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Picking up the pieces: What to expect from the Peacebuilding Commission

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This report sums up the results of the conference “Picking up the pieces: What to expect from the Peacebuilding Commission for sustainable peace and development”, which was held in New York on December 6, 2005. The conference was organized by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation (FES) in cooperation with the German Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ).

1 Introduction

The event brought together some 40 representatives from different constituencies with a stake in international peace and security and development governance: troop and financial contributors to peacekeeping operations, providers of post-conflict development aid, the UN Secretariat, civil society organizations, academia, and government representatives from countries that have recently undergone post-conflict recovery. The aim of the conference was to give expression to the expectations of the different stakeholders as regards the added value of a Peacebuilding Commission (PBC), Peacebuilding Support Office (PBSO) and Peacebuilding Fund, the creation of which were decided in principle by the UN Summit Outcome Document in September 2005. The event was not intended to address the organisational and procedural features of the PBC, which remained in debate in the General Assembly (GA) at the time. However, given the salience of those issues, it was not possible to avoid the subject entirely.

As the UN is not alone in re-tooling itself to address better the transition from conflict to stability, the FES had invited a representative of the U.S. Office of the Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization (S/CRS) as one example of national efforts to improve government coordination in post-crisis environments. Ms. Wong, the Deputy Coordinator, spoke at a luncheon following the conference.

2 Why a Peacebuilding Commission?

The intellectual and institutional trail leading to the creation of the PBC was summarized by Ambassador Ellen Margrethe Løj, Permanent Representative of Denmark and one of the two GA “facilitators” on the PBC dossier. She recalled that over the last five years there had been a gradual realization that the international community was not doing as well as it could in bringing back conflict countries and regions to long term stability and development. She and others cited the now well-accepted statistics that about 50% of conflict countries relapse into violence in the five years following a peace agreement.

The creation of a PBC is intended to improve this record and consequently diminish the accompanying human and financial costs. From the various contributions of speakers and participants, it emerged that the PBC could do so in four different ways:

- First, by organising and institutionalising an integrated approach between interventions meant to restore peace and security and those intended to bring about development in post-conflict situations. As argued by Ms. Ina-Marlene Ruthenberg, from the BMZ, “peace is a process”. There have been efforts in the past few years to improve the coherence in UN post-conflict action – e.g. the development of the integrated mission concept, the creation of bodies such as the Executive Committee on Peace and Security, the United Nations Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO) Best Practice Unit (BPU) and the United Nations Development Programme’s (UNDP) Bureau of Crisis Prevention and Recovery (BCPR) – but they have proven insufficient to overcome differences of approaches.
- Second, by bringing into a single forum the major stakeholders of post-conflict stabilisation and reconstruction, i.e. the UN, but also the major financial and troop contributors, and the international financial institutions (IFIs). This should help overcome gaps and overlaps, e.g. an overload in support for police training programmes whereas other key components of the rule of law, such as prisons and justice systems, remain unattended. Although the point was not made directly, the underlying assumption here is that the UN can no longer be expected to restore peace and stability single-handedly, but that it must work together with other partners to that end. Here is an obvious parallel with peacekeeping, where the Secretary General has called for an “interlocking system of peacekeeping capacities” combining the means of the UN and regional organisations.¹
- Third, by forcing continued political attention on particular conflict situations with the attendant political and financial commitments. In other words, to ensure that once the “CNN effect” has evaporated, donors follow up with their financial pledges and major external powers – generally, but not

¹ *In Larger Freedom*, Report of the Secretary General (A/59/2005, 21 March 2005) para 112 <http://daccessdds.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N05/270/78/PDF/N0527078.pdf?OpenElement>

necessarily the P5 – keep exercising whatever form of political cajoling or pressure is needed to ensure that the parties implement their commitments under peace agreements. Ambassador Guterres, Permanent Representative of Timor Leste to the UN, testified of how important this continued attention by the international community had been at crucial moments of the transition process in his country.

- And fourth, by ensuring that all stakeholders will work from an agreed “roadmap”, which will set out both the “big picture” and the specific areas where progress and/or change is needed over time, and the sequence in which interventions are required to bring about such progress or change. The role of the PBSO in establishing this roadmap is expected to be crucial.

3 Conflict prevention and peacebuilding

The High-Level Panel, which inspired the proposition of the Secretary General to the GA that a Peacebuilding Commission be created, had foreseen a dual role for the PBC, in conflict prevention and post-conflict reconstruction. However, the same Member States that five years ago had rejected the proposal of the Brahimi report to create an Information and Strategic Analysis Secretariat, were now unwilling to grant the PBC a conflict prevention and early warning role. This was reflected during the conference by the position taken by the Permanent Representatives of Egypt, Ambassador Maged Abdelfattah Abdelaziz, and Bangladesh, Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury, who argued that there were enough mechanisms elsewhere to fulfil these tasks and that the preventive role of the PBC should be limited to preventing the relapse into conflict.

Obviously, revising the Summit Outcome decision on that front could not be part of the conference agenda. However, it was clear from the statements of several participants that they regarded this as a missed opportunity to put prevention squarely on the UN agenda, and to take a serious look at the relationship between conflict prevention and peacebuilding. Tellingly, among them was the representative of Sierra Leone, Ambassador Sylvester Edundayo Rowe,

who argued that the relapse of his country into conflict a few years ago was a failure of conflict prevention, not of peacebuilding.

In practice, the degree to which the PBC will be able to exercise a preventive role will depend on the institutional arrangements member states finally agree upon. Important factors will be who has authority in setting the PBC’s agenda, as well as the change of internal UN dynamics brought about by the expansion of the Secretariat’s capacity for mediation, decided in principle by the Summit. It can be assumed that the greater the latitude for a country to self-select for PBC consideration or for selection by the Secretary General, and the greater the capacity of the Secretariat to engage in mediating conflicts, the greater the chance that conflict situations will be brought early on the agenda of the PBC. However, the various possible scenarios were not discussed during the conference.

4 Institutional Stakes

Unfortunately, but not unexpectedly, the debate on the PBC in the GA has become caught up in a struggle about the balance of power between the Security Council (SC), the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and the GA. At one extreme is the US position – not represented at the conference – that the PBC should report exclusively to the Security Council, a condition for effectiveness and a reflection of the US lack of trust in ECOSOC; at the other end is the effort of Egypt, shared in different shades by a number of southern countries, to prevent the creation of a PBC from reinforcing a trend visible over the past 10-15 years. These countries contend that the Security Council has been gradually expanding its mandate and increasingly encroaching upon the prerogatives of ECOSOC and the GA. Other countries that are neither among the P5, nor major financial or troop contributors, are keen to preserve their rights of oversight of the PBC via the GA.

The perception that the SC is extending its scope of activities at the expense of the GA and ECOSOC was very clearly reflected during the conference in the statement of Ambassador Abdelaziz of Egypt and comments by Indian General (Rtd.) Kapil Kak. At issue is not only the relationship which the PBC should entertain with

these stakeholders, but also the number of members each group of stakeholders should be entitled to on the Commission. The statement of Ambassador Abdelaziz suggested that a regional balance should be achieved, although this was not considered by the Summit Outcome document.²

How those differences would play out in the negotiations remained unclear at the time of the conference. A draft resolution proposing PBC dual reporting to the Security Council and ECOSOC was in discussion, with a provision for yearly reporting to the GA. Whether a sequenced reporting process would be introduced, as had been proposed by some – e.g. reporting to the Security Council in a first phase, reporting to ECOSOC at a later stage – and how the right balance would be achieved in keeping the GA informed whilst avoiding micro-management on its part, remained to be seen.

An additional institutional issue, implicit in the statement of Ambassador Abdelaziz, was the degree of autonomy which the PBC and the proposed Peacebuilding Fund should be granted, respectively, in setting the agenda of the PBC and making financial allocations. It was obvious that countries such as Egypt would like to see this autonomy bound as narrowly as possible by tightly defined mandates and close review by the GA. However, it was not possible from the discussions to assess the range of views among Member States on this issue.

5 What does it take for Peacebuilding to succeed?

Throughout the day, discussions went back and forth between the PBC itself and the more generic requirements of “peacebuilding”, with a

particular illustration of US efforts to refine their national peacebuilding tools. As a consequence, the debate was implicitly rather than explicitly laying out the parameters of the success of the PBC if and when it is created. A set of those parameters are related to the substantive issues that must be tackled, another to the stakeholders that must be involved.

The substantive requirements

A recurrent theme of the discussions was that of “ownership” of the peacebuilding process. As Jamal Benomar, from UNDP’s BCPR, put it, the challenge was to “provide a context and create the space in which local actors can themselves develop the solutions they want”. “Ownership” has several components and at least two groups of stakeholders. One is the government authorities of the country/region in conflict, the other its population at large.

Two problems were highlighted as regards government authorities. One was the time it takes in a post-conflict environment to identify and empower – normally through a constitutional and electoral process – local and national authorities that are both legitimate and capable to take the reins of government, i.e. define strategies, make decisions and follow them through. As argued by Chris Landsberg, Director of the Centre for Policy Studies of South Africa, and testified by Ambassador Guterres of Timor Leste, this takes staying power from the international community. The second was the point, raised by Mubashir Hasan, a former Pakistani Finance Minister and currently President of the People’s Party of Punjab, that in many cases, the task is not to re-establish an old order that has failed, but to “re-distribute power in a new way”. The challenge that this sets for the international community was not discussed in detail, but Jamal Benomar did confirm that what was at stake was no less than a process of state building.

The kinds of interventions likely to create ownership by local populations were not systematically discussed. It was obvious from the Haiti and Timor Leste examples cited, however, that the provision of basic infrastructure and services, such as roads, water, electricity, basic health care and education, was key in gaining the sympathy of the locals to the efforts of the interna-

² The Summit Outcome Document spells out that the Organisational Committee of the PBC will include members of the Security Council, members of ECOSOC, and representatives of the major troop and financial contributors to the UN. However, it does not specify the number of members of each group and whether there should be a geographic distribution of the membership; Summit Outcome Document, A/Res/60/1, 24 October 2005, para 101, <http://daccessdds.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N05/487/60/PDF/N0548760.pdf?OpenElement>

tional community and motivating them to contribute their share. Talking from his experience of work with extremely destitute communities in Punjab, Mubashir Hasan also pointed out how important the psychological impact of such activities can be, arguing that access to electricity, or a new road to the main town in the area can “change the mental universe of the people”. He also highlighted the importance that the redistribution of land can have in specific circumstances: by giving previously excluded individuals a stake in the system, this significantly increases the chance that they will want to preserve rather than to destroy it. This, in a way, pointed out to the broader need of attending to the redistribution of wealth generated from natural resources in post-conflict situations. The point was raised, both as regards conflict prevention and post-conflict stabilisation, by Ms. Ruthenberg, who strongly argued that the international community should dare to “interfere” on this issue, given the interplay between economics and conflict.³

The difficulty of matching the political, social and religious set of values of local societies with the principles implicit in UN and major donor reconstruction programmes was raised by Mubashir Hasan, and again by several participants in reaction to the presentation of the US Deputy Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization (see box). Democracy and the market economy are controversial propositions in some parts of the world, and imposing them cannot be a solution. The difficult ethical and practical issues involved in broadening the participation of populations living in non-Western societies in the determination of their own economic and political future, were, however, too big to be tackled during the seminar.

Finally, a practical issue facing military peacekeepers in most early reconstruction phases was raised: should they start rebuilding infrastructures and providing services to the locals in the absence of a short term alternative? Such was

the choice made by the Bangladeshi contingent in Sierra Leone and others in Timor Leste. However, this is not an accepted doctrine at DPKO and many Western militaries regard the task as “mission creep”, and are reluctant to take it up.

The non-governmental and transnational stakeholders

Of the many stakeholders that must be involved to ensure the success of peacebuilding, contributors to this conference addressed the importance of non-governmental organisations, women, the private sector, and regional banks.

The need to take into account the gender perspective and involve women in reconstruction processes was made by a large number of speakers from the non-governmental organization (NGO) community but also from governments. The role of women’s groups and NGOs as social and economic actors was highlighted by Ambassador Chowdhury, speaking from the experience of Bangladesh, as well as from Ambassador Guterres on the basis of Timor Leste’s reconstruction experience. This, in turn, pointed to the importance of making the education of women a key priority of reconstruction efforts. The commitment of NGOs in making sure human rights remained on the agenda was also highlighted. The particular way NGOs – both local and international – could interact with the PBC was not addressed directly during the seminar but was the object of a separate afternoon discussion.

The specific role regional development banks could play in peacebuilding was illustrated by Ms. Ruthenberg who spoke of the contribution the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) had made in Haiti, remaining involved and present within the country even as the World Bank withdrew. As the conflict subsided this allowed the IDB to respond rapidly to needs; besides, it demonstrated flexibility in the type of projects it was willing to finance (for example, roads rebuilt by the peacekeepers). Generally, she made the point that, as the major shareholders from regional banks are more directly concerned by instability in their own region, they will be more responsive in making the kinds of resource commitment decisions needed to mitigate that

³ Extensive literature on the subject is available from the Economic Agendas in Civil Wars program of the International Peace Academy (completed projects) <http://www.ipacademy.org/Programs/Programs.htm>

instability than more remote global institutions such as the World Bank and IMF.

The US model: Seeking coherence in national action for peacebuilding

Just like the UN and many other governments, the US is seeking to more effectively address the challenges of failed and failing states. Thus in July 2004 it created an Office of the Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization (S/CRS) to “lead, coordinate and institutionalize U.S. Government civilian capacity to prevent or prepare for post-conflict situations, and to help stabilize and reconstruct societies in transition from conflict or civil strife so they can reach a sustainable path toward peace, democracy and a market economy”. The requirements identified, basically, are the same as those that brought about the creation of the PBC, i.e. the need to ensure continuity of attention and engagement (the 2-3 year framework considered by the S/CRS is the time span political leaders usually devote to a crisis, but it seems somewhat short) and the need for comprehensiveness in the approach, which involves the development of a range of civilian skills matching the complex task of political, social and economic engineering at hand.

The Office, to summarise, has four main tasks:⁴

- Develop a civilian counterpart capability to the military at the strategic level (State Department), operational planning level, and field deployment level so as to ensure that the complex requirements of stabilisation and reconstruction are addressed from an early stage and throughout the operation
- Accordingly, ensure that comprehensive civilian-military planning takes place and that field-based coordination of civil-military relations is effective
- Ensure the strategic coordination of US action with that of major bilateral partners, the UN, and other multilateral partners in particular conflict situations
- Gather lessons learnt in managing post-conflict situations, whereby the major challenge identified is to enable the transition “from outsiders ‘doing’ to outsiders ‘enabling’” by building local capacities.

Among the issues on the agenda of S/CRS at present, Ms Wong, the Deputy Coordinator, highlighted the following:

- The need to ensure from Congress a sufficient budget for S/CRS’s operation but, in particular, for the recruitment, training and deployment of a Civilian Response Corps
- The need, additionally, to obtain congressional approval for the creation of a “Conflict Response Fund”, the aim of which would be, like that of the UN Peacebuilding Fund, to finance quick impact projects and fill the gaps in financing whilst the approval process of major financial assistance is running its course
- Deepening the process of dialogue and coordination between the military and NGOs: the U.S. Institute of Peace and S/CRS have launched a task force on civil-military relations in a non-permissive environment.

⁴ More comprehensive information can be found on the S/CRS website, <http://www.state.gov/s/crs/>

6 Will the Peacebuilding Commission be up to the task?

The question remains whether, even if the GA agrees on a PBC format, the Commission will be up to the task of peacebuilding in all the magnitude and complexity highlighted by the participants. In other words, will the PBC make a difference? No clear answer was provided, but a series of factors were raised or alluded to that suggest the outcome could only be conditionally positive:

- Will the terms of reference of the PBC, PBSO and Peacebuilding Fund be sufficiently flexible to enable those bodies to respond nimbly to needs without being hamstrung by constraining authorisation and reporting procedures? Will this, in particular, speed up an often slow process of reaction by the international community in post-conflict situations?
- Will the PBC really succeed in lengthening the span of attention of the international community to regions and countries at risk?
- Will it be entrusted with sufficient inherent authority, so that the multilateral development banks, the IMF, the major international donors and the major UN agencies will feel bound by its orientations?

- Will it remedy the current imbalance in international donors' attention to conflicts in different regions of the world or is there a risk, on the contrary, that it might even accentuate the existing gap between "rich men's wars and poor men's wars"? (Chris Landsberg)
- Will the PBSO be the repository of consolidated knowledge and institutional memory on particular conflict situations and particular post-conflict processes, which is missing at present in the institutional system?
- How and at what stage will the PBC interact with regional organisations and regional banks and incorporate their contributions?
- Will the PBC have direct contacts with representatives of civil society and in what format?

At the time of writing this report, an agreement of the GA on the creation of the PBC looked likely. Even if this were to be confirmed, it is reasonable to expect that practice during the first few months will be crucial in determining the authority, decisiveness and effectiveness of the PBC.

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