (7 seats):

Burundi
Chile
Croatia
Egypt
El Salvador
Fiji
Jamaica