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Peacebuilding and Political Accompaniment

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Political Accompaniment

The notion of political accompaniment in peacebuilding lacks an agreed definition. In practice, it reflects an approach where the international community aligns with national priorities, supports inclusive political processes based on open dialogue, and commits to the long-term.ⁱⁱ Intergovernmental institutions, Member States, and United Nations and regional field presences each provide political accompaniment by proactively engaging with national authorities, both to strengthen the capacities necessary to rebuild after conflict and to resist policies that increase the risk of relapse. As such, the international community aims to serve as a safeguard against political developments that could reignite violence or create new sources of conflict. **Depending on context, this role can raise tensions between respecting decisions taken by a national government and maintaining a broader perspective on the needs of the society as a whole.**

Effective political accompaniment rests on three key elements. First, it is based on an appreciation of the

deeply political nature of peacebuilding. Achieving sustainable peace involves lasting political and institutional change, which in turn produces significant shifts in the distribution of power and authority. Political accompaniment seeks to reinforce legitimate and inclusive governance.

Second, successful peacebuilding must be prioritized and sequenced based on a country's own assessment of the causes of conflict and steps needed to address them. Securing national consensus on priorities can be difficult, especially in the immediate post-conflict period when political tensions are high. The goal is to support national priorities that reflect input from all stakeholders, as determined through wide public consultation and democratic processes. Properly aligning support with national peacebuilding strategies in turn requires international partners to ensure that the assistance they provide is both coordinated and coherent.

Third, political accompaniment entails long-term commitment to a post-conflict state, in keeping with

the extended timelines necessary for achieving sustainable peace and the fact that peacebuilding progress is rarely linear.

Relevant Actors

Accompaniment can be broadly classified into three categories: intergovernmental institutions, Member States, and international and regional field presences. Intergovernmental institutions draw on the legitimacy conferred by their multilateral character to engage post-conflict states on behalf of the international community. Exactly how this accompaniment is provided varies according to mandate and context. The Security Council responds to negative developments in peacebuilding processes addressing them in resolutions, issuing presidential statements, undertaking field visits, and sending clear political messages during public meetings. The Peacebuilding Commission provides a forum for frank discussion with national authorities about outstanding peacebuilding challenges. The Chairs of the Peacebuilding Commission's configurations also provide accompaniment through their regular interaction with national and international stakeholders, both at headquarters and on the ground. Some regional organizations provide similar forms of accompaniment, whether through discussions of country situations at annual summits or more formalized mechanisms like the African Union's Peace and Security Council. The fact that intergovernmental institutions operate at the global or regional level, have explicit mandates to address issues, and tend to generate wider international attention adds political weight to their role.

Member States also engage with national authorities through bilateral and informal channels. Neighbouring states and other partners may privately raise concerns in country. This form of accompaniment draws on longer-term relationships and may appeal to shared regional interests. Regular interaction between donors and their national interlocutors also provides

opportunities to encourage the adoption of an inclusive approach to peacebuilding. This type of accompaniment builds on established diplomatic ties, operates continuously, may be able to respond more quickly to negative trends, and potentially preserves public political space for national authorities to change course.

In most cases, political accompaniment by United Nations and regional field presences benefits from perceived legitimacy and neutrality of international institutions. Backed by Security Council mandates, peacekeeping operations and special political missions undertake peacebuilding within the context of a broader political engagement with national authorities. This may involve explicit support for processes like elections and reconciliation, but also an appreciation of the fundamentally political nature of efforts to reform the security sector and establish the rule of law. In non-mission settings, United Nations Country Teams and Resident Coordinators encourage national authorities to pursue strategies that ensure inclusive, equitable socioeconomic development.

Each of these types of political accompaniment is subject to important limitations. Multilateral institutions tend to focus on a situation when the risks are high and the onset of new crises can quickly direct international attention elsewhere. They also require a high degree of consensus amongst their membership to operate effectively. Political disagreements within intergovernmental institutions can hamper peacebuilding processes or prevent countries from receiving international attention. Bilateral political accompaniment tends to be lower profile and can be more easily ignored by national authorities. International and regional field presences are subject to host state consent, which can limit political engagement with national authorities. Experience shows that senior United Nations leaders may risk being declared *persona non grata* if they persistently pursue sensitive issues. Resident Coordinators and United Nations Country Teams may feel particularly constrained, given that they lack an explicit political mandate and depend on cooperation

with national authorities to deliver their programs. The duration of United Nations peace operations is also far shorter than the timelines required to achieve sustainable peace. As a result, the international community's political accompaniment too often consists of a patchwork of efforts knitted together over time with varying degrees of success and insufficient predictability.

Potential Value for Peacebuilding

Political accompaniment is premised on the central importance of legitimate, inclusive governance for achieving lasting peace. Democratic institutions that reflect the interests of all groups within a population tend to produce more equitable development, resolve tensions before they erupt into conflict, and provide all citizens with a positive stake in their state. Yet empirical research on democratization has clearly shown that states in transition face higher risks of instability than either authoritarian or democratic countries. These risks particularly centre on threats to entrenched elites. Political accompaniment by international actors can thus serve as an important source of resistance to efforts by particular groups to protect their power, whether by undermining electoral processes, weakening human rights institutions, limiting space for political opposition, or curbing freedom of the press. By insisting on inclusive political processes based on open dialogue, international actors can help ensure that the root causes of conflict are fully addressed and prevent the emergence of new sources of tension.

The World Bank has argued that it takes most societies recovering from conflict between at least 17 to 41 years to transform their core national institutions.ⁱⁱⁱ Effective international support for peacebuilding must resist adopting unrealistic timelines. Rather than understanding peacebuilding as a particular form of assistance that takes place in the immediate post-conflict period, the ideal of effective political accompaniment suggests that the

international community needs to adapt to setbacks and new challenges over the long-term. This approach recognizes that peacebuilding is not a steady progression from an immediate post-conflict focus on security issues to traditional development programming. Instead of providing parallel support through security, development, human rights, and humanitarian policy silos, political accompaniment requires a comprehensive approach at all stages. Political accompaniment is also premised on mutual accountability. *The New Deal for Engagement in Fragile States* clearly articulates the trust required on both sides.^{iv} Post-conflict countries commit themselves to pursuing peacebuilding in a legitimate and inclusive manner. In turn, international partners commit to providing timely, predictable, and transparent support that reinforces national systems and accepts the risks inherent in post-conflict environments. Experience suggests that linking these approaches is likely to be more effective and efficient.

Challenges to Effective Accompaniment

Political accompaniment requires a balancing act between providing the support necessary to advance national peacebuilding initiatives and encouraging national actors to pursue an inclusive approach. These objectives can come into tension, particularly when elites decide to pursue policies designed to hinder opposition or exclude particular groups. In such circumstances, national authorities may be less open to external political engagement, which may be resisted as interference in domestic affairs. Success thus depends on the quality of the partnership between international and national actors, as well as the degree of leverage that international actors bring to bear.

Political accompaniment is also complex. It is simpler to design programming, capacity-building, and technical assistance to achieve narrow sectoral goals. Effective political accompaniment not only requires the diplomatic skills necessary to negotiate sensitive issues, but also a nuanced understanding of the country in question. It is not sufficient to simply strengthen the

formal institutions of the state. International actors must also understand how reforms will affect wider political dynamics, traditional sources of authority, and informal practices. This appreciation for context is regularly cited as an enduring weakness in international peacebuilding efforts.

Where coordination is poor, efforts to provide political accompaniment may result in duplication, confusion of roles, or increased transaction costs. In any given situation, multiple international actors may seek to provide varying forms of accompaniment. In the best case scenario, this engagement combines into coherent support for national efforts to tackle core peacebuilding challenges. In the worst case scenario, international actors reach different strategic conclusions, deliver contradictory messages to national authorities, and undermine each other's authority.

Finally, maintaining the level of international attention required for sustained political accompaniment remains a critical challenge. For example, the Security Council's agenda is currently crowded with an unprecedented set of intractable conflicts. Crisis management absorbs much of its capacity, leaving relatively little time to closely monitor seemingly stable post-conflict settings. Potentially worrying developments that might otherwise provoke a response can pass unnoticed, such as deepening tensions between political parties, the gradual undermining of independent national institutions, or the slow emergence of new sources of communal conflict. The pressure to cut budgets and demonstrate success by removing countries from its agenda also contributes to the Security Council withdrawing peace operations before the need for political accompaniment has run its course. These incentives are not unique to the Security Council. To varying degrees, every international actor engaged in peacebuilding struggles to devote adequate and sustained attention to countries emerging from conflict.

The Peacebuilding Commission as a Political Actor

On paper, the mandate and composition of the Peacebuilding Commission seems ideally suited to providing political accompaniment. As a multilateral forum with wide membership, it has the advantage of bringing together all relevant international actors to discuss the peacebuilding challenges facing the countries on its agenda. When united behind a common position, the Commission's Member States credibly speak for a significant portion of the international community. Equally importantly, the Peacebuilding Commission's intergovernmental character ensures that it deals with national authorities on a peer-to-peer basis. The Commission's broad mandate and reporting lines to both the General Assembly and Security Council also cut across United Nations policy silos, allowing it to address a wide range of security, development, and human rights concerns. A relatively open-ended mandate and minimal rules of procedure ensure that the Commission can both extend and adjust its engagement according to developments on the ground. In short, the Peacebuilding Commission should have the authority, thematic mandate, and flexibility necessary to provide effective political accompaniment.

Despite these theoretical advantages, the Peacebuilding Commission has struggled to overcome several shortcomings. As in all forms of diplomatic engagement, leverage matters. The Commission does not have direct access to financial resources nor does it have the authority to take decisions that materially alter the support provided to post-conflict countries. As a result, the Commission lacks both carrots and sticks. This not to suggest that it has no influence. The Peacebuilding Commission's inherent legitimacy and status as an outside actor can affect national decision-making, particularly when a national government fears the consequences of diminished international credibility. However, beyond serving as the moral voice of the international community, the Commission possesses few tools for affecting the incentive structures of national elites.

Several potential strengths have also proven to be weaknesses. The Commission's role as an advisory body to the Security Council should confer a degree of delegated authority. Yet in reality, the relationship between the Council and the Commission remains distant and underdeveloped. The Peacebuilding Commission's advice has not regularly shaped the Security Council's decisions in a significant manner, nor is the relationship between the Peacebuilding Commission and Security Council's political accompaniment always clear or coordinated. Member States have also yet to fully commit to the Peacebuilding Commission. It operates largely as a New York-based institution with limited direct engagement from capitals and stands separate from Member States' decision-making about security and development policy at a global level. The close relationship between the Commission and national authorities should also be a source of influence, but in some cases mismatched expectations at the outset have contributed to disappointments at a later stage of engagement. The result is that the Peacebuilding Commission's actual clout is lower than its potential influence.

Finally, the Peacebuilding Commission remains somewhat disconnected from the work of United Nations operational entities. Despite its location in headquarters and interaction with senior leadership in the field, the Peacebuilding Commission is not fully integrated into wider United Nations peacebuilding efforts. While it has in some cases played a valuable role by lending political support to Special Representatives of the Secretary-General or Resident Coordinators, the Commission is too often seen as an external body removed from field-level realities, a source of additional transaction costs, and operating outside established reporting lines to the Security Council or Executive Boards.

Policy and Research Gaps

While the rationale and evidentiary basis for political accompaniment is clear, our understanding of how to effectively provide political accompaniment in practice is still largely anecdotal. A more rigorous approach to evaluation and lessons learned is needed. While some of the methodological challenges that bedevil efforts to demonstrate successful conflict prevention also apply to political accompaniment, there is room to use qualitative research methods and comparative case studies to better assess what has worked so far and why.

In terms of United Nations peacebuilding policy, considerable attention has been devoted to the mission start-up phase, to the transition from a peacekeeping operation to an integrated peacebuilding office, and to the withdrawal of peace operations. However, the policies and institutional arrangements required in the period immediately following the removal of a country from the Security Council's agenda are less well developed. Inevitably, a significant burden falls upon the Resident Coordinator and the United Nations Country Team. More thought needs to be given to political accompaniment during this period, especially in terms of mitigating the effects of diminished funding and the withdrawal of an explicit political mandate.

Most importantly, a sizeable gap remains between when international peacebuilding efforts currently decline and when the evidence suggests that post-conflict states will have completed the necessary institutional transformations. International actors need to develop the policies and mechanisms necessary to lock in sustained and predictable assistance for the two decades or more that are realistically required, bearing in mind that this support will need to continuously adapt over time and that political accompaniment may be required well beyond the immediate post-conflict period.

ENDNOTES

- i. The views expressed in this paper are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect the positions of any current or former employer.
- ii. According to the 2010 Review of the Peacebuilding Architecture, the objective of political accompaniment is to "facilitate and advance the kind of broad-based dialogue that will enable a society to heal and rebuild." The notion of political accompaniment elaborated in this paper is broader, in keeping with current usage and recent policy developments. United Nations Document A/64/868, 21 July 2010, p. 23.
- iii. World Bank, World Development Report 2011: Conflict, Security, and Development. Washington: World Bank Publications, 2011, p. 11.
- iv. International Dialogue on Peacebuilding and Statebuilding, New Deal for Engagement in Fragile States, pp. 2-3.