

Prospects for the UN Peacebuilding Commission

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The UN Peacebuilding Commission (PBC) is an important new institutional development; one that is, at least in part, a product of individual and institutional learning within the United Nations (UN) from its experiences with the complex and interrelated challenges of conflict resolution, peacemaking, peacekeeping and post-conflict peacebuilding, reconciliation and development. Scores of UN officials have first-hand knowledge of the discouraging frequency with which negotiated settlements re-erupt into armed conflict, and it has been widely observed that countries return to violent conflict within five years of the successful negotiation of a peace settlement nearly 50% of the time.¹

Such experience with the consequences of abandoning a conflict zone after the termination of armed violence has spurred interest in longer-term peacebuilding efforts. A peace settlement takes a conflict out of the news and removes it from the top of the policy agenda. There is often then a lag in providing, and sometimes even a failure in committing, resources initially pledged and promised in order to achieve a peace settlement.² The virtual abandonment of Afghanistan in the early 1990s is a classic illustration of this phenomenon, one with far-reaching, ongoing consequences.

There has also been a growing realization that the achievement of what Johan Galtung termed “positive peace” entails far more than the termination of violent conflict alone. Peacebuilding is a long-term,³ complex, as well as fundamentally value-laden project that entails core decisions about how to construct the “good” society and involves both formal and informal institution-building. There are neither distinct phases between, nor is there a clear linear progression through, the negotiation of a peace agreement, the deployment of peacekeeping forces, peace maintenance operations and peacebuilding efforts. Rather, these different aspects are interrelated in complex ways and often occur not in sequence but simultaneously and overlapping with one another. Measures taken during the negotiation of peace settlements have important implications for, and are intrinsically related to, longer-term state-building and development. Indeed, the effectiveness and perceived fairness of new state institutions and processes of development can determine whether conflict resolution is sustainable.

It is still early to offer informed judgements on the UN Peacebuilding Commission and its new Support Office, but it is probably useful to explore some of the challenges facing the Commission, as well as to identify early on some of the constraints under which it operates and some of the important opportunities it presents. These reflections should be read as preliminary or speculative perspectives

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on an institution that holds promise and potential, and they are intended to support the purposes of the Commission, not to cast doubt on its ambitious agenda. Individuals working on the Commission or in its Support Office do not need to be reminded of the challenges they face or the constraints under which they operate, but it is hoped that this preliminary articulation of conceptual, organizational and political challenges, constraints and opportunities might help to clarify the issues and is offered in the spirit of supporting their important efforts.

Challenges facing the Peacebuilding Commission

MEETING EXPECTATIONS

One of the first major challenges facing the Peacebuilding Commission is a product of the timing and context of its creation—the challenge of high expectations. Although the origins of the concept of peacebuilding within the United Nations date back at least as far as 1992 and former Secretary-General Boutros-Ghali's *Agenda for Peace*,⁴ the Peacebuilding Commission itself grew from recommendations of the High-level Panel on UN reform in December 2004 and was a concrete outcome of the World Summit in September 2005. Its creation coincided with an unprecedented growth in the number, range and complexity of UN peacekeeping missions across the globe.

The Peacebuilding Commission remains the one element of substantive UN reform that seems to show the most sustained promise: prospects for reform of the UN Security Council's composition were derailed before the 2005 summit, and plans for internal management reforms continue. Perhaps the most striking contrast is with the disappointing performance of the other new institutional product of the World Summit, the Human Rights Council, which has been extensively criticized both outside and (more quietly) inside the United Nations.

While attention and high expectations are not necessarily bad things, as Andrew Mack (former director of the Strategic Planning Unit in the executive office of former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan) suggested at the International Security Forum in Zurich in October 2006, it might be sensible to lower the expectations of the Peacebuilding Commission slightly. There is a great deal at stake for the institutional credibility of the United Nations, and the problem with such high expectations is the impossibility of ever fully living up to them. A concerted and well-managed effort at public relations to lower expectations could aid the success of the Commission and wider UN reform efforts, but performance on the ground is ultimately more important.

As with any new institution, performance on its first test cases will prove critical for the PBC's future development; it will set the precedents for the Commission. Thus it is critical to establish early

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success in the difficult, but very different, cases of Burundi and Sierra Leone. Although both involve the resolution of protracted and violent conflicts, they are at different stages in their peacebuilding efforts and begin with very different historical, sociocultural and political-economic bases. What works well in one country context may be of limited transferability to the other, hence strong initial performance in widely divergent cases will bolster the PBC's reputation.

To meet expectations as a new institutional entity, the Peacebuilding Commission needs to ensure that it becomes more than just another forum for talking about the issues, or a weak substitute for the reasonably successful inter-agency efforts it replaces (such as the Economic and Social Council's ad hoc advisory groups on countries emerging from conflict).⁵

DEFINING PEACEBUILDING

There is no strong consensus on the definition of peacebuilding, let alone the best practices for achieving it. Former UN Secretary-General Boutros-Ghali defined peacebuilding expansively as “action to identify and support structures which will tend to strengthen and solidify peace in order to avoid a relapse into conflict” in his *Agenda for Peace*,⁶ but as Michael Barnett and his colleagues point out, the operational meaning of peacebuilding varies significantly across multilateral, regional and national agencies.⁷ As they illustrate, “when the Bush administration thinks of peacebuilding it imagines building market-oriented democracies, while UNDP imagines creating economic development and strong civil societies committed to a culture of nonviolent dispute resolution”.⁸ Thus, the broad basis of support for the Peacebuilding Commission may stem partially from the fact that there is no consensus on the meaning of peacebuilding itself.

This lack of an agreed definition could affect the substantive content of the Commission’s activities. There is a danger that successes in one context will be picked up and imported wholesale into another, without consideration of widely varying contextual, historical or situational differences between different conflict zones. Individuals and institutions are shaped and influenced by their experiences, and analogical reasoning from the successes (and failures) of previous peacebuilding efforts will necessarily inform and guide their decisions about the present challenges of peacebuilding. The measures that seemingly worked in Timor-Leste might have some relevance for Sierra Leone, but the demographic and resource differences between the two conflict zones may render those same measures of limited utility.

The greater challenge will be to discover how and when to apply specific contextually grounded insights to different settings. Language, cultural understanding and a good knowledge of history are always a good place to start, but more analytically grounded typologies of conflict zones and phases would prevent the misapplication of ideas from one context to another. Given the limited human resources available for most UN operations and the pressing demands on the time of UN officials, this is an area where non-governmental organizations and scholarly analysts could make a positive contribution.

Peacebuilding as a liberal project

Although there is no consensus on the definition of and the best practices for achieving peacebuilding, it is in practice a *liberal* project. That is, peacebuilding is broadly constituted on the premise that democratic institutions and market mechanisms will ultimately provide the stable foundations for peace, both internally and externally. The theoretical underpinnings of the Peacebuilding Commission are profoundly liberal, even if they are not explicitly articulated as such.⁹ Support for respect of human rights, the promotion of the rule of law, the construction of representative institutions with periodic elections, the creation of forums for popular participation in politics and encouragement of the emergence of a vigorous and free media are all components of peacebuilding efforts, as well as of the construction of a liberal society. The active and engaged participation of the international financial institutions, a central aspect of the mandate of the Peacebuilding Commission, will inherently reinforce the emergence and strength of market institutions.

Identifying the liberal underpinnings of peacebuilding is not intended to undermine it in any way, only to point out its political basis. The Commission and its agents will have to make many deeply political choices in their work, including how to adjudicate between conflicting goals; there are many situations in which progress on one goal may undercut progress on another (for example, respecting the rights of women may conflict with objectives of local judicial governance). Liberalism may well be

the best approach for adjudicating such choices, but it is important to recognize that the construction of liberal institutions, however desirable, is a political project in and of itself.

As Timothy Sisk has argued, pursuing peace and establishing a democracy can at times work at cross-purposes.¹⁰ According to Sisk, prospective peacebuilders face four types of dilemma: horizontal, vertical, systemic and temporal. Horizontal dilemmas entail decisions about who is included and who is excluded from the peacebuilding process. Vertical dilemmas require decisions about who speaks for the public: are elections sufficient as an expression of political will, or are other, non-electoral mechanisms more appropriate (ranging from appointed councils or assemblies such as shuras and loya jirgas to the informal convening of groups of “representative” non-governmental organizations)? How are historically marginalized groups (sometimes at the root of conflict) to be represented and incorporated in the peacebuilding process? Systemic dilemmas refer to the roles the Peacebuilding Commission and the agencies it represents inevitably play in the peacebuilding process. Does external recognition of a particular group or individual by the PBC favour some possible long-term outcomes over others? And to what extent does external involvement delegitimize local control and ownership of the process? Finally, temporal dilemmas are about the sequencing challenges inherent in any process of peacebuilding. Do the requirements of security always precede considerations of justice? Should electoral processes precede reconciliation efforts or be undertaken simultaneously with them? Under what circumstances should elections take place before an entire territorial space has been secured?

Thus, the effective functioning of the Peacebuilding Commission—coordinating the activities of different agencies and producing an integrated strategy for each case with which it works—will be challenged by the politically charged decisions these functions entail. The PBC will face genuine conflicts of interest and vexing trade-offs—such as whether and how to engage former wartime leaders (some of whom may be perpetrators of extreme violence and potential candidates for war crimes tribunals) in transitional governance structures. There are times when a Faustian bargain will have to be struck in order to maintain order in a given polity, which could come at the expense of other components of post-conflict resolution and efforts toward reconciliation. There are no general rules of thumb to guide any of these decisions, and the Peacebuilding Commission is inevitably going to have to make choices with very real consequences for the peacebuilding effort.

Managing the process

As one participant in a Geneva Centre for Security Policy workshop of October 2006 observed, “most peacebuilding strategies fail not because of their content, but because of deficiencies in their process”. Deciding whom to include in peacebuilding is difficult enough; choosing who should ultimately decide on a peacebuilding strategy is the Peacebuilding Commission’s most profound governance question. Is it the Peacebuilding Commission? Is it the government representative of the affected Member State, different factions of the conflict, civil society organizations or the public?

One of the key insights from practitioners with experience of successful peacebuilding is the importance of local participation, support and “buy-in” among key players in the strategy adopted. Such key players can include a wide variety of civil society actors, including private sector business. Given this insight, perhaps the Peacebuilding Commission should consider giving greater attention to facilitating processes and creating spaces for local actors to sort things out among themselves, rather than deciding who should participate, how they should participate and the sequence of peacebuilding activities. There are, of course, occasions when external intervention is crucial for breaking deadlocks among local actors, but one aspect of the assistance provided to countries emerging from deadly conflict could be the provision of space for deliberation, not just answers to technical questions.

GOVERNANCE

One of the principal reasons for the creation of the Peacebuilding Commission was to facilitate the coordination of different actors engaged in peace support activities. During its first year, most of the Commission's attention has appropriately been directed to improving coordination among sometimes fragmented UN bodies, subsidiary organizations and agencies, as well as their relationships with the Washington-based international financial institutions. Thus, the effort is largely internally directed. As Barnett and his colleagues have pointed out, however, the coordination problem goes well beyond the United Nations.¹¹ Given the variation in mission and different operational meaning of peacebuilding in different agencies, the need for coordination extends to other multilateral organizations (such as the European Union and other regional bodies) as well as to national bodies. The so-called "New York problem" emerges when the consensus formed in New York is not communicated to, or shared with, or internalized by key players in national capitals, so there is also a need to engage key actors in their home capitals, not only for resource mobilization but also for consistency in policy toward the target country.¹²

An additional governance challenge emerges from the sheer size of the Peacebuilding Commission itself. Since the Commission is a creation of both the General Assembly and the Security Council, it is important that it be representative of both bodies. However, the requirement that 31 Member States act on the basis of consensus may render the new institution less effective than some of the smaller advisory groups it has replaced.¹³

There is a real risk that the size of the Commission, coupled with the lack of a common definition of peacebuilding and other challenges regarding substantive content, will mean that the PBC becomes just another talking-shop, an additional bureaucratic hurdle for getting things done within the United Nations. Fortunately, reaching consensus has not proven to be a problem to date. It may prove more difficult down the line, however, when the Commission takes up even more difficult or more highly politicized cases.

FINANCING

The final challenge facing the Peacebuilding Commission is financial.¹⁴ A total of US\$ 210m has already been pledged to the Peacebuilding Fund, with a stated goal of US\$ 250m (as originally recommended by the High-level Panel).¹⁵ Of that amount, the Secretary-General has allocated US\$ 35m to Burundi to strengthen governance and the rule of law, and US\$ 35m to Sierra Leone for projects in youth employment and empowerment, democracy and good governance, justice and security, as well as public service delivery. The main purpose of the fund is to fill the resource gap for critical needs such as disarmament, demobilization and reintegration during the period between the signing of a peace agreement and the convening (and eventual disbursement) of funds from donor meetings. As Carolyn McAskie, Assistant Secretary-General and head of the Peacebuilding Support Office, stated at the January 2007 meeting of the Security Council on the Peacebuilding Commission, "[t]he Fund, however, can only act as a catalyst. Alone, it cannot address the peacebuilding resource needs of countries emerging from conflict".¹⁶ At the same meeting, the representatives of both Burundi and Sierra Leone concurred with this assessment and stressed the importance of sustained financial resources. As Ambassador Sylvester Rowe of Sierra Leone put it, "the bottom line is 'resources, resources, resources'".¹⁷

The total funds eventually needed for reconstruction and development will extend into billions of dollars, but the question remains whether the existing goal of US\$ 250m for the Peacebuilding Fund will be large enough for the rapid-release funds that will be needed if the Commission extends its work to other countries that could potentially use its support (for example, Afghanistan, Côte d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Haiti, Iraq, Lebanon, Liberia, Somalia, Sudan and Timor-Leste). As Ambassador Gaspar Martins, Chairman of the Organizational Committee of the Peacebuilding Commission, has stated, recent contributions to the Peacebuilding Fund are encouraging, "though the amount available is still insufficient when compared to the needs of the two countries and the urgency of meeting those needs".¹⁸

Constraints placed on the Peacebuilding Commission

The challenges of the Peacebuilding Commission's work are compounded by the constraints under which it must operate. The principal constraint comes from the very nature of the United Nations itself, as a profoundly state-centred organization. States constitute the membership, govern the institution and are given priority in all of its deliberations. Therefore any peacebuilding process undertaken under the United Nations' auspices will tend to privilege state concerns. Although the UN resolutions creating the Commission call for the engagement of actors from civil society and business organizations, these organizations may be marginalized in a process that will invariably give most attention to the priorities identified by Member States, rather than those of civil society.

As a UN entity, the Peacebuilding Commission will inevitably work closely with states—waiting for a Member State to request its assistance, relying on a Member State to host its visits and convene participants in its country-specific meetings and asking a Member State for guidance on its specific project needs and allocation of funds from the Peacebuilding Fund; it assumes that a functioning, representative and viable state already exists. But there may be instances when a viable state has yet to emerge, or when the state itself is a threat to sustainable peacebuilding. If there is no competent national authority with which the PBC can work, its assumption regarding the state could prevent the Commission from taking on some of the most difficult conflict situations.

The state-centred orientation of the United Nations also constrains the Commission because some internal conflicts are generated as much by regional conflicts as they are by actions undertaken and contained within a single Member State; peacebuilding and the long-term resolution of conflict may depend on the engagement of actors operating outside the domain and immediate control of the affected state. Focusing on an individual Member State may not adequately address the real sources of the problem, which could require the engagement of other states, transnational non-state actors and regional organizations. It is important to note, however, that in the Commission's engagement with Burundi, there is sensitivity to the regional dynamics of the conflict and collaboration with the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region.¹⁹

A further constraint—and potential opportunity—for the Peacebuilding Commission is that the resolutions that created the Peacebuilding Commission, like most UN resolutions, contain ambiguities and compromise language. There is no definition of peacebuilding itself, and although the resolutions recognize the important role of women in conflict prevention and resolution, as well as the important contribution of civil society and non-governmental organizations, they never specify *how* these actors will be engaged. It was relatively easy to form a consensus on creating the Peacebuilding Commission because (as discussed above) it means different things to different people. If pragmatists prevail and interpret the ambiguities in constructive ways, this may prove to be an asset. If not, this could reduce the Peacebuilding Commission to a forum for the kind of political infighting that has compromised the effectiveness and legitimacy of the Human Rights Council.

Opportunities for the Peacebuilding Commission

There has been growing concern within and outside the United Nations about the democratic deficit operating within the organization. No one disputes the non-representative nature of the UN Security Council, and the failure to reform its membership prior to the 2005 World Summit was a real disappointment for many. There are also growing concerns about the global legislative functions increasingly being taken on by the United Nations (especially in the cases of Security Council resolutions 1373 of 2001 and 1540 of 2004). And the absence of any form of judicial balancing of Security Council actions regarding the designation of individuals and corporate entities for their alleged support for acts of terrorism has provoked legal challenges in national and regional courts about whether the UN Security Council may be taking actions that violate regional human rights conventions.²⁰

As a joint venture between the General Assembly and the Security Council, the Peacebuilding Commission is a potentially important institutional innovation within the UN system. If it succeeds, it could be seen as a way to address some of the larger democratic deficit concerns and could conceivably become a model for future institutional cooperation between the General Assembly and the Security Council. Developing countries and the Non-Aligned Movement frequently expressed concern about the Security Council's central and authoritative role during the debate on the creation of the Peacebuilding Commission. Some viewed the permanent five's central role in the Commission as a way to allow the Security Council veto into the halls of the General Assembly through the back door, while others expressed concern that the Peacebuilding Commission might simply become an extension of the Security Council. Although these concerns got the Commission off to a rocky start, the Council kept a fairly low profile during 2006 and has been cautious about referring additional conflict situations to the agenda of the Commission.²¹

The general sense of pragmatism at its first substantive meetings in October 2006 bodes well for the future development of the PBC. The leadership of the Peacebuilding Commission (from Angola and El Salvador) has direct experience with successful peacebuilding efforts at home and is firmly committed to the success of the enterprise in other conflict situations. The staff and leadership of the Support Office are widely viewed as highly qualified and in possession of an appropriate background for the complex tasks of the institution. Carolyn McAskie's statement to the January 2007 Security Council session on the PBC was articulate, succinct and clearly cognizant of many of the challenges and constraints facing the Commission. Finally, and most significantly, countries emerging from violent conflict (Burundi and Sierra Leone) are showing serious commitment to their participation in the process.

The historical record of the United Nations on peacekeeping is mixed—at least in part because it deals with the most challenging cases—but the Peacebuilding Commission presents an opportunity to demonstrate the effectiveness of the United Nations. Operational success in the cases of Burundi and Sierra Leone could be important for shoring up the credibility of the United Nations more generally.

Conclusion

Although the challenges are many, and the constraints daunting, there is a very real chance that the Peacebuilding Commission and the institutional experiment it represents could eventually succeed. Ultimately, however, the success or failure of the Peacebuilding Commission is beyond the Commission's effective control: the success of different peacebuilding operations will depend on the political will of key players in the conflict zones themselves. It is hoped that, with the political backing and encouragement of other UN

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Member States, those key players can be encouraged along, and the processes of engagement and the provision of resources for urgently needed transitional projects will create the conditions for successful, sustained peacebuilding.

Notes

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8. *Ibid.*, p. 44.
9. Roland Paris, 2004, *At War's End: Building Peace after Civil Conflict*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
10. Timothy D. Sisk, "Peacebuilding as Democratization: Findings and Implications", paper presented at the workshop "Establishing the United Nations Peacebuilding Commission", Graduate Institute of International Studies, Geneva, 12 June 2006.
11. Barnett et al, op. cit.
12. This is a valuable lesson learned from the implementation of multilateral sanctions, see Peter Wallensteen, Carina Staibano and Mikael Eriksson (eds), 2003, *Making Targeted Sanctions Effective: Guidelines for the Implementation of UN Policy Options*, Uppsala University, at <www.smartsanctions.se/stockholm_process/Reports.htm>.
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15. "UN Grants Sierra Leone \$35 million to Help It Build up Institutions for Peace", *UN News Service*, 1 March 2007.
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19. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
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