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Conceptual Issues In Peacebuilding

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1. This note explores conceptual issues in peacebuilding. It draws on a review of available literature,[i] which identified a consensus around 5 basic lessons:

   a. Peacebuilding must be *more* context- and nation-specific;

   b. *More* local country *ownership* of peacebuilding processes is crucial;

   c. *Inclusive* peacebuilding processes lead to *more* durable peace;[ii]

   d. Peacebuilding initiatives should be more clearly built around *long-term strategies*, while also remaining adaptive to the conditions on the ground;

   e. Peacebuilding should be thought of *more holistically*, rather than being issue-specific.

2. It is easy, perhaps, to be dismissive of these lessons. The need to be context specific is older than the idea of peacebuilding – and applies to all international interventions. The needs for inclusion, to be adaptive, to support national ownership and work together – are, in part, the needs that led to the creation of the peacebuilding architecture

in 2005. They were re-iterated in the 2010 review of the PBC, and in several major papers on the Peacebuilding Commission.[iii]

3. This paper accepts these lessons, but suggests many of the difficulties in peacebuilding stem from fundamental conceptual issues, rather than the simple failure to implement peacebuilding effectively. The first of these issues is the absence of a clear definition of peacebuilding.

I. Peacebuilding – a term without definition.

4. In 1992, *An Agenda for Peace* introduced and defined the term peacebuilding as "action to identify and support structures which will tend to strengthen and solidify peace in order to avoid a relapse into conflict."

5. The Member States, in the 2005 resolution establishing the peacebuilding architecture, emphasized the importance of "international support to national efforts to establish, redevelop

or reform institutions for the effective administration of countries emerging from conflict, including capacity-building efforts."[iv] The Council also tasked the Commission to "focus attention on the reconstruction and institution-building efforts necessary for recovery from conflict and to support the development of integrated strategies in order to lay the foundation for sustainable development." But no clear definition was offered.

6. Since then, practice has driven the understanding of peacebuilding at the United Nations, rather than a careful attempt to establish a theory or a framework.[v] The closest that the Secretariat has come to offering a definition was a May 2007 Policy Committee decision, which observed that: "Peacebuilding involves a range of measures targeted to reduce the risk of lapsing or relapsing into conflict by strengthening national capacities at all levels for conflict management, and to lay the foundations for sustainable peace and development."

7. This has meant that peacebuilding is more often defined by activities and by sectors, than by a shared understanding as to what it is – and equally as importantly, what it is not. As a result, a 2008 observation on competing concepts of peacebuilding remains true today:

> *The term 'peacebuilding' is used in two quite different ways. Many practitioners and academics use the word peacebuilding as an all-encompassing term, both in scope and time frame – i.e., to refer to the overall set of security, political, humanitarian, and developmental activities that occur from day one after conflict and prior to full-blown peace and sustainable development. However, many international diplomats, especially at the UN, use the term to refer to … 'late recovery', or 'peace consolidation' – i.e., after the security-intensive, peacekeeping-focused phase of recovery. This confusion in usage is evident in the debate surrounding the role of the Peacebuilding Commission – initially*

designed to perform a range of early recovery functions but [which] in practice has to date only been asked to take on 'late recovery' contexts.[vi]

8. The consequences of the dissensus over peacebuilding extend beyond a discussion of which countries the Peacebuilding Commission can effectively support. As former Executive Representative of the Secretary-General, Michael von der Schulenburg argues, it "has led to fragmented approaches to peacebuilding, with each UN department and agency wanting to preserve its own conceptual and operational independence."[vii] This is the opposite of the 2005 UNSC resolutions' vision of the Peacebuilding Architecture as a means for improving coordination and bringing together relevant actors.
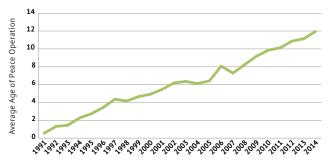
II: Three basic questions: who, when and what?

9. This lack of clarity can best be captured in the absence of answers to the three basic questions:
    a. **Who**: Is international support to peacebuilding the exclusive provenance of development actors? Or is there also a role for peacekeepers? Humanitarians? Who, in the United Nations, is responsible for 'peacebuilding'? How does that change depending on the configuration of the UN presence in the country (e.g. in a 'mission setting' versus a 'non-mission setting')?
    b. **When**: Does the task of peacebuilding begin at the point of cessation of a conflict? Are there elements of peacebuilding that can begin prior to a political settlement? Does peacebuilding encompass peacemaking and prevention, or does it stand alone? And is it only about "peacebuilding in the aftermath of violent conflict" (as the topic is formulated on the Agenda of the Security Council), or is "building peace" also part of how conflict is prevented in the first place?
    c. **What**: The Secretary-General's 2009 report, *Peacebuilding in the immediate aftermath of Conflict*, defined five key areas of focus for the

international community: establishing security, building confidence in a political process, delivering initial peace dividends and expanding core national capacity. Is this the right list for countries that have moved beyond the immediate aftermath of conflict?

10. Establishing the timeframe for peacebuilding is an essential first step. As the 2011 World Development Report has argued the process of building stable institutions takes, at minimum, decades. The experience of the United Nations in peacekeeping echoes this – *Figure 1*, below, demonstrates the steady and continuing increase in the average age of UN peace operations. The relapse into conflict that has led to the re-establishment of operations in Haiti, Timor-Leste and Somalia highlight the real difficulty – and considerable expense – of having too short a timeframe.

Fig 1: Average Age of UN Peace Operations: 1991-2014
(For missions mandated after 1990)

11. A decision on a timeframe – or at the very least, a defined period where the Architecture seeks to support peacebuilding – will help resolve the question of who is involved in peacebuilding. It will also need to be accompanied by clarity on who provides accountability for performance against tasks – and in particular, the relationship of the Peacebuilding Commission to the Security Council.

12. The questions of *who*, *when*, and *what* are, of course, linked to issues of how. What levels of inclusion should the United Nations advocate for? How does that change over time? How should the UN manage

the tensions between its norms, and countries' sovereignty – and how should this balance change when, for example, a country is no longer on the Council Agenda? Might there be a role for 'softer', longer-term accompaniment by the PBC, for example, from precisely that moment when the Council's 'harder' attention is no longer indicated?

13. The question of national ownership is also at the heart of *who* and *how*. The term national ownership is frequently used, but rarely with any definition of who constitutes the national and what is being owned. Is it ownership of the formal state over political processes? Who actually owns reform of the security sector – the government or the people, or both? As the then Permanent Representative of Jordan noted, in March 2014 in the Security Council, "Nor does it make any sense that "national ownership" is highlighted repeatedly, when the very emphasis on the need for "inclusivity" makes it clear that in most, if not all post-conflict societies - as opposed to normal developing countries - there is no cohesive nation, that can go about owning anything. Own what? Own by whom?" How can mantras about national ownership be made operational in the face of conflict?

14. One other lesson, that has begun to emerge from the experiences of Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and Côte d'Ivoire, is that threats to peace often arise at the sub-national level, rather than the national. Understanding of sub-national conflicts, how they threaten peace, and the limits and scope of the international role also remain very weak.[viii]

III: A need for guidance

15. All of the above stresses the need for explicit guidance that establishes the basic tenets around *who*, *what*, *when* – and in doing so, establishes the *how*. Definitions and choices need to be linked to clear strategic goals for peacebuilding. This is not to argue for a prescriptive framework. Context must always come first.

16. Careful attention to both the conclusions of the 2011 World Development Report and to major critiques may be helpful.[ix] Taken together, these suggest that the key question for international actors is to identify investments that can help reduce the risk of reversion to conflict – or perhaps merely the extent of conflict – while national institutions emerge.

17. Better models for supporting institution-building are also needed. One, the "Problem-Driven Iterative Adaptation" model, proposed by the Center for Global Development, is particularly useful (despite its unwieldy name). It argues for reform activities that, simply put,

    a. aim to solve problems that are locally recognized and recognizable, by

    b. empowering local actors to experiment in pursuit of results, and building

    c. active learning that incorporates feedback from experience into new solutions, by

    d. engaging broadly to ensure that reforms are viable, legitimate and relevant — that is, politically supportable and practically implementable.[x]

18. In addition to the above, three additional principles could inform further work on peacebuilding doctrine:

    a. *Humility*: A need to recognize the limits, and limited role, of peacebuilding and international action after conflict. This goes hand-in hand with:

    b. *Comparative advantage*: The 2011 report, *Civilian Capacity in the Aftermath of Conflict*,[xi] urged adoption of a strict principle of comparative advantage, to prioritise local capacities over international intervention, and to demand clear, sector-specific statements of comparative advantage for the United Nations. Along with an understanding of what needs to be done for peacebuilding, the Peacebuilding Architecture, and any other actors involved, should be able to clearly articulate what relevant expertise they bring to the table. Together, these principles will help to ensure more context-specific peacebuilding, and more local ownership of peacebuilding processes.

    c. *Non-linearity*: There is no single pathway to a stable peace, or a high-performing institution. The nature of peacebuilding involves investments with uncertain outcomes, and non-linear progression towards a goal. This must be incorporated into any guidance to enable initiatives to both design for the long-term and adapt to changing conditions.

19. But in the absence of a basic model, or a theory, it is hard to understand how the Peacebuilding Architecture and the United Nations can provide effective support to countries emerging from conflict. Indeed, the Peacebuilding Fund, which is widely perceived as the most successful element of the Peacebuilding Architecture, has the most-clear Terms of Reference, that usefully define and limit its role.

20. A clear understanding of comparative advantage needs to be coupled with an operational definition **or** framework for peacebuilding. Together, they allow each element of the PBA to understand both its role and how each can link to the other actors – within the United Nations and without – who are engaged in peacebuilding.

21. There is no easy answer. The framework must be broad enough in terms of time and topic so that each element of the PBA can clearly articulate the value of its engagement in each different context. There may be a few general principles that can be derived – such as the ability of the PBC to play a serious role in dual accountability, or to support Council mandates by ensuring that development assistance is aligned to Council goals. A clear statement of value may also be the only way to rescue the PBC from the institutional doldrums in which it resides, or to ensure that the PBF is more than simply a useful source of top-up cash.

22. Finally, it must be recognized that the United Nations is but one actor in peacebuilding. If Member States are truly committed to supporting countries

in their quest for a stable peace, there is a need for a mechanism that can look across the performance of the entire international community – the United Nations, bilateral actors, and host countries alike – and help all of these actors to do better, together. Here, perhaps, is a significant opportunity for the Peacebuilding Architecture to live up to expectations.

ENDNOTES

i   Yazaki, A, "A brief review of literature and lessons learned on peacebuilding", UNU Center for Policy Research, 2015. [used in draft form]

ii   See Jones, B. "Development in the shadow of violence" p.9, at http://www.idrc.ca/EN/Documents/Development-in-the-shadow-of-violence.pdf. Or. Call, C.T. and V. Wyeth eds. Building States to Build Peace, Lynne Rienner, 2008.

iii Von der Schulenburg, M. 2014. *Rethinking Peacebuilding: Transforming the UN Approach.* International Peace Institute; and, Hearn, S., Alejandra Kubitschek Bujones, and Alischa Kugel. 2014. T*he United Nations "Peacebuilding Architecture": Past, Present and Future.* Center on International Cooperation.

iv   S/RES/1645

v   For an in-depth summary, please see, Wyeth, V. "Peacebuilding at the UN over the last 10 years" at http://www.frient.de/en/publications-service/news-details/article/peacebuilding-at-the-un-over-the-last-10-years.html

vi   Chandran, R., and Bruce Jones. "Recovering from war" Center on International Cooperation, 2008.

vii *Rethinking Peacebuilding*, p. 1

viii For an example from Somalia, see: http://www.somaliangoconsortium.org/docs/key/15/2014/1396353740.pdf. For an example from Thailand, looking at the scope of international actors, see, Burke A. "How do international development agencies approach peacebuilding in a sub-national conflict?" Development in Practice. Vol. 23, Iss. 7, 2013 or Barron, P. "Subnational conflict – new approaches needed" at http://asiafoundation.org/in-asia/2014/08/13/subnational-conflict-new-approaches-needed/

ix   See, in particular Jones, Gareth and Dennis Rodgers. "The World Bank's World Development Report 2011 on conflict, security and development: a critique through five vignettes." LSE, 2011

x   Andrews, M, et al, "Escaping Capability Traps through Problem-Driven Iterative Adaptation (PDIA)." Center for Global Development, Working Paper 299, June 2012. Language adapted slightly.

xi   A/65/747–S/2011/85 "Civilian Capacity in the Aftermath of Conflict." United Nations, 2011