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Getting the Peacebuilding Commission off the Ground: Including Civil Society

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Introduction

This report summarizes the results of the working conference “Getting the Peacebuilding Commission off the Ground – How to Include Civil Society on the Ground,” held in New York on 5 September 2006, organized by the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) New York Office and the Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflicts (GPPAC). The meeting brought together over 70 representatives from the Peacebuilding Commission membership, non-PBC UN member states, the UN Secretariat, academia and civil society organizations. The aim was to (1) inform interested members of the policy community about how the PBC will operate and discuss the ways in which other stakeholders can add value to its work, and (2) to provide a forum for exchange of views between various stakeholders, including civil society representatives from Sierra Leone and Burundi, the two countries that have been selected as the PBC’s first ‘clients.’

Overview of PBC and Progress to Date

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 and Security Council passed corresponding resolutions to establish the new organ as an intergovernmental advisory body, as well as a Peacebuilding Support Office (PBSO), 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.

Although the PBC, with its new focus and innovative composition, was seen as an important element of the September 2005 summit outcome, its creation was initially hampered by the politics of process. It took Member States over five months – from December 2005 until 16 May 2006 – to elect the full membership of the PBC's Organizational Committee. Before that, political haggling over the wording of the resolution that established the PBC resulted in confusion surrounding its precise role. Many have noted, however, that intergovernmental processes take time, and that many UN bodies take years, not months, to get off the ground.

Once the 31 members of the Organizational Committee were in place, the PBC's inaugural meeting was held on 23 June 2006, where members selected a Chair (Angola), two Vice Chairs (El Salvador and Norway), and adopted provisional rules of procedure. At a second meeting on 13 July, the PBC announced that Burundi and Sierra Leone had been selected as the first two country cases. Informal briefings on the two cases was held on 19 July – open to NGOs, the briefings included presentations by representatives from Burundi and Sierra Leone, the UN country team, the World Bank and the IMF – and the dates of October 12 and 13 were chosen for the first country-specific meetings.

The PBC's relationship with civil society

Two aspects remain to be finalized: the participants in for the country-specific meetings, and the mechanism for civil society engagement which are alluded to in the rules of procedure. Both of the resolutions establishing the PBC called for the Commission to “consult with civil society, nongovernmental organizations, including women's organizations and the private sector engaged in peacebuilding activities, as appropriate.”¹ In its inaugural meeting, the PBC adopted provisional rules of procedure that echoed this language, and also stated that this consultation shall be ensured through the development of specific modalities. Civil society groups have proposed

¹ A/RES/60/180 and S/RES/1645, para. 21

that the country-specific meetings be open for observation and that NGOs – with a preference to those from the subject country – be invited to address the Organizational Committee. However, no concrete arrangements have been made to date for civil society participation, and PBC member states have expressed varying degrees of support for formal civil society involvement in PBC discussions.

Although the provisional rules of procedure adopted by the PBC allow for maximum flexibility, participants at the conference noted that the language concerning civil society consultation is extremely weak compared to other UN organs. Participants cited many examples of NGO engagement with other UN bodies, including consultative status with ECOSOC, the Arria formula for civil society engagement with the Security Council, circulation of statements and oral statements. In the case of the PBC, much is left to the discretion of the Chair for each meeting; without a proactive Chair, it is possible that civil society will be sidelined. It is worth noting that the Chair of the PBC, Ambassador Ismael Gaspar Martins of Angola, expressed strong support for the inclusion of NGOs as full participants in the country specific work of the PBC. This is an encouraging development, but has yet to translate into concrete modalities for civil society involvement. Members of the PBC and representatives of the PBSO called on NGOs to develop concrete proposals and to continue to self-organize to consider their role and develop their input for the Commission.

National ownership and the role of civil society

While the PBC has been heralded as an opportunity to focus greater international attention and resources to the complex tasks of peacebuilding, expectations about what the PBC will actually be able to deliver vary widely within and outside of the UN. Participants noted a particular lack of clarity in both Burundi and Sierra Leone – the PBC's first 'clients' – on what the PBC actually is, what its mandate is meant to be, and what is the actual structure and process that it envisages for itself in these countries.

The most important measure of success of the PBC will be the results it is able to deliver on the ground. This will require pragmatism in approaching the question of peacebuilding; a more focused and disciplined approach to setting goals and devising strategies; and, most importantly, understanding that decisions will need to be driven by local needs, priorities, and context. The importance of national ownership of peacebuilding and the need for the PBC to work with national actors – both government and civil society – was stressed in the resolutions creating the PBC and repeatedly emphasized by participants at the meeting. All agreed that the PBC must be flexible and inclusive, and help national governments develop the capacity to deliver on the ground.

The principal stakeholders in post-conflict peacebuilding are the citizens of the state in question, and their perceptions of gaps are a valid barometer as to whether progress is taking root. Citizens need to advise and be advised on national peacebuilding strategies, through systematic engagement in priority-setting processes. Unfortunately, too often, citizens are sidelined and peacebuilding strategies are built upon political compromises among elites. Those who are not at the table when priorities are decided

are generally left out of decisions about implementation. A crucial role of the PBC will be to ensure that national actors have sufficient space for dialogue and priority-setting processes to take place. Civil society – and particularly organizations with deep ties to local communities – has a crucial role to play in ensuring that citizens are included in these processes. During the conference it was argued that, ‘civil society’ is a variegated concept, encompassing different actors, roles, strengths, weaknesses, and capabilities. It can sometimes be difficult to identify interlocutors and arrive at good working relationships with national counterparts. The PBC will need to have a differentiated approach towards different civil society actors.

Inputs into PBC deliberations are only one potential avenue for civil society involvement; there should also be significant and continued collaboration between civil society and the PBSO and the UN country team on the ground, to provide input and ideas and assist with implementation of PBC recommendations. The PBC should also 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. 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.

PBC members argued that civil society will play important advocacy and operational roles, as well as assist in mobilizing resources for peacebuilding. Public participation and awareness-raising was repeatedly emphasized as a core task for civil society groups. Civil society advocates also envisioned an important role in monitoring implementation of PBC recommendations to ensure that decisions are followed up. Participants emphasized the need to ensure that civil society groups in country have access to discussions at all levels (national, regional, and UN headquarters), as well as documentation of PBC decisions to facilitate monitoring.

Civil society organizations have already begun to organize in Burundi and Sierra Leone with the objective of identifying challenges and priorities for the peacebuilding strategy in their country for input in the decisions made by the PBC. These meetings have served to initiate processes in-country to monitor and implement peacebuilding strategies, and will also set a precedent for civil society conduct in future country cases. These efforts to self-organize and provide coherent recommendations to the PBC were hailed as a welcome development by the Chair and Vice-Chairs of the Commission. The results of the initial consultations held in Sierra Leone and Burundi are discussed in further detail below.

Civil society in Sierra Leone

Civil society in Sierra Leone sees the PBC as a crucial new development in efforts to build sustainable peace in that country, and is eager to ensure a place at the table in PBC discussions. Civil society organizations play a significant role in all aspects of peacebuilding in Sierra Leone, including truth and reconciliation processes, conflict prevention, peace education, human rights education and advocacy, campaigns for just mining, livelihoods for youth and women, citizen participation in governance, and

advocating for transparency and accountability at all levels of government. Sierra Leonean media has promoted messages of peace and democracy, and disseminated information about peacebuilding. Civil society organizations played an active role in contributing to peaceful elections in 2002 and are working on sensitization and awareness-raising for the forthcoming elections.

Although civil society has received recognition for its efforts, there is still a tendency to sideline civil society groups and NGOs from formal processes, and citizens still tend to see government as the sole organ of change. Civil society was not included in the Lome peace process. Women's groups were not included in initial government peace consolidation efforts, although later became involved via disarmament, demobilization and reintegration. Capacity remains a problem, and many organizations need to work on building local capacity to address issues at the country level.

With the assistance of GPPAC, civil society groups in Sierra Leone organized a national consultation with a focus on the PBC and post-conflict reconstruction in the country. With the theme "Promoting Sustainable Peace and Human Security through Collective Action", the July 19-20 consultation brought together 30 participants from civil society organizations working in various thematic areas across the country, along with representatives from government agencies, the Special Court for Sierra Leone, the United Nations Integrated Office in Sierra Leone (UNIOSIL), and other international agencies. A representative from WANEP, the local organizer, presented the results of that meeting and recommendations that emerged.²

Several key gaps in peacebuilding in Sierra Leone were identified during the consultation, namely: piecemeal implementation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) recommendations; lack of effective monitoring and evaluation mechanisms; lack of adequate resources for effective performance of public institutions; lack of integrated and sustained donor support; weak national research and documentation capacity with respect to peacebuilding; weak partnership between government and civil society organizations; poor collaboration among civil society organizations at the sub-regional level (Mano River Basin); and diverse thematic focus of civil society efforts.

The national consultation identified seven priority areas/issues as crucial for consideration by the PBC during the country-specific meetings:

- implementation and dissemination of the TRC recommendations and the poverty reduction strategy;
- strengthening effective partnership among government, civil society, inter-governmental organizations and donors;
- human resource development, including skills training for youth and economic empowerment for women;

² Details that follow are drawn from the presentation by Edward Jombla of WANEP and the *Report on the Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict (GPPAC) National Civil Society Consultation in Sierra Leone*, available at http://www.gppac.org/documents/GPPAC/process/UN_Peacebuilding_Commission/Sierra_Leone_Consultation_Report1.doc

- gender mainstreaming in peacebuilding;
- establishment of a research unit; capacity building for civil society organizations and public institutions;
- strengthening effective collaboration between and among governments and civil society in the Mano River Basin;
- and establishment of monitoring and evaluation mechanisms.

In order to ensure follow-up on the execution of these recommendations, a nine member Working Committee was set up. The Committee was charged with the responsibility to engage the government, UN country team and organs, the international community, and Sierra Leonean NGOs; to monitor and follow up PBC meetings on Sierra Leone and make recommendations to the PBC's Organizational Committee; and to ensure civil society participation in PBC discussions.

Civil society in Burundi

Burundi, the second country on the PBC's agenda, has made tremendous progress over the past 10 years. Although significant challenges remain, there is now space and willingness among national actors for real change. This is an opportune moment for the PBC to start its work. As in Sierra Leone, civil society has played an important role in this transformation, including work on human rights, anti-corruption, women and girls, peace and reconciliation, work with refugees, reintegration of demobilized combatants and youth, capacity building work with local NGOs, election monitoring, campaigns on citizenship, and collaboration among public and private media to sensitize and educate the population.

Civil society groups in Burundi organized a similar national consultation with a focus on the PBC and post-conflict reconstruction in the country, held on 30th August, 2006 and September 1st, 2006. Results from the consultation were presented at the conference in New York and included nine key recommendations for the PBC:

- the promotion of permanent social and political dialogue between all actors (government, opposition, NGOs, and private sector);
- establishment of transitional justice mechanisms appropriate to the Burundian context following broad popular consultation;
- rehabilitation of basic infrastructure, including schools, hospitals and roads;
- capacity building for non-governmental actors to play a better role in promoting good governance and public participation;
- trainings for public institutions on operational methods adapted to democratic governance, including parliament, communal councils, army and police;
- reinforcement of participatory development to guarantee local governance in the design and monitoring of development projects;
- human rights promotion and education;
- advocacy to financial institutions to help put Burundi on the path to development, including pushing bilateral donors to make good on aid pledges;

- and influencing government to respect its commitments adopted via the constitution, national law, and ratification of international instruments such as human rights treaties.³

There is a broad commitment on the part of Burundian NGOs to back the work of the PBC. However, more information and public awareness raising is still required to help Burundian citizens and civil society alike understand and contribute to the actual work of the PBC. There are also critical tensions between civil society and the government that the PBC may be called upon to mitigate if civil society is to fulfill its role in monitoring implementation of PBC recommendations.

Recommendations

Several concrete recommendations emerged from the discussion, covering several broad themes:

Formal mechanisms to involve civil society in PBC discussions in New York. Rules of procedure for PBC engagement with civil society should cover country-specific meetings as well as general discussions of the PBC's Organizational Committee. NGOs and representatives from civil society should be invited to observe and monitor PBC meetings at the UN, with access to agendas, the right to attend public meetings, and the right to submit statements. The forthcoming country specific meetings on Burundi and Sierra Leone will set the tone for all future work of the PBC, and it is crucial to include representatives of international and local NGOs to signal to stakeholders that transparency and inclusiveness will be given important weight.

Mechanisms to involve civil society in-country. A ten-minute presentation to the PBC in New York is not sufficient to represent the views of actors in-country. More systematic efforts are needed to connect with these organizations in the field. The PBC should formalize its commitment to supporting in-country consultations, and ensuring that all relevant actors have access to key documentation in local languages. It was suggested that the PBSO could help to support these in-country consultations, or perhaps PBC members could be designated to attend such meetings.

Engagement with the PBSO. Participants emphasized the importance of an overarching vision of peacebuilding for Sierra Leone and Burundi, and the need for the PBC to ensure that international efforts are united, rather than running on disparate parallel tracks. The head of the PBSO, Carolyn McAskie, argued that the PBSO should become the knowledge center for this entire movement, to tap into and help create networks for peacebuilding organizations at the international and local level. Civil society should also work with the PBSO to monitor and review peacebuilding outcomes to maintain a long-term focus on peacebuilding in the countries in question.

³ Details that follow are drawn from the presentation by Sandra Melone of Search for Common Ground and the Report on *Contribution of Civil Society in Peace Process in Burundi*, available at http://www.gppac.org/documents/GPPAC/process/UN_Peacebuilding_Commission/report_Burundi_CS_SO.doc

Continued efforts by civil society organizations to self-organize. Civil society groups should continue to self-organize, and efforts such as the national consultations in Burundi and Sierra Leone, and the formation of umbrella NGO organizations can help ensure that activities are well coordinated and avoid duplication. However, the onus should not rest solely on civil society to self-organize: it is important for local groups to know that they will be invited to forward the results of their consultations and concrete recommendations to the PBC. These efforts should also be supported by UN actors in-country.

Next steps

On 12 September 2006, the meeting organizers forwarded a set of recommendations for modalities to be adopted by the PBC to the Chair and Vice-Chairs of the PBC and the head of the PBSO.⁴ GPPAC and FES plan to arrange for briefings in advance of the October 12-13 country specific meetings, which will include presentations by civil society representatives from the subject country and NGOs with relevant thematic expertise. These briefings would not be intended to replace the inclusion of civil society in the PBC meetings, but to allow a more in-depth exchange of views and experiences prior to the formal meetings.

Conclusion

Participants agreed that the challenge before the PBC is to understand, on a country-specific basis, the roots of conflict and help countries identify a path to sustainable peace. This can only be accomplished through the involvement of all possible players. The question is not merely how to involve civil society in the workings of the PBC – which is essentially a procedural debate – but on a broader scale, how to ensure that all sources of information, all resources, all energy, and all aspects of society are drawn on to ensure broadest strategic approach, the most inclusive process, and the most sustainable results.

Annex:

Recommendations from meeting organizers to PBC (dated 12 September 2006)

⁴ For the recommendations see Annex

Annex:

Recommendations for modalities to be adopted by the PBC

Under the provisional rules of procedure for the PBC, the Chair of the PBC will “provide on a regular basis for consultation” with representatives including from civil society and NGOs and to ensure this, the PBC shall develop further details and modalities. Taking note of ECOSOC Resolution 1996/31, which provides modalities for NGO consultations with ECOSOC including access to meetings and the provisional agenda, ability to submit documents and opportunities for oral presentations, we request the following procedures to be adopted by the PBC.

1. The Chair should invite three representatives of civil society organizations or NGOs as participants at country specific meetings and relevant meetings of the organizational committee including thematic discussions. Civil society participants should be allowed an opportunity to make a brief statement and partake in the inter-active dialogue of the PBC.

For country specific meetings, at least one invitation should be extended to a representative of civil society from the subject country. Special consideration should be given to representatives of national peacebuilding initiatives designated through a transparent and inclusive consultation or nomination process organized by civil society within the country.

With regard to participation by international NGOs with expertise on the themes or countries under discussion, special consideration should be given to those organizations that have been designated to appear before the PBC as a result of a self-organized transparent and inclusive consultation or nomination process.

Special consideration should be given to ensure representation of women’s organizations.

2. NGOs should be permitted to observe public meetings of the PBC.
3. In order for civil society organizations and NGOs to best coordinate their efforts in advance of meetings, the provisional agenda for PBC meetings should be communicated in a timely manner.
4. Organizations may submit written statements relevant to the work of the country specific meetings or thematic discussions of the PBC. Statements should be circulated to the Members of the Commission.

Additional considerations for the PBC and the Peacebuilding Support Office

We also urge the PBC and the Peacebuilding Support Office to consider the following recommendations to ensure effective partnerships with civil society:

1. A source of funding should be established within the UN to support consultations with civil society, particularly from countries advised by the PBC . Our organizations are prepared to support the costs for representatives of national civil society forums to appear before the October 2006 country specific meetings of the PBC. However, UN support is necessary to ensure the long-term sustainability of these arrangements.
2. The PBSO should designate at least one staff member to serve as a focal point or liaison for civil society.
3. The PBC and the support office must ensure that the results of their work are communicated to civil society in the subject countries. Specifically, country strategies developed with assistance from PBC should be made available in relevant local languages.
4. The PBC and the support office should encourage UN offices and agencies present in the subject countries to engage and consult with civil society.