



Cairo Policy Briefs

No (4)

November 2014

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Acknowledgments

- This Policy Brief was first submitted as a Discussion Paper to the Cairo Workshop on "Regional Perspectives of Peacebuilding: Identifying Gaps, Challenges and Opportunities", organized jointly with the Egyptian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the United Nations Peacebuilding Support Office (PBSO).



- This Policy Brief was made possible in part by the generous support of the Government of Japan through the United Nations Development Program.



The UN Peacebuilding Architecture 10 Years Later: Lessons Learned and the Way Forward

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The United Nations (UN) Peacebuilding Architecture (PBA) was established in December 2005, and by the end of 2015 it will thus have been in existence for 10 years. The core rationale behind the PBA was to ensure that the UN system does not take its eye off countries emerging out of conflict too soon.

The research by Paul Collier and others that suggested that 25 to 50% of all peace processes relapse within five to ten years was very influential in this regard.¹ It created an evidence-based rationale for the lesson identified by the UN peace and development community that the UN needed to accompany peace processes for longer than the 2 to 4 years that was the norm at the time. Following a number of cases in the 1990s, where countries like Liberia, Sierra Leone and Haiti relapsed into violent conflict after the withdrawal of UN peacekeeping missions, it was realized that the UN needed to remain engaged for longer with countries emerging out of conflict so that it could help to support these countries through a period of heightened risk and fragility until their peace processes were consolidated. As the UN Security Council had to focus its attention on managing the most critical crisis of the day, it was decided to establish the PBA to accompany states in the aftermath of conflict.

In 2010, after the PBA had been in existence for five years, a review of the peacebuilding architecture (A/64/868-S/2010/393) concluded that while some progress has been made, the PBC had yet to realize its full potential. The 2015 review, which will take place after one full decade has passed since the establishment of the PBA, offers us with the opportunity to both revisit the original vision and purpose behind the PBA, as well as to consider how the PBA can be strengthened so that it can realize its full potential.

This Policy Brief is intended to provide a brief introduction into the UN Peacebuilding Architecture, as well as to cover some of the major issues that will inform the review.

The year 2015 presents the international community with a unique opportunity to set the agenda for the UN's peace and development agenda. Not only is it the year in which the UN will adopt a new post-2015 development agenda, but it is also the year in which the UN will review both its peace operations and its PBA. Thus, as we consider the regional aspects of peacebuilding, we need to remain mindful of the inter-linkages between peacebuilding, peace operations (including both peacekeeping and special political missions) and development.

Looking back at the first decade of the UN Peacebuilding Architecture

Structurally, the PBA consists of the Peacebuilding Commission (PBC), the Peacebuilding Fund (PBF) and the Peacebuilding Support Office (PBSO). Together they form what is

¹ Paul Collier et al. estimate a relapse figure of 50%, but this has been questioned by Astri Suhrke and Ingrid Samset, who argue for a figure closer to 25%. See Paul Collier et al., *Breaking the Conflict Trap: Civil Wars and Development Policy* (Washington, DC: The World Bank, 2003) and Astri Suhrke and Ingrid Samset, 'What's in a Figure? Estimating Recurrence of Civil War', *International Peacekeeping*, vol.14, no.2, 2007, pp. 195 – 203.

referred to as the PBA. However, the UN system's peacebuilding work is much more comprehensive than the PBA. Many, if not all the UN's funds, agencies and programmes work in post-conflict settings and, at a minimum, their work in these countries need to be conflict-sensitive. However, in many cases they also engage in peacebuilding work. In addition, the UN's special political missions and some of its peacekeeping missions also have peacebuilding mandates. The UN system's peacebuilding approach is coordinated by the Senior Peacebuilding Group, chaired by the Assistant Secretary-General for Peacebuilding Support. The establishment of the PBA has thus also contributed to a greater awareness of the need to coordinate peacebuilding across the UN system.

At the same time, it has helped us to note the degree to which the UN system, and the international system more generally, lacks coherence and often works at cross-purposes with itself. Much more needs to be done to improve international coherence and the PBA should be able to play a much more meaningful role in this regard. One option is that the PBC focuses less on UN system coordination and more on accompanying strategic compacts at country level, as well as stimulating more coherent international action to counter those external factors that constrain local peacebuilding efforts, such as illicit financial flows, resource exploitation and international organized crime.

The 2010 review focused mostly on the PBC and it essentially found that the PBC has not lived up to its expectations. It found that the momentum that followed in the wake of the establishment of the PBA has waned, as reflected in the fact that the initial enthusiasm of countries to be on the agenda of the PBC has declined. It argued that the PBC lacked vision, has struggled to mobilize resources, and was associated with high transaction costs as a result of the direct engagement of the chair and members of the country configuration in the design and approval of country-level strategic frameworks.²

The 2010 review also found that the PBSO struggled to find its niche, noted its staffing problems, and questioned the quality of its strategic and policy work. The Center for International Cooperation found that the PBSO had not yet “fulfilled the function of coordinating peacebuilding policy and best practices for which it had been intended.”³

In contrast, the Peacebuilding Fund has been widely acknowledged as a success. It has made significant progress with improving its internal processes, including notably its results management framework, following several independent reviews including a major review in 2013.

As of end 2014, with the 2015 review of the PBA about to kick-off, the general sense is that not much progress has been made with the implementation of the recommendations of the 2010 review. Perhaps as a result, a much more consultative and grounded approach has been followed with the preparation of the 2015 review. The members of the PBC, with the support of the PBSO and several think tanks have embarked on a process of consultations that has produced terms of reference and recommendations for a review

² Sarah Hearn, Alejandra Kubitschek Bujones & Alischa Kugel, *The United Nations "Peacebuilding Architecture": Past, Present and Future* (New York: Center for International Cooperation, 2013) p. 7.

³ *Ibid.*

process that promises to result in a much deeper and more anchored review than was the case in 2010.

The proposed review process will look beyond the PBC, and even beyond the PBA and situate UN peacebuilding in its wider environment and context. It will start with a series of country case studies that is intended to give the review an evidenced-based foundation, and the cases studied will include both countries where the PBA has been active, as well as some where the PBA has not been involved. A group of experts will be appointed by the Secretary-General in consultation with member states, to undertake the case studies and to generate findings and recommendations. Finally a number of Permanent Representatives will assess the findings of the experts in an inter-governmental process, to increase the ownership member states will have in its findings and recommendations.

Key Lessons Learned and the Way Forward

The core question that should form the basis of the 2015 review of the PBA is whether the PBA has been able to address the systemic gap that its establishment was meant to fill? Has the establishment and functioning of the PBA contributed to an improvement in the coherence of the UN system and in its coordination with other international actors? And if not, how should the UN system and the PBA be reformed to enable it to better address these challenges?

There has been a marked increase in the attention the UN system has devoted to internal coherence, as well as to coordination with national counterparts and other international actors. This is at least partly due to the establishment of the PBA and the subsequent performance of the PBC, especially the early work it did to encourage the development of country-level strategic peacebuilding frameworks. Even if some of these experiences initially resulted in high-transaction costs for those involved, it laid the foundation for what is now widely accepted as best practice, namely that the relationship between national authorities, local civil society and international partners need to be anchored in country-level compacts or strategic frameworks.⁴ However, much more remains to be done and the 2015 review is likely to give particular attention to how the PBA in general, and the PBC in particular, can further refine and enhance its role in helping to stimulate and support coherence and coordination within the UN system, between the UN and other international partners and at the country-level between international, national and local partners.⁵

Another core question is whether the establishment of the PBA has had an impact on how we understand and view peacebuilding today, and what the role of the PBA is when it comes to peacebuilding policy coherence. One of the success stories of the PBA is that the work it has undertaken since its establishment a decade ago has resulted in the peacebuilding concept, despite its ambiguity, developing from an obscure concept used by relatively few experts, to a concept that is now widely used, broadly understood

⁴ Richard J. Ponzio, "Strategic Policy Frameworks as Peacebuilding Tools: A Comparative Study", *Journal of Peacebuilding and Development*, Vol. 5, No. 2, 2010.

⁵ Michael von der Schulemburg, *Rethinking Peacebuilding: Transforming the UN Approach* (New York: International Peace Institute, 2013) p. 13.

and generally accepted and welcomed, not only in New York and Geneva, but also in Bujumbura, Kinshasa and Goma, Monrovia, Free Town, Bangui, Khartoum and Juba.⁶

We now have a shared understanding of peacebuilding as peace consolidation, which means a focus on preventing a (re)lapse into violent conflict in those context where a peace process has been established, or preventing an outbreak of violent conflict, in those transitional contexts where peacebuilding is applied as a preventative measure. The PBA has thus contributed to making the need for sustained engagement more of a mainstream and widely accepted principle. Much more needs to be done to further operationalize this concept, and the PBC, supported by the PBSO and others could play a much more central role in assessing and consolidating the knowledge generated by peacebuilding practitioners, evaluators and researchers, and to provide inter-governmental sanction for the strategic principles and operational guidelines that should direct the UN system and the international peacebuilding community.

The work of the PBA has also helped to highlight various enduring challenges embedded in the peacebuilding concept, and I want to conclude with the issue that I think will be the most important for the PBA to grapple with over the next 10 years, namely national and local ownership, including especially the role of local civil society.⁷ The core of the problem with national and local ownership is not that the principle has not been accepted – almost every policy document recognizes that peacebuilding cannot be sustainable without national and local ownership – but that we have failed to internalize the rather radical implications of this principle, namely that peacebuilding is essentially local.⁸ The international actors, including the PBA, still dominate the peacebuilding space, with the perverse result that an international intervention more often than not generates the opposite effect of what it aims to achieve: it removes much needed feedback, it prevents local social institutions from learning, it generates dependence, it contributes to fragility and it undermines self-sustainability.

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⁶ Cedric de Coning, *Clarity, Coherence & Context: Three Priorities for Sustainable Peacebuilding*, NUPI & CIPS Working Paper, Ottawa CIPS & NUPI's The Future of the Peacebuilding Architecture Project (Oslo: Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, 2010).

⁷ Eli Stamnes, 'Values, Context and Hybridity: how can the Insights from the Liberal Peace Critique Literature be Brought to Bear on the Practices of the UN Peacebuilding Commission?' NUPI & CIPS Working Paper, uOttawa CIPS & NUPI's The Future of the Peacebuilding Architecture Project (Oslo: Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, 2010).

⁸ Cedric de Coning, "Understanding Peacebuilding as Essentially Local", *Stability: International Journal of Security & Development*, Vol 2, No 1 (2013), available at: <http://www.stabilityjournal.org/article/view/sta.as>