

# Economic, social and cultural rights in peacebuilding

## A snapshot of practice from the 2024 Peacebuilding Fund Thematic Review

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*This policy brief on the intersection between economic, social and cultural rights and peacebuilding draws from the 2024 Peacebuilding Fund Thematic Review, which focused on synergies between human rights and peacebuilding in Peacebuilding Fund-supported programming.<sup>1</sup> This policy brief summarizes the findings from the Thematic Review that relate to economic, social and cultural rights and peacebuilding, drawing extracts from the Thematic Review, and supplementing it with other material gathered in the course of the research.*

### The Peacebuilding Fund

The Peacebuilding Fund (PBF) was established in 2006 by the Secretary-General at the request of the General Assembly as the primary financial instrument of the United Nations (UN) to sustain peace in countries at risk of or affected by violent conflict. The PBF provides funds to UN entities, Governments, regional organizations, multilateral banks, national multi-donor trust funds and civil society organizations. From 2006 to 2023, the PBF allocated nearly \$2 billion to 72 recipient countries.

Since 2006, the Peacebuilding Support Office (PBSO), which supports the PBF, has commissioned Thematic Reviews to examine past practices and promising innovations in peacebuilding, and to reflect on the performance of the PBF in designated areas.<sup>2</sup> The Review that this policy brief was part of was commissioned by the PBSO in partnership with the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and the Government of Switzerland. Research was led by United Nations University Centre for Policy Research (UNU-CPR), and conducted between January and October 2023. Further methodological details are provided in the full Thematic Review.

Economic, social and cultural rights (ESCR) – which include rights to adequate food and healthcare, decent working conditions, social security, education, cultural respect and enjoyment, among others – have long been protected under a number of international treaties and standards. However, differences in the way these ESCR have been enforced or applied by Member States have long led to critiques that these rights are “neglected” or not put on an “equal footing” with civil and political rights.<sup>3</sup> The same has also been observed in the peace and security field, including in peacebuilding programming.

This policy brief offers one snapshot into the linkages between ESCR and peacebuilding, and how incorporating ESCR considerations into peacebuilding programming could contribute to conflict prevention and efforts to sustain peace. It draws from a larger Thematic Review of the Peacebuilding Fund aimed at exploring synergies between human rights and peacebuilding.<sup>4</sup> The Review took stock of 92 projects supported by the PBF from 2017 to 2022, across 45 countries and territories, with a view to identifying best practices and lessons learned from the field. Although ESCR was not one of the human rights-related thematic areas originally identified as the focus of the Review, it emerged as a central theme in many of the

The full Thematic Review is available at: <https://unu.edu/cpr/report/2024-pbf-thematic-review-synergies-between-human-rights-and-peacebuilding-pbf-supported>.

projects and thematic areas examined, and across the two country case studies in the Review: Colombia and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC).

To explore this learning and identify future directions for ESCR-related programming this brief will first provide some background on ESCR. It will then discuss how ESCR considerations manifested in the PBF-supported projects explored in the Thematic Review, and identify lessons learned about ESCR and peacebuilding.

## **Background: economic, social and cultural rights in law and peacebuilding practice**

ESCR includes rights to adequate food and housing, education, health, water and sanitation, to take part in cultural life and to work, among others.<sup>5</sup> These are frequently distinguished from civil and political rights, which include the right to life and liberty, to be free from torture, freedom of movement, freedom of religion and expression, due process rights, and to equal treatment, among others. The 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights made no distinction between these two categories of rights, but two major covenants subsequently adopted by the General Assembly in 1966 – the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights – clustered them into distinct areas.<sup>6</sup> Since then there has been a healthy debate between academics and practitioners about the distinctions between these two categories of rights, whether they differ in how justiciable or binding they are, and whether they should be distinguished at all.<sup>7</sup>

Critics have long argued that social and economic rights have been “neglected” within the human rights movement and given less enforcement attention by States, often attributing this to ideological differences during the Cold War and Western liberal democracies’ greater emphasis on civil and political rights.<sup>8</sup> This critique that greater weight has been placed on civil and political rights also extends to the peace and security field. Where peace treaties or political settlements have included provisions related to human rights, they have tended to focus on concerns or guarantees regarding civil and political rights – e.g., amnesty provisions, release of prisoners or detainees, freedom of movement and return for refugees, or guarantees of political or territorial rights.<sup>9</sup> A 2007 report on realization of ESCR by the UN Secretary-General observed that “[e]conomic, social and cultural rights have been comparatively neglected in strategies aimed at

restoring peace and ensuring accountability in conflict and post-conflict settings”.<sup>10</sup>

This greater focus on civil and political rights has also been observed within peacebuilding programming. A traditional menu of peacebuilding work in post-conflict settings includes significant attention to human rights and justice processes, including efforts to strengthen practice or promulgate laws and regulations that are in accord with international human rights standards, to expand access to justice, and to support special initiatives like transitional justice mechanisms, among others. Although such activities might in theory enable greater protection of both ESCR and civil and political rights, these activities have more often focused on strengthening laws that relate to civil and political rights, or related due process protections.<sup>11</sup> A particular example of this are transitional justice mechanisms, which are key mechanisms for contributing to both rights awareness and conflict transformation in post-conflict scenarios. As scholar Amanda Cahill-Ripley has observed, “transitional justice mechanisms have traditionally ignored or side-lined violations of economic and social rights, focussing [sic] almost entirely on violations of civil and political rights as the primary grave human rights violations to be addressed when seeking justice for past atrocities”.<sup>12</sup> They have also tended to draw upon models of criminal justice, which can neglect more socially or economically oriented restorative measures.<sup>13</sup>

Given this background, greater understanding of how ESCR are incorporated and addressed within current peacebuilding efforts could be important in terms of identifying continuing gaps, as well as opportunities to respond to them. To facilitate this, the subsequent section will draw on examples of existing programming within the Thematic Review sample, in particular as manifested in the two country case studies. It will also discuss insights from practitioners about the opportunities and current limitations for this type of programming going forward.

## **Findings: economic, social and cultural rights in UN peacebuilding**

Overall, the PBF-supported peacebuilding projects examined for the Thematic Review reflected the larger tendencies of the field, of greater attention to civil and political rights. The 92 projects selected as the Thematic Review sample were drawn from one of six categories that PBSO tracks as associated with human rights-related work: protection of human rights defenders and victims of human rights violations; access to justice; civic space; transitional

justice; support to national human rights institutions and other State mechanisms; and countering hate speech, disinformation and misinformation.<sup>14</sup> There is no specific tracking of projects related to ESCR.

The lack of specific tracking of ESCR as a subfield within the peacebuilding work supported is in itself an indicator of the degree of *overt* attention to these issues in the peacebuilding field, or lack thereof. The PBSO develops these categories based on the issues or practice areas that most commonly emerge within the project documents (the documents that describe the overall background, objectives, theory of change and activities proposed for a project). UNU-CPR also examined these project documents and although it was able to identify issues that would relate to ESCR, explicit mention of ESCR was rare. In the vast majority of project documents, the connection was tenuous, a minor part of the project, or reflected an emphasis on socioeconomic activities (for example livelihood support) without drawing a link to socioeconomic *rights*.<sup>15</sup> The absence of focus on ESCR is notable given that a large portion of PBF-supported work could be linked to advancement and enforcement of ESCR. This includes a large number of PBF-supported projects working on natural resources and land or those with strong livelihood components.<sup>16</sup>

Analysis of the content and framing of the 92 PBF-supported projects further reinforced the perception of a greater focus on civil and political rights. Some of the largest categories examined (in terms of number of projects in the sample) was in work related to rule of law or the justice sector (20 projects), to strengthening Government institutions (30 projects), and support to human rights defenders (19 projects).<sup>17</sup> Across all three categories, the greater focus of projects was on civil and political rights, albeit with a small number of projects undertaking work related to land rights and reforms, workers' rights and conditions, or other legal areas related to socioeconomic rights.<sup>18</sup> Roughly a quarter of the projects examined were either centrally or significantly focused on transitional justice. In line with the overall conclusions on the transitional justice field, within these the greater weight tended to be on truth-seeking and criminal justice remedies following violations of bodily harm or other civil and political rights.<sup>19</sup> The greater focus on civil and political rights was also evident in programming related to addressing exclusion or marginalization of certain groups. For example, projects that sought to address gender inequality or support women's empowerment tended to focus on enabling women's civic and political participation, for example, supporting them to run for office, or to otherwise ensure inclusion in political decision-making.<sup>20</sup>

Although some programming pushed the envelope in trying to address women's socioeconomic needs and rights first (as discussed further below), this was still the minority practice.

Other interviews with experts and practitioners in the course of the research provided some background on how such de-prioritization of ESCR might arise. Some attributed it to the lack of a long history of peacebuilding work focused on ESCR, which was reinforced by continued siloing in the field. For example, one human rights expert at a UN agency involved in this work said that because activities related to the environment, natural resources, land, climate or other economic spheres have not traditionally been associated with rights components, she was not often asked to support project design or implementation when these projects arose. This meant that in a large sector of work that was very relevant to rights realization, particular human rights expertise was not brought to bear, which could negatively affect project design and impact, in her view.<sup>21</sup>

This is not to suggest that those interviewed thought that ESCR issues *should* be less prominent or given less priority. In fact, many of the human rights experts and practitioners interviewed took pains to emphasize the link between ESCR and conflict drivers, and to argue that there should therefore be more of a focus on this work. One OHCHR staff member reflected on the major protest movements of the last several decades – such as those leading to the Arab Spring revolutions – and the type of issues that were at the center of those protests: “Sometimes people go on the streets because of elections, but ultimately it’s because they’re not happy with their lives. Most of the big demonstrations are about socioeconomic issues.”<sup>22</sup> Another practitioner pointed to the COVID and climate crises, which have contributed to livelihood deterioration in many countries, and have in turn, exacerbated conflict vulnerabilities: “If you look at Pakistan or Sri Lanka ... these crises were sparked not by horizontal grievances but by economic hardship.”<sup>23</sup> When asked about gaps in PBF-supported work on human rights and peacebuilding portfolio, interviewees most often highlighted a need for more engagement on the linkage between socioeconomic issues and needs and peacebuilding, and the nexus with ESCR. Beyond programming, those working at a policy or institutional level also highlighted a need for greater attention to ESCR as a strong signal or early warning sign of conflict. “Usually people talking about prevention talk about elections, or civil political rights ... But really for prevention, we need to think about inequality, and lack of realization of socioeconomic rights,” offered one UN official involved in policy forums that discuss preventive steps.<sup>24</sup>

In addition, the two country case studies, in Colombia and in the DRC, highlighted what an important role ESCR-related components might play in conflict prevention and peacebuilding programming. In Colombia, in particular, there was already a greater infusion of ESCR themes in programming than is true in many other contexts. To help illustrate examples of where ESCR-related programming is manifesting, and what further contributions it might make, the subsequent two sections provide excerpts from these country case studies as they pertain to ESCR dimensions. This will be followed by broader analysis and reflections learned on ESCR and peacebuilding, drawn from these two case studies as well as other project analysis and interviews.

### **ESCR and peacebuilding in Colombia**

While the overall finding from the project analysis was that most of the PBF-supported projects did not prominently focus on ESCR, the projects examined in Colombia tell a different story. Compared to other country contexts considered in the Review, PBF-supported programming in Colombia already had a relatively strong nexus with ESCR, or at least with socioeconomic considerations that could be linked to these rights. More than half of the seven PBF-supported projects examined in the Colombia case study placed socioeconomic needs at the core of the project's design and theory of change – with elements like livelihood support or efforts to improve access to health care, education, land, and property positioned as integral to the peacebuilding effort in question.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, interviews with the project partners and recipients during field research in Colombia suggested these components were viewed as among the most valuable within the projects, with strong evidence of them contributing to the peace process and to other peacebuilding goals. The Colombia example thus provides a strong case study of what the dividends for peacebuilding might be if ESCR considerations were more strongly incorporated.

The reason for a stronger focus on ESCR in Colombia traces back at least in part to the nature of the peace process in Colombia and the emphasis on ESCR-related issues within the peace agreement signed in 2016 by the Government of Colombia and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC-EP). Unusually for a peace agreement, the 2016 agreement strongly incorporated human rights considerations and concerns, included those related to ESCR. A strong theme of the negotiations was the need to address root causes of the conflict, including inequality and lack of development and economic resources for rural populations. The final agreement's first chapter on "Integrated Rural Reform" posits a transformation of rural livelihoods and land reform. This includes provisions on

reducing gaps and inequity in education, health and public services, and economic reintegration of ex-combatants, victims and conflict-affected regions, as well as cultural and environmental concerns.<sup>26</sup>

The 2016 agreement has been the foundational framework guiding UN activities in the country since that time. It is therefore perhaps not surprising that the strategic documents that help guide peacebuilding and development activities in Colombia also reflect this focus on human rights as part of the peace and transition process, including ESCR. The Common Country Analysis (CCA), for example, is a planning and assessment tool mainstreamed in the UN System, which assesses challenges and opportunities for development, humanitarian support, peacebuilding and human rights. Although many of the CCAs examined for the Review had references to socioeconomic issues (poverty and development challenges), it was unusual for them to directly make the linkage with underlying gaps or deprivations in ESCR. The CCA for Colombia, by contrast, explicitly notes that "lack of access to economic, social, and cultural rights for these populations affects the exercise of their civil and political rights, creating conditions for the perpetuation of violence and maintaining barriers to the strengthening of the State in these areas".<sup>27</sup> In addition, it also explicitly references some of the recommendations for Colombia developed through the Universal Periodic Review – an important feedback and accountability mechanism, by which Member States evaluate each others' progress on meeting human rights benchmarks.<sup>28</sup>

As noted above, this appears to have trickled down into shaping the content of programming to be more inclusive of rights approaches, specifically of ESCR. In addition to the seven projects examined for the Review, interviews in Colombia suggested that a larger portion of the peacebuilding programming overall is rights-centric, with specific attention to socioeconomic needs, issues of economic equality, as well as other social and cultural rights (for example, those of Afro-Colombian and Indigenous communities). The seven projects examined ranged from supporting Colombia's Truth Commission, to several projects working on access to justice and the participation of marginalized or vulnerable groups,<sup>29</sup> and efforts to strengthen community protection mechanisms, given continued violence wrought by non-State armed groups (NSAGs). As is true with the larger transitional justice field, the work and findings of the Truth Commission were focused on political and civil rights – for example forced disappearances, violations of bodily integrity, recruitment of children, forced displacement and sexual violence. Nonetheless, there were efforts to address inequality and

other ESCR considerations in the outreach and follow-up to the Commission's final report. The stronger area of work for ESCR in Colombia lay in the the other two categories of projects, particularly the work with marginalized groups. Analysis of these projects suggested two key take-aways about how a greater focus on ESCR might enhance human rights and peacebuilding programming, as well as the overall peace and transition process.

First, implementing partners observed that **addressing socioeconomic rights can be a prerequisite to pursuing other human rights objectives, such as encouraging greater political participation.**<sup>30</sup> One of the projects examined sought to expand access to justice and worked with female victims of past violence (in particular sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV)) in the department of Vista Hermosa ([PBF/IRF-266](#)). It not only considered the transitional justice aspects of addressing past violations of physical integrity and political rights, but also paid due attention to how the project could contribute to the beneficiaries' ability to access education, health and sustainable livelihoods. The first stage focused on improving livelihood options for SGBV victims, particularly women, through provision of seed funding for entrepreneurship and job or skills training,<sup>31</sup> as well as other activities that enabled better access to health care and childcare. These activities were selected as a first step toward addressing SGBV following early consultations with the community, and also due to implementing partners' past experience working with the beneficiary population. The implementing partners found that without basic livelihood and family care needs met, women would not have the time or resources to participate in additional political or public engagement.<sup>32</sup> As one of the staff members working on the Vista Hermosa project observed, "It was hard [for the beneficiaries] to participate in politics without an income."<sup>33</sup> As such, attention to women's socioeconomic rights and needs became a way to advance political participation and leadership, and to enable victims to bring their cases to the transitional justice system.<sup>34</sup>

There were similar findings from another project examined ([PBF/IRF-400](#)), which sought to enable LGBTQI+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, intersex, asexual and more) people and Afro-Colombian and Indigenous women from conflict-affected regions to participate in the peace process and other peacebuilding efforts. The overall project was focused on expanding civic and political participation, as well as on supporting the overall capacity and strength of these advocacy networks. However, one of the ways that these larger goals were

achieved was through providing targeted livelihood assistance. An implementing civil society organization representative highlighted that this livelihood component was needed so that members of the very recently formed local LGBTQI+ non-governmental organizations (NGOs) were able to continually attend workshops. Since their NGO work and advocacy were on a voluntary basis and they worked other full-time jobs, livelihood assistance was a prerequisite to being able to "afford" capacity-building on political mobilization and advocacy. "It's hard to capacitate them on transitional justice or mental health and psychosocial support when they don't know where their next meal is coming from," one implementing partner explained.<sup>35</sup>

Beyond meeting basic financial and resource needs, those involved argued that encouraging awareness of ESCR also contributed to psychological empowerment, which then enabled beneficiaries to demand their rights. An example of this could be seen in the workshops provided in the Vista Hermosa project ([PBF/IRF-266](#)), which had a significant emphasis on socioeconomic rights issues: the workshops sponsored as part of this project attempted to raise participants' awareness of the significance of unpaid household labour, their sexual and reproductive rights and health, and, in some cases, their role as contributor to the household's income.<sup>36</sup> According to both the implementing partners and the independent evaluation, women who participated in these workshops left more economically and psychologically empowered.<sup>37</sup> This enabled them to contest discriminatory patterns in their relationships and take on leadership roles in their communities.<sup>38</sup> One implementing partner observed that this contributed to long-lasting impact: it created a "turning point in their [beneficiaries] lives. It changed their idea of what they were capable of doing."<sup>39</sup>

The second major dividend identified was that these **socioeconomic components and rights linkages could help sustain and advance the peace process.** Given the substantial attention to economic and social issues within the peace agreement in Colombia, promoting and advancing ESCR was seen as central to advancing the peace process and to neutralizing conflict drivers. Many of the PBF-supported projects emphasized the way that project components related to advancing socioeconomic conditions or rights helped realize the peace agreement's commitments – for example, to rural reform or improvement of social services and benefits. One implementing partner in the [Vista Hermosa project](#), for instance, observed that the beneficiaries only appeared to perceive the peace agreement as successful, and bringing something to their

lives, through the project's socioeconomic components. Through this, there was a realization, they said, that the peace process "not only provides amnesties and assistance to the demobilized perpetrators", but also brought opportunities for themselves.<sup>40</sup> Improved access to education, health and sustainable livelihoods among women in Vista Hermosa made the peace agreement's dividends demonstrable for the first time, increasing its perceived legitimacy.

Another project implemented in a conflict-prone area ([PBF/COL/B-1](#)) presented a slightly different rationale, but one that is equally important for understanding how a focus on economic rights or components can advance conflict prevention. It was focused on responding to threats to human rights defenders and to communities by NSAGs, addressing the conditions that led to the empowerment of these NSAGs. This included both extending and strengthening the reach of the State and also trying to encourage sustainable and legal livelihood options – the lack of which had enabled illicit activities and groups to thrive in targeted areas.<sup>41</sup> The project incorporated substantial development and sustainable livelihood activities, including vocational training, financial assistance to smallholder farmers and seed funding for small community cooperatives. These were portrayed as a way to

empower those communities both economically and politically, and a way to counter or negate some of the underlying economic drivers in conflict-affected areas.<sup>42</sup>

Overall, in Colombia, socioeconomic components were seen as advancing civil and political rights, countering sources of violence, reinforcing the Government, and giving legitimacy to the peace agreement. However, one outstanding issue for these types of activities is that there was not always a clear linkage between the socioeconomic components and either the peacebuilding or human rights goals being advanced. Some economic support activities within the projects examined, such as livelihood initiatives for community members, including former ex-combatants, were implemented separately from other peacebuilding components of the project, and also were not clearly identified as advancing socioeconomic *rights* (as opposed to simply providing economic benefits). While socioeconomic components can be crucial for advancing human rights and peacebuilding goals, it is important to make sure the linkages to the underlying rights issues are there and are clearly followed through in project implementation. Clearer articulation of this linkage might have made some of the above projects even more impactful, by improving their strategic design and identifying additional ways to take these themes forward in implementation.

### Key take-aways on ESCR in peacebuilding from the Colombia case study:

- Addressing gaps in ESCR helped realize the commitments of the 2016 peace agreement, increasing its legitimacy among affected populations.
- Socioeconomic support in conflict-affected communities also helped to reinforce the Government and address some of the economic drivers or root causes of conflict, thus contributing to conflict prevention.
- Advancement of ESCR can be a lynchpin for realizing other civil and political rights. To address exclusion or lack of participation of marginalized groups it may be necessary to address socioeconomic, psychological or cultural needs and gaps first.

### ESCR and peacebuilding in the DRC

Between 2017 and 2022, the PBF approved 22 projects in the DRC with a total budget of \$46,555,583.<sup>43</sup> The four projects in this study represent those with the strongest human rights focus from the DRC portfolio over this period of time.<sup>44</sup> Compared with Colombia, the focus on ESCR was less central in the projects examined in the DRC, a focus that was also in line with the broader strategic framework in the country.<sup>45</sup> While all four projects in the case study included socioeconomic components, these tended to be framed as a tool to build social cohesion and prevent conflict rather than to help realize socioeconomic rights

per se. Nonetheless, even though the project focus was not explicitly on ESCR, the findings illustrated how important greater ESCR considerations could be in advancing peacebuilding in the DRC.

Several of the projects examined were implemented in areas from which the long-standing peacekeeping mission, the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO), had recently transitioned.<sup>46</sup> Two of these – a pair of linked projects ([PBF/COD/C-1](#); [PBF/COD/B-7](#)) in the Kasais – sought to kickstart transitional justice mechanisms and

processes by taking a multidimensional approach, embedding efforts to start a subnational truth commission within a project that also helped address deficiencies in regular justice mechanisms, facilitate community dialogue and reconciliation and support some community development work. In the first of these projects, [PBF/COD/C-1](#) (which was implemented from 2018 to May 2021), support was provided to seven local NGOs to work on community infrastructure rehabilitation projects, providing both immediate short-term income opportunities and the potential for long-term economic recovery. The second project, [PBF/COD/B-7](#) (implemented from 2019 to 2023), extended the multidimensional transitional justice and reconciliation model to another region (Tanganyika) and also brought in additional components, including reintegration of ex-combatants and returnees. It also included support to local socioeconomic opportunities, but – in a reflection of lessons learned from the first project – attempted to make these more sustainable interventions by supporting projects that were more conducive to longer-term income generation.<sup>47</sup>

In both projects, supporting **activities that responded to socioeconomic needs was seen as an important part of advancing reconciliation and conflict transformation.** Activities related to infrastructure (road) rehabilitation and supporting income generation helped facilitate open dialogue and economic exchange between conflict-affected communities. This was seen as helping to advance social cohesion, providing a degree of stability and opening up the space for the transitional justice consultations to take effect. In the second follow-on project, the community-based socioeconomic components were also seen as facilitating a more harmonious return process, defusing tensions that might arise either among host communities or returnees.<sup>48</sup> The combination of attention to socioeconomic needs and concerns with overt discussion of issues in the past through a reconciliation approach was seen as enabling voluntary returns to unfold in a relatively peaceful way, which many interviewees said was surprising given the conflict history.<sup>49</sup>

Although socioeconomic components were very centrally connected to the theory of change underlying these projects, these components were not framed as ways to advance or address gaps in socioeconomic *rights*. To the extent that the projects focused on human rights and legal dimensions (for example within the legal reform and justice-related activities), the emphasis was on civil and political rights. The socioeconomic components were treated as quite distinct, more as adjacent development and social cohesion-related elements than a way to improve respect

for ESCR. While these socioeconomic components inarguably contributed to the project's success, the project might have been more cohesive and the effects more sustainable if these components had been connected with the broader justice and institutional support efforts. Reflecting back on the project results, these ESCR-related components should be understood not just as a financial incentive for community participation, but as a key element of the theory of change for conflict transformation and reconciliation.

The other two projects examined were quite different from those in the Kasais, in terms of the nature of their activities and context. One focused on gender equality and women's empowerment in a remote mining area of South Kivu, and the other focused on empowering young professionals to support peacebuilding and human rights awareness. Yet the two together offered additional insights into how ESCR can be key in supporting the empowerment and participation of marginalized or disadvantaged groups, in many ways in line with the findings of the Colombia case study.

The project [PBF/IRF-317](#) (implemented between 2019 and 2021) focused on promoting and increasing the protection of women and girls working in the informal artisanal mining sector. It aimed to counter women's marginalization and their physical and economic insecurity, while also increasing their participation in local dialogues and mechanisms for natural resource management. It was the first project implemented in the remote Shabunda Territory of Kigulube and the first of its kind to address gender-based violence (GBV) in that area.<sup>50</sup> With its focus on women's economic opportunities and rights, it was arguably the most closely linked to ESCR of all the projects examined in the DRC. Nonetheless, this was not articulated as a project related to ESCR in the project documents. This helps illustrate the point raised earlier that many peacebuilding projects may have a nexus with ESCR but do not clearly identify it as such.

Project activities included working with women's associations, victims of GBV, the police, mining agents and local cooperatives to raise awareness and promote respect for human rights, gender equality and GBV laws. The aim was to enhance community security measures through reforms intended to prevent future GBV violations. Although some components of the project were more focused on women's protection from bodily harm (specifically SGBV) and associated civil and political rights, there was equal consideration given to improving women's working conditions and economic prospects. These components delivered some immediate dividends for the women

beneficiaries, with reports of higher salaries being provided to women by the conclusion of the project.<sup>51</sup> According to an independent evaluation of the project this “opened doors for women’s autonomy within society, specifically their ability to undertake economic activities in the project areas, including mining areas”.<sup>52</sup> **This attention to women’s economic conditions also appeared to be a key element contributing to an “undeniable” and significant shift in the perceived role of women in the community (particularly among miners).**<sup>53</sup> Greater emphasis on the rights linkages underlying these socioeconomic gains might have made this an even more powerful project.

The final project considered in the DRC, [PBF/IRF-405](#), sought to enable young people, including specifically young lawyers, to act as change agents promoting human rights and peace awareness. Activities included socioeconomic and professional training for 300 young people, as well as support to some beneficiaries on income-generating activities and savings plans. In addition, there was a human rights training for young lawyers. The young lawyers were then to use this increased knowledge to sensitize community leaders and members, including customary chiefs and their female family members, on human rights, transitional justice, GBV, child marriage, women’s rights and land rights. While the project did include some support for socioeconomic activities, they were considered to be too limited and poorly adapted to local needs to sufficiently benefit the youth community in a province facing widespread unemployment.<sup>54</sup> The sensitization efforts with young lawyers, meanwhile, were described as a component with significant potential, but which was unlikely to realize the intended objectives. The young lawyers in question were already so overstretched given the size of the territory they covered and their limited numbers, that it was difficult for them to fully deliver upon the sensitization role envisioned.<sup>55</sup> Some of the human rights training delivered within the context of the project included topics related to ESCR (for example, land rights). Nonetheless, as with the larger field, the focus was largely on awareness of civil and political rights.

The findings from this fourth project illustrate the larger gap on ESCR seen within the projects in the larger Thematic Review sample. **While some indeed seemed to recognize important gaps in socioeconomic needs, the activities related to addressing these needs tended to be siloed from the larger human rights and peacebuilding objectives.** Although gaps in ESCR protection were clearly an issue, responding to these issues was not visible or strongly articulated within the project theory of change. Additionally, this project – as with many others focused on youth empowerment – clearly recognized that socioeconomic issues may be a barrier for youth. However, the projects’ socioeconomic components were not sufficient to enable youth to play the catalysing role intended, even for example, with the more successful component of the young lawyers’ human rights training.

Overall the examination of these four projects within the DRC indicates an important potential role for ESCR in peacebuilding. In all of the communities where projects were implemented, issues of under-development, poverty, limited services and limited livelihood options contributed both to conflict drivers and the fragility of any peace achieved. Attention to these issues, many of which accorded with gaps in the realization of ESCR, were often the sort of interventions that communities saw as most critical to addressing the risks and vulnerabilities that their communities faced. Activities related to these socioeconomic issues also appeared to have a catalysing effect. As in the example of the two multidimensional transitional justice projects, they helped to open the space for other peacebuilding and human rights objectives.

These project examples suggest that focusing on socioeconomic needs can indeed provide important leverage for peacebuilding goals – ranging from addressing gender inequality to supporting youth empowerment as peacebuilders and enabling reconciliation and justice transitions to take hold. However, there is still a need for greater attention to how socioeconomic components contribute to the realization of ESCR within the field.

### **Key take-aways on ESCR in peacebuilding from the DRC case study:**

- Combining transitional justice activities with those that addressed community socioeconomic needs helped to open the space for transitional justice and community reconciliation that would be necessary for conflict transformation.
- Attention to women’s socioeconomic protections and rights as workers helped shift the perceived role of women in the community, and facilitated economic opportunities that helped them participate in other areas of community decision-making.
- Lack of consideration for the socioeconomic needs and gaps in ESCR that were affecting young people limited efforts to position youth as champions for peacebuilding and human rights in their communities.



## Analysis and conclusions

In addition to the two case study findings, the analysis of the other projects in the sample, as well as interviews with practitioners and experts in the field, highlighted important lessons about the way that ESCR interacts with other peacebuilding and conflict prevention objectives. Three key insights stood out, two related to the strengths and opportunities within ESCR-related programming, and one related to current gaps and deficits observed.

### 1. ESCR as a lynchpin for advancing other civil and political rights

The findings suggest that helping to realize ESCR can be a lynchpin for advancing other civil and political rights. This was well illustrated by the project examples from the Colombia case study. In projects aimed at encouraging the inclusion and participation of women, minorities and other marginalized groups in Colombia (for example, the women in Vista Hermosa ([PBF/IRF-266](#)), LGBTQI+ and Afro-indigenous persons ([PBF/IRF-400](#)) or youth and women in conflict-affected communities ([PBF/IRF-401](#))), beneficiaries expressed that a key hurdle to further civil and political advancement was their inability to meet needs associated with their ESCR.

There were similar findings across the other projects related to gender empowerment and advancing women's equality, as well as some of those related to addressing the marginalization of minority communities or focused on youth empowerment. While the stated objectives for these projects often focused on empowerment or protection of civil and political rights, the strategies deployed frequently gave attention to lack of fulfillment of ESCR or unequal ability to access those rights as a precursor step. As the project document for one project in the Central African Republic (CAR) stated, **“Gender inequalities in the economic sphere have a significant influence on women’s ability to participate in social and community life. If they cannot meet their basic needs or those of their families, it is difficult for them to get involved individually or collectively through their association or local group for the promotion and protection of their rights.”**<sup>56</sup> One civil society representative who worked with a network of women peacebuilders said that economic empowerment is always one of the top three priorities or needs they will engage with, and offered examples of this from countries as diverse as Sierra Leone, the DRC and Timor-Leste.<sup>57</sup> She offered that while socioeconomic rights do not always get the most attention in high-level political discussions and advocacy, they are invariably “in the front in terms of what’s impacting women”.<sup>58</sup>

The linkage was not only that economic needs must be met before participation can happen but that helping women to realize ESCR could shift power dynamics in ways that allowed women to demand and protect other civil and political rights. One gender expert characterized the linkage between ESCR (particularly economic rights) and ability to participate or realize other civil and political rights as follows: “The more that women economically contribute to the household, the more power they have, the more they can negotiate. That economic status allows them to then gain leverage to then participate in other issues.”<sup>59</sup>

For this reason, experts and practitioners saw a link not only between economic and political participation but also saw an enabling role for ESCR when it came to bodily integrity rights. For example, one advisor with UN Women who worked on some of these peacebuilding initiatives observed that countering GBV went hand-in-hand with realizing ESCR. Among their beneficiaries, she said, “women stressed that economic rights went alongside the political ones.”<sup>60</sup> The first step to addressing and preventing sexual violence could well be not only education and awareness raising, or other physical protection and enforcement measures, she offered, but also things that empowered women economically, such as supporting women’s entrepreneurship. A similar perspective was shared by a practitioner who worked with women peacebuilders and victims groups globally: she said that programming support on things like enabling women to start a business, to take out a loan in their name, or pursue education had an enabling effect beyond simply meeting economic needs. “Women said it’s much more than putting food on table – it also equates to their own personal security. They said they’d be less vulnerable.”<sup>61</sup> The DRC project discussed above in the Shabunda mining community provided a concrete example of this: the focus on women miners’ economic rights and contributions seemed to contribute to shifts in gender norms in the community and to be a stronger step toward preventing GBV than focusing on violence alone.

Those working on the empowerment of minorities or marginalized groups in certain contexts also observed that addressing ESCR could be a prerequisite to advancing other rights. For example, in some of the other projects in Latin America, strategies that attempted to counter the marginalization and inequality of Indigenous communities were as focused on issues related to realization of ESCR – access to land, resources and other economic needs, as well as respect for their social and cultural traditions – as they were to civil and political rights. One practitioner interviewed said that when working on a project that involves minorities or other disadvantaged groups,

peacebuilding strategies will often try to incorporate project activities related to agriculture or livelihoods, advancing healthcare access or food security.<sup>62</sup> This was viewed as both addressing access issues (and lack of full realization of ESCR for those minorities), while also getting to the root causes or drivers of migration, violence, dissatisfaction with or grievances against the Government, or other issues that the peacebuilding project sought to counter. **A colleague taking part in the same interview concurred, adding that “peacebuilding is not just about dialogue and awareness, but also empowering people to bring food to their table and working with communities on the right to property, the right to work”.**<sup>63</sup>

There was also an important interactive effect between ESCR and efforts to protect and strengthen civic space. While some practitioners frame civic space more as an expression of civil and political rights – for example, linking it with rights to freedom of expression, assembly and political participation – others noted that protecting civic space should be viewed as protecting and encouraging citizen engagement and participation on all fronts, including their ability to demand realization of ESCR.<sup>64</sup> Experts also observed that in some cases, shrinking civic space may be as much due to curtailment of ESCR – for example, reducing services or equal access to housing, healthcare or to education – which then generates barriers to other types of civic and political participation.

## **2. ESCR realization advancing peacebuilding and conflict prevention**

The overall remit of the 2024 Thematic Review was to consider synergies between human rights and peacebuilding, and how the tools, strategies and capacities associated with these two fields may be complementary and mutually reinforcing. Within this larger inquiry, ESCR stood out as among the most promising areas of work at the intersection of human rights and peacebuilding.

One reason that ESCR appeared to be such a potent avenue for peacebuilding was because of its strong alignment with root causes in many contexts. Across the research, project documents and implementing partners identified ways that gaps in realization of ESCR contributed to drivers of conflict. One project in Sudan ([PBF/SDN-B-3](#)) framed housing, land and property issues in West Darfur and denial of “the right to adequate housing” for internally displaced persons (IDPs) as a key driver of intercommunal violence and an inhibitor of peace in Sudan. Other projects examined ([PBF/IRF-383](#); [PBF/IRF-317](#)) identified the right to a healthy environment and safe working conditions as contributors to root causes and/or issues that were obstructing parts of the

community from becoming productive peacebuilders. One project in Guatemala ([PBF/IRF-169](#)) sought to address a long-standing source of land conflicts and tensions by focusing on human rights violations or gaps in protection – the majority of which related to ESCR of Indigenous communities – and how they linked to the root causes of the conflict. Those working on the project argued that there had been past attempts to address this issue through other forms of peacebuilding dialogue or development approaches, but this new approach – viewing the issue from the perspective of ESCR violations and the gaps at issue – was somehow able to gain more traction and open up a more productive peacebuilding dialogue between the Government and affected communities.

In the programming examined in Colombia, the strong attention to ESCR was also due to the view that these rights were linked to conflict drivers. ESCR-related issues like inequality, rural land reform and the inclusion of women and minority groups were given substantial programming attention because of the benchmarks built into the 2016 agreement with the FARC-EP; however, these issues were embedded in the agreement because they were viewed as underlying causes of the conflict. This meant that realizing ESCR, particularly for rural and disadvantaged communities, as well as for women and other minority groups, had a two-fold impact for peacebuilding and conflict prevention. First, and most immediately, by helping to deliver on the 2016 peace agreement, attention to these ESCR issues reinforced the legitimacy of the peace process and the credibility of the Government to deliver on its commitments. In addition, it was taking steps toward long-term conflict prevention by addressing root causes of the conflict.

Related to the root causes issue, another important attribute of ESCR-related peacebuilding is that it may be a way to combine a rights-centred approach with attention to larger political-economy dynamics. In recent years, there have been increasing calls for peace interventions (whether peace operations or broader peacebuilding) to give greater heed to political-economy dynamics given that these can be a structural driver of conflict.<sup>65</sup> This was also visible in several of the projects in the Colombia case study. In many of the conflict-affected communities in Colombia, political-economy dynamics surrounding narcotics trafficking or other illicit goods continue to drive sources of violence by empowering criminal actors and NSAGs. Thus, by giving attention to Government service provision, alternative livelihoods and other ESCR-linked issues in these conflict-affected communities, some of the projects (e.g., [PBF/COL/B-1](#); [PBF/IRF-401](#)) tried to partly disrupt these conflict economies and give communities options for pursuing peace.

Whether it is because they align with root causes and structural drivers of conflict, or simply because ESCR often invoke bread-and-butter issues like livelihood opportunities, healthcare or access to education, ESCR-related peacebuilding efforts are often received positively by communities or target groups because they appear to offer tangible benefits. The reactions to the activities in the Colombia projects examined provided a strong example of this. Beneficiaries said that projects that helped to address gaps in service provision and economic opportunities provided them with the first concrete examples they had seen of “peace dividends”. It shifted their notion that the peace process was just benefiting the Government or ex-combatants, to something that could lead to improvements in their lives.

A final important characteristic of ESCR-related programming is that it appeared to be a way to open up space for community dialogue and for subsequent steps toward peacebuilding and social cohesion. The two, linked transitional justice projects in the Kasai region of the DRC ([PBF/COD/C-1](#); [PBF/COD/B-7](#)) offer an example of this. Within these projects, consideration for the community’s economic vulnerability and socioeconomic needs was attributed with creating the necessary space for conversations about transitional justice and reconciliation. It both created a positive peacebuilding momentum – something that could engender cooperation and further exchange and dialogue – and also partially responded to factors that could otherwise contribute to competition and community tension going forward. This was viewed as particularly important in enabling the reintegration and resettlement of ex-combatants and returnees, which was an additional component in the project [PBF/COD/B-7](#). Economic competition can often be a point of tension between host communities and returning or incoming migrant communities, and also a critical consideration in community reintegration and acceptance of former combatants.

### **3. Lack of linkage between socioeconomic components and socioeconomic rights, and with peacebuilding dividends**

While there were ample examples of ways that peacebuilding programming is contributing to the realization of ESCR, this was rarely the objective. As noted, it was rare to see any explicit mention of ESCR within the project documents. That project activities responding to socioeconomic needs or gaps could also advance the realization of fundamental rights – those protected in the covenants, treaties and customary law related to ESCR – was a connection that most project documents did not

make. Where project components did contribute to the realization of ESCR, it appeared to be an unanticipated benefit, rather than something intended in the project design.

Even further, although this research has identified a number of ways that attention to ESCR can advance peacebuilding and conflict prevention, this linkage was often not fully articulated in project documents or in the project design, and sometimes did not appear to be purposefully intended at all. In many of the projects, socioeconomic components appeared to be included because they could encourage participation in the programming or win Government authorities’ support for the project. They were treated as immediate short-term incentives to allow the programming to go forward, essentially carrots to induce participation and buy-in, rather than as critical parts of the theory of change, and elements that could help galvanize conflict transformation.

Greater recognition of these linkages could result in more impactful programming, both in terms of rights advancement and in terms of peacebuilding goals. As a starting point, just making these connections could enhance programme design and ensure that project components are synched together and implemented in a way that could fully leverage the potential catalytic effects of ESCR components. In the projects examined in the Colombia and DRC case studies, these components were often implemented separately and quite independently from other peacebuilding components, somewhat limiting their ability to enhance other project components.

The tendency not to connect these projects up with rights advancement might also have limited one of the ways that they might contribute to conflict transformation. As noted above, gaps in the realization of ESCR have frequently been linked to root causes of conflict. **A socioeconomic component that offers some individual livelihood or community economic benefits might address some of those issues, but if not designed to address the underlying ESCR gap in question, it might end up being a short-term economic input rather than contributing to the sort of structural change that could actually address an underlying driver of conflict.** This issue of the sustainability of interventions is certainly an issue, regardless of whether the rights-connections are made or not. Nonetheless, thinking about the immediate and long-term ESCR implications may help in developing strategies that would lead to more durable interventions, more closely focused on the underlying issues likely to drive grievances and tensions.

There are also more practical or process-related issues – those related to methodologies or steps that tend to lead to good programme design and to funding – that would be improved by greater understanding and articulation of these linkages. One of the central findings of the 2024 Thematic Review was that strong and well integrated human rights and peacebuilding projects tend to result where there is sufficient human rights capacities or resources backstopping project development and implementation.<sup>66</sup> In some cases, this was because the UN entity or implementing partner in question had invested in developing internal human rights expertise, such that personnel were available to review the project design and offer suggestions about ways to advance rights protections or take into account human rights risks. In others, the implementing partners in question reached back to other parts of the system – for example, human rights specialists within OHCHR, or Human Rights Advisors within the country in question (as applicable) – for feedback and support in enhancing rights elements or considerations.

However, this feedback loop and reservoir of human rights expertise appeared less likely to be brought to bear in projects related to ESCR. As noted in the background section, projects that were centered around land, natural resources or other economic and development activities were often not viewed as human rights-related projects. This meant that unlike peacebuilding projects that were immediately understood to be human rights-related (for example, a transitional justice or one enhancing laws related to freedom of expression or assembly), ESCR-related projects were often not shared with human rights experts or staff members for feedback in the early developmental or review stages.<sup>67</sup>

Lack of articulation of these human rights or peacebuilding connections might also create limitations on funding. Practitioners observed that there can be a certain reluctance for peacebuilding funds (like those provided by the PBF) to be used for socioeconomic components, because they are viewed as in the realm of “development” funding. Some of the Peace and Development Advisors and other implementing partner staff interviewed suggested that the PBSO sometimes raises questions (and seems inclined not to fund) components that resemble development activities, which are perceived as being the mandate of other donors.

Civil society representatives also observed some hesitancy to fund certain socioeconomic components within the donor landscape more broadly. One civil society advocate who worked with networks of women peacebuilders said there was a perception that there was greater political support, and potentially funding, for women’s empowerment related to civil and political rights.<sup>68</sup>

Broader recognition and understanding of the links between ESCR in peacebuilding would be an important step for addressing donor hesitancy in this field. However, to achieve this it is also incumbent on those developing these projects to better articulate both the connection to rights advancement and the peacebuilding dividends within any project design or proposal.

## Conclusions and next steps

Overall the findings in the Thematic Review suggest that work related to socioeconomic rights holds tremendous promise in terms of advancing human rights and peacebuilding. The case studies provided examples of ways that ESCR can be an enabler for addressing other civil and political rights, for protecting or strengthening civic space, while also acting as a catalyst for other peacebuilding initiatives. Given the strong alignment between ESCR and root causes and immediate drivers of conflict in many countries, attention to ESCR holds strong promise in contributing to early warning and preventive action, and can be an important safeguard for sustaining peace. Greater attention to ESCR may also align with calls for UN peace operations and special political missions (as well as those of other partners) to incorporate more of a political-economy perspective into their strategies and operations. However, an outstanding deficit in the field is the failure to recognize these linkages, and to fully articulate both how socioeconomic components or issues align with fundamental rights, as well as how these might advance peacebuilding objectives.

The Thematic Review suggested a number of steps to better address these issues, with an important emphasis on further learning and innovation in this field. Although the Thematic Review was focused on the PBF, some of the recommendations also apply to other donor funds and activities in this space.

## Recommendations

- Given the overall gap in theorization between ESCR and peacebuilding, UN entities and other partners working in this space should look to explore linkages between ESCR and peacebuilding; this might be through community of practice discussions, supporting specific learning tools and studies (e.g., thematic reviews, or learning components built into project design) or funding exploratory programming to test promising methodologies in different environments and peacebuilding situations.
- Given the evidence that attention to ESCR can be a prerequisite to advancing other rights, those working on rights empowerment and advancement for disadvantaged groups may want to pay more concerted attention to these linkages, and build them into programming design; donors in this space should not only encourage such programming approaches (rather than being reticent to fund socioeconomic components) but may also want to consider specific funding mechanisms or modalities that give greater attention to ESCR issues.
- Within organizations or UN entities that work in the human rights and peacebuilding space, there should be

a greater emphasis on identifying synergies and linkages across *all* human rights areas. Breaking down silos between human rights and other sectors of peacebuilding work should go hand-in-hand with greater recognition of ESCR-related themes within existing peacebuilding work.

- To encourage better understanding of PBF investments and to support trend identification and learning, the PBSO should consider tracking projects that advance ESCR as a human rights-related component.
- Programming in the human rights and peacebuilding field has increasingly looked to ways that human rights monitoring and analysis can contribute to early warning and preventive action. The findings suggest that it will be important that these early warning systems — still an emerging area of practice — are set up with a view to also capturing ESCR-related indicators.
- Those working in international peacebuilding and prevention forums (such as the Peacebuilding Commission) or working on the development of national prevention strategies should ensure that sufficient attention is devoted to ESCR, both as early warning signs and as generating avenues for conflict prevention.<sup>69</sup>

# Endnotes

- 1 Erica Gaston, Fiona Mangan, Cristal Downing, Raphael Bodewig, Lauren McGowan, Emma Bap, and Adam Day, *2024 PBF Thematic Review: Synergies between Human Rights and Peacebuilding in PBF-supported Programming* (New York, United Nations University, 2024). Accessible at: [https://collections.unu.edu/eserv/UNU:9658/thematic\\_review\\_human\\_rights\\_peacebuilding.pdf](https://collections.unu.edu/eserv/UNU:9658/thematic_review_human_rights_peacebuilding.pdf).
- 2 In order to regularize the practice of consolidating learning and knowledge, the PBF committed to commissioning up to two Thematic Reviews a year in its 2020–2024 Strategy. The most recent Thematic Reviews examined the projects supported by the PBF related to climate-security and environmental peacebuilding (2023), local peacebuilding (2022), gender-responsive peacebuilding (2021), and transitional justice (2020). See: Secretary-General’s Peacebuilding Fund, “2020–2024 Strategy,” *Peacebuilding Fund*, March 2020, [https://www.un.org/peacebuilding/sites/www.un.org.peacebuilding/files/documents/pbf\\_strategy\\_2020-2024\\_final.pdf](https://www.un.org/peacebuilding/sites/www.un.org.peacebuilding/files/documents/pbf_strategy_2020-2024_final.pdf).
- 3 Katharine G. Young and Amartya Sen, eds., *The Future of Economic and Social Rights* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2019), p. 1; Amanda Cahill-Ripley and Diane Henrick, “Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and Sustaining Peace: An introduction,” *Project Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and Sustaining Peace* (Geneva, QUNO, Lancaster University, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2018). Accessible at: <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/genf/14400.pdf>.
- 4 Erica Gaston et al., *2024 PBF Thematic Review*.
- 5 For further discussion and definitions, see: “Economic, social and cultural rights,” *United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights*, last accessed 20 November 2023, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/human-rights/economic-social-cultural-rights>.
- 6 International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), UNTS 993, p.3, entered into force 3 January 1976. Additional treaties or conventions that codified or created obligations with regard to ESCR include: UN Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989, UNTS 1577, p.3. Entry into force 2 September 1990; Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women 1979, UNTS 1249, p.13. Entry into force 3 September 1981; Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2006, UNTS 2515, p.3. Entry into force 3 May 2008.
- 7 A full scope of this multi-decade debate is beyond the scope of this policy paper. For some examples of this discussion, see Ruth Gavison, “On the relationships between civil and political rights, and social and economic rights,” *The Globalization of Human Rights*, Jean Marc Coicaud et al., eds. (Tokyo, United Nations University, 2003); Young and Sen, *The Future of Economic and Social Rights*; Rotem Litinski, “Economic Rights: Are They Justiciable, and Should They Be?” *Human Rights Magazine* vol. 44 No. 3 (2019); Michael J. Dennis and David P. Stewart, “Justiciability of Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights: Should There be an International Complaints Mechanism to Adjudicate The Rights to Food, Water, Housing, and Health?” *Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*, Manisuli Ssenyonjo, ed. (London, Routledge, 2017); Philip Alston, “Out of the Abyss: The Challenges Confronting the New UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights,” *Human Rights Quarterly* vol. 9, No. 3 (1987).
- 8 For examples of some of the viewpoints within this debate, see Young and Sen, *The Future of Economic and Social Rights*; Ignacio Saiz, “The Universal Periodic Review and economic, social and cultural rights: A skewed agenda?” *International Service for Human Rights*, 20 May 2016, <https://ishr.ch/latest-updates/universal-periodic-review-and-economic-social-and-cultural-rights-skewed-agenda/>; Daniel J. Whelan and Jack Donnelly, “The West, Economic and Social Rights, and the Global Human Rights Regime: Setting the Record Straight,” *Human Rights Quarterly* vol. 29, No. 4 (2007); Susan L. Kang, “The Unsettled Relationship of Economic and Social Rights and the West: A Response to Whelan and Donnelly,” *Human Rights Quarterly* vol. 31, No. 4 (2009); Alex Kirkup and Tony Evans, “The Myth of Western Opposition to Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights? A Reply to Whelan and Donnelly,” *Human Rights Quarterly* vol. 31, No. 1 (2009).
- 9 Stina Höglbladh, “Peace agreements 1975–2011 – Updating the UCDP Peace Agreement dataset,” *Uppsala Conflict Data Program* (Uppsala, 2012).
- 10 Report of the Secretary-General on the question of the realization in all countries of economic, social and cultural rights, [A/HRC/4/62](https://www.unhcr.org/refugees/4/62) (2007), para. 2. For further discussion of uneven support for ESCR in peacebuilding, see Amanda Cahill-Ripley, “Foregrounding Socio-Economic Rights in Transitional Justice: Realising Justice For Violations Of Economic And Social Rights,” *Netherlands Quarterly of Human Rights* vol. 32, No. 2 (2014).
- 11 This point was raised by experts interviewed for the Thematic Review, and was also generally reflected in the programming examined. In addition, an interesting barometer for how much attention is accorded to civil and political rights versus ESCR in these contexts is to examine the commitments and recommendations made through the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) process. One study that examined the whole of UPR recommendations (not limited to countries undergoing post-conflict transition periods), found that fewer than one in five UPR recommendations focused on ESCR. See: Ignacio Saiz, “The Universal Period Review and economic, social, and cultural rights.”
- 12 Amanda Cahill-Ripley, “Foregrounding Socio-Economic Rights in Transitional Justice: Realising Justice For Violations Of Economic And Social Rights,” p. 184. For additional discussion of the greater focus on civil and political rights, but some growing examples of transitional justice mechanisms incorporating attention to ESCR, see [A/HRC/4/62](https://www.unhcr.org/refugees/4/62), paras. 35–39; Louise Arbour, “Economic and social justice for societies in transition,” *NYU Journal of International Law and Politics* vol. 40 (2007).
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 The source for the descriptive titles of these categories is taken from internal PBF tracking matrices. The PBF conceptualization of each of these categories may differ from that of other implementing agencies or partners.
- 15 Within the research team’s internal coding of the 92 projects, some 32 projects had components that had a strong nexus with socioeconomic issues, including aspects focused on livelihoods, land rights, health or education access or provision, or other social or cultural issues. As noted inline, these were rarely framed explicitly as rights issues, but could be connected to rights established under various ESCR covenants, treaties and customary law. The projects that most commonly had these elements were those within the PBSO-designated category for “protection of human rights defenders (HRDs) and victims of human rights violations” and also projects that were focused on the inclusion of previously marginalized groups (i.e. on the basis of gender, age, or minority status).
- 16 See Erica Gaston, Oliver Brown, with Nadwa al-Dawsari, Cristal Downing, Adam Day, and Raphael Bodewig, *Thematic Review on Climate-Security and Peacebuilding* (New York, United Nations University, 2023). Accessible at: [https://www.un.org/peacebuilding/sites/www.un.org.peacebuilding/files/documents/climate\\_security\\_tr\\_web\\_final\\_april10.pdf](https://www.un.org/peacebuilding/sites/www.un.org.peacebuilding/files/documents/climate_security_tr_web_final_april10.pdf). To assess whether omission of ESCR was leading to certain projects related to human rights and peacebuilding not being tracked as such, the research team also examined other PBF-supported work beyond the human rights and peacebuilding sample, including both other projects supported in the last five years in Colombia and the DRC (the two country case studies), and those

- in the prior Thematic Review on Climate-Security. The results suggested that there were a number of projects dealing with rights surrounding land, property and equitable access to resources which were not tagged as “rights-related” projects by PBSO’s current methodology. See, for example, projects [PBF/LBR/H-3](#) and [PBF/IRF-230](#) (both in Liberia), [PBF/IRF-151-152](#) (Kenya and Somalia), [PBF/IRF-257](#) (South Sudan) and [PBF/IRF-253](#) (Sierra Leone). This led to the conclusion that not tracking ESCR-related work likely leads to a significant underestimation of PBSO’s investment in human rights-related work.
- 17 Gaston et al., *Thematic Review on Synergies between Human Rights and Peacebuilding*, pp. 18-19.
- 18 Projects with a focus on land rights included [PBF/IRF-169](#) (Guatemala); [PBF/SDN/B-3](#) (Sudan); and [PBF/SSD/B-2](#) (South Sudan).
- 19 Of the 92-project sample analysed in the Thematic Review on Human Rights and Peacebuilding, 14 projects (15 per cent) were centrally focused on transitional justice initiatives, while another eight had at least one significant transitional justice. Of these, only two of the transitional justice mechanisms in question – one related to reparations following a transitional justice case in Guatemala ([PBF/IRF-169](#)), and some aspects of the Truth Commission in Colombia (supported by [PBF/COL/C-1](#); [PBF/COL/A-3](#); [PBF/COL/A-5](#)) – had strong themes related to ESCR. A two-project initiative ([PBF/COD/C-1](#); [PBF/COD/B-7](#)) supporting the establishment of subnational truth commissions in the DRC also incorporated support to community socioeconomic development in other activities of the project, but these were not as central as atonement for past bodily harm and civil and political rights within the truth commissions themselves. For further discussion of transitional justice programming supported by the PBF, see Erica Gaston et al, *2024 PBF Thematic Review*, p. 18; Salif Nimaga and Kyusun Rose Chung, *Thematic Review of PBF-supported projects on Transitional Justice* (New York City, Secretary General’s Peacebuilding Fund, 2020). Accessible at: [https://www.un.org/peacebuilding/sites/www.un.org/peacebuilding/files/documents/thematic\\_review.pdf](https://www.un.org/peacebuilding/sites/www.un.org/peacebuilding/files/documents/thematic_review.pdf).
- 20 Although this was the overall trend, there were some projects that stood out for a greater focus on women’s ESCR, both in the project design and implementation, for example a project in the DRC that focused significantly on working conditions for women and girls ([PBF/IRF-317](#)). Further examples are discussed within this brief. Overall, 22 of the 92 projects had a central or very strong focus on gender dimensions; another 18 had at least a component or sub-theme related to gender. For a brief discussion of these projects in the Thematic Review see Erica Gaston et al, *2024 PBF Thematic Review*, p. 19. There was a similar political inclusion focus in the 14 projects strongly or centrally focused on youth empowerment, although the youth empowerment projects did focus on socio-economic inclusion to a slightly greater degree. For more see Gaston et al, *2024 PBF Thematic Review*, p. 19.
- 21 Interview with UN agency staff, MS Teams, 9 May 2023 (Interview #46).
- 22 Interview with OHCHR staff member, Microsoft Teams, 15 May 2023 (Interview #51).
- 23 Interview with three practitioners on rule of law and conflict prevention work, New York, 24 April 2023 (Interview #38).
- 24 Interview with UN headquarters staff member, Microsoft Teams, 5 May 2023 (Interview #42).
- 25 The full Colombia case study and discussion of these seven projects is available in Erica Gaston et al, *2024 PBF Thematic Review*, pp. 24-35.
- 26 “Punto 1 del Acuerdo final para la terminación del conflicto y la construcción de una paz estable y duradera: Hacia un Nuevo Campo Colombiano: Reforma Rural Integral,” Acuerdo final para la terminación del conflicto y la construcción de una paz estable y duradera, Justicia especial para la paz, 12 December 2016, [https://www.jep.gov.co/Marco%20Normativo/Normativa\\_v2/01%20ACUERDOS/Texto-Nuevo-Acuerdo-Final.pdf?csf=1&e=0fpYA0](https://www.jep.gov.co/Marco%20Normativo/Normativa_v2/01%20ACUERDOS/Texto-Nuevo-Acuerdo-Final.pdf?csf=1&e=0fpYA0).
- 27 See: United Nations, “Common country analysis: Colombia 2019,” p. 48. Accessible at: [https://minio.uninfo.org/uninfo-production-main/60cafec3-829f-4157-8625-15346bc110af\\_CCA-Colombia-2019\(1\).pdf](https://minio.uninfo.org/uninfo-production-main/60cafec3-829f-4157-8625-15346bc110af_CCA-Colombia-2019(1).pdf).
- 28 Ibid.
- 29 This included women, LGBTQI+ communities, as well as rural, Indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities. Interviews suggested that these were priorities mainstreamed across UN work.
- 30 Interview with UN official, Bogotá, 27 January 2023 (Interview #87).
- 31 This component was expanded to offer seed financing for the women who participated due to COVID-related economic hardship during the project’s implementation. Mariangela Villamil Cancino “Informe de evaluación cualitativa final del proyecto ‘modelo territorial de garantías de no repetición y de empoderamiento de mujeres y jóvenes para su acceso efectivo al SIVJRN’,” 20 December 2020, [https://www.un.org/peacebuilding/sites/www.un.org/peacebuilding/files/documents/pbf\\_irf-266\\_informe\\_final\\_evaluaci\\_n\\_proyecto\\_gypi.pdf](https://www.un.org/peacebuilding/sites/www.un.org/peacebuilding/files/documents/pbf_irf-266_informe_final_evaluaci_n_proyecto_gypi.pdf), p. 47.
- 32 For example, among other activities, the women’s groups collaborated to ensure that they would share childcare burdens with others in the group at certain periods, in ways that would enable other beneficiaries to take part in the other political engagement envisioned as part of the project. Ibid, p. 54.
- 33 Interview with UN official, Bogotá, 27 January 2023 (Interview #87).
- 34 Mariangela Villamil Cancino “Informe de evaluación cualitativa final del proyecto ‘modelo territorial de garantías de no repetición y de empoderamiento de mujeres y jóvenes para su acceso efectivo al SIVJRN’,” 20 December 2020, [https://www.un.org/peacebuilding/sites/www.un.org/peacebuilding/files/documents/pbf\\_irf-266\\_informe\\_final\\_evaluaci\\_n\\_proyecto\\_gypi.pdf](https://www.un.org/peacebuilding/sites/www.un.org/peacebuilding/files/documents/pbf_irf-266_informe_final_evaluaci_n_proyecto_gypi.pdf), p. 43; Interview with a representative of an implementing entity, Bogotá, 26 January 2023 (Interview #85); interview with UN official, 27 January 2023 (Interview #87).
- 35 Interview with a representative of an implementing entity, Bogotá, 26 January 2023 (Interview #12).
- 36 Mariangela Villamil Cancino “Informe de evaluación cualitativa final del proyecto ‘modelo territorial de garantías de no repetición y de empoderamiento de mujeres y jóvenes para su acceso efectivo al SIVJRN’,” 20 December 2020, [https://www.un.org/peacebuilding/sites/www.un.org/peacebuilding/files/documents/pbf\\_irf-266\\_informe\\_final\\_evaluaci\\_n\\_proyecto\\_gypi.pdf](https://www.un.org/peacebuilding/sites/www.un.org/peacebuilding/files/documents/pbf_irf-266_informe_final_evaluaci_n_proyecto_gypi.pdf), p. 4.
- 37 Ibid., p. 44.
- 38 Ibid.
- 39 Interview with a representative of an implementing entity, 30 January 2023 (Interview #93).
- 40 Interview with a representative of an implementing entity, Bogotá, 31 January 2023 (Interview #94).
- 41 “Deeply rooted: Coca eradication and violence in Colombia,” *International Crisis Group*, 26 February 2021, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/latin-america-caribbean/andes/colombia/87-deeply-rooted-coca-eradication-and-violence-colombia>.
- 42 [PBF/COL/B-1](#) (Colombia); interview with UN official, Bogotá, 26 January 2023 (Interview #84).
- 43 This amounts to 4.1 per cent of PBF’s worldwide approvals during this timeframe.
- 44 UNU-CPR briefly examined the key components of the other 22 projects to make this determination. Outside of the four in the case study, three projects in this time period had components related to women’s access to human rights institutions, and justice mechanisms. However, they are overall not as strong in terms of a human rights focus as the four that make up the DRC case study. These projects are: [PBF/COD/A-8](#), [PBF/COD/B-10](#), [PBF/IRF-404](#).

- 45 The strategic documents in the DRC also place a greater emphasis on civil and political rights than on ESCR. United Nations, “Common country analysis: Democratic Republic of the Congo,” 2019; United Nations, “Plan cadre de Coopération des Nations Unies pour le Développement Durable (UNSDCF) 2020–2024,” 2019.
- 46 The current UN mission in the DRC, the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO), was established in 2010. In 2018, a decision was made to transition the mission and gradually withdraw MONUSCO resources from certain provinces, including withdrawal from the Kasais in 2021, and a gradual phase out from Tanganyika between 2022 and 2024. Three of the four projects were located in these areas. For further descriptions of the projects and background context in the DRC, including on the MONUSCO transition, see Erica Gaston et al., *2024 PBF Thematic Review*, pp. 34–39.
- 47 These interventions included the provision of income generation kits and the creation of village savings and credit associations (Associations Villageoises d’Épargne et de Crédit). Interview with a representative of an implementing agency, Kananga, 7 March 2023 (Interview #126); interview with a representative of a local NGO, Kananga, 9 March 2023 (Interview #144).
- 48 Interview with UN official, MS Teams, 19 April 2023 (Interview #116). The biggest drawback of this approach was that the resources were insufficient to meet demand, in particular for the socioeconomic support. With not enough to go around, some individuals within the target communities and in neighbouring communities felt left out. Interviews with representatives of local NGOs, Kananga, 9 March 2023 (Interviews #141, 142, 143, 144, 145).
- 49 Interviews with representatives of local NGOs, Kananga, 9 March 2023 (Interview #141, 142, 143, 144, 145).
- 50 Interview with representatives of an implementing agency, Kinshasa, 6 March 2023 (Interview #121). See also project documents for [PBF/IRF-317](#).
- 51 Independent evaluation [PBF/IRF-317](#) (DRC).
- 52 Independent evaluation [PBF/IRF-317](#) (DRC), p. 11.
- 53 Independent evaluation [PBF/IRF-317](#) (DRC), pp. 12–17.
- 54 Interview with young beneficiaries of the project, Kananga, 8 March 2023 (Interview #135).
- 55 Interview with project beneficiaries, Kananga, 8 March 2023 (Interview #137).
- 56 Project documents for [PBF/IRF-413](#) (CAR), p. 10 (translated by author).
- 57 Interview with civil society peacebuilder, MS Teams, 15 May 2023 (interview #52).
- 58 Interview with civil society peacebuilder, MS Teams, 15 May 2023 (interview #52).
- 59 Interview with gender expert, by MS Teams, 13 June 2023 (Interview #61).
- 60 Interview with UN official, Bogotá, 27 January 2023 (Interview #87).
- 61 Interview with civil society peacebuilder, MS Teams, 15 May 2023 (interview #52).
- 62 Interview with four peacebuilding practitioners, MS Teams, 20 July 2023 (interview #72).
- 63 Interview with four peacebuilding practitioners, MS Teams, 20 July 2023 (interview #72).
- 64 Interview with OHCHR official, MS Teams, 12 January 2023 (Interview #7).
- 65 See, e.g., United Nations and World Bank, “Pathways for Peace: Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Conflict,” (Washington, DC, World Bank, 2018). Accessible at: <http://hdl.handle.net/10986/28337>; United Nations, “A New Agenda for Peace,” *Our Common Agenda Policy Brief 9* (2023). Accessible at: <https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/our-common-agenda-policy-brief-new-agenda-for-peace-en.pdf>.
- 66 Gaston et al., *2024 Thematic Review*, pp. 72-74.
- 67 Interview with UN agency staff, MS Teams, 9 May 2023 (Interview #46).
- 68 Interview with civil society peacebuilder, MS Teams, 15 May 2023 (interview #52).
- 69 On proposals for national prevention strategies, see United Nations, “A New Agenda for Peace,” *Our Common Agenda Policy Brief 9* (New York, July 2023). Accessible at: <https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/our-common-agenda-policy-brief-new-agenda-for-peace-en.pdf>.