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What are the current challenges facing United Nations (UN) Peacebuilding and how can these be addressed?

Executive Summary

According to the United Nations Charter, the UN was founded with a commitment to save 'succeeding generations from the scourge of war' (UNGASC 2000). To achieve this important commitment, the UN has undergone several transformations over the years in relation to its peace operations. One of these transformations have been in the area of peace-building that aims to 'stabilise post conflict situations by creating or strengthening national institutions' (Cavusoglu 2000: 1). The aim of this report is to identify the key challenges facing UN peacebuilding operations and to outline recommendations that address these challenges. The report identifies *three main challenges with UN peacebuilding*. These include (1). The UN peacebuilding agenda continuing to adopt a *largely top-down approach* with conflated agendas that lack a clear sense of priority areas (2). The UN Peace Building Commission (PBC) *being highly institutionalised and lacking coherence* amongst various UN agencies and departments (3). Finally, there is a *multiplicity of peacebuilding actors* including civil society, NGOs, international donors, regional actors who often undermine a purposeful and integrated approach to peacebuilding in the host state.

It is imperative to overcome the above challenges if UN peacebuilding is to remain credible and relevant. As such, the report makes the following recommendations. Firstly, there needs to be a genuine attempt to engage with local civil society and to garner their support in the peacebuilding agenda. Secondly, there is a need for a 'coordinated, coherent and integrated' approach to UN peacebuilding, specifically a reform to the UN PBC by empowering the PBC to become a central governing council for all integrated peacebuilding missions and agendas (Von Der Schulenburg 2014). Finally, to promote a more streamlined peacebuilding agenda specific to each host state, there is a need to create one main peacebuilding agenda for each host state

with each state having one PBC office as its head and then working alongside local civil society and external actors to strengthen each state's peacebuilding agenda (Peter and Osland 2021; Torrent 2021; Von Der Schulenburg 2014: 2-14).

UN Peacebuilding and the Peacebuilding Commission (PBC)

Peace Operations have evolved over time from simple peacekeeping missions during the Cold War, to addressing complex intra-state conflicts and stabilising post-conflict situations through strengthening state institutions, a core function of peacebuilding today (Cavusoglu 2000:1). To understand Peacebuilding, a distinction needs to be made between *peacemaking and peacekeeping*. According to the 2000 Brahimi Report, 'peacemaking addresses conflicts in progress, attempting to bring them to a halt, using the tools of diplomacy and mediation' (UNGASC 2000: 2). Peacekeeping according to Jackson (2015: 172) describes 'the efforts of UN and other organisations to intervene in violent conflicts...with the goal of limiting harm to non-combatants and preventing the possible escalation to major warfare'. In January 2019, following substantial institutional reform within the UN, peacekeeping has now come under the broad umbrella of 'Peace Operations' (Osland and Peter 2021: 1). Peace-building is a term with more recent origins, and according to the Brahimi 2000 report, can be defined as activities that 'reassemble the foundations of peace and provide the tools for building on those foundations' (UNGASC 2000: 3). Thus, Peacebuilding incorporates strengthening the rule of law and state authority, creating legitimate and functioning state institutions, improving respect for human rights, strengthening democratic development, as well as promoting conflict resolution (UNGASC 2000: 2; Anderson 2012: 224).

Prior to 2005, the main UN department responsible for peace operations was the Department of Peacekeeping Operations. In 2005, the General Assembly and Security Council mandated the creation of the Peacebuilding Commission (PBC), an intergovernmental advisory body that promotes peacebuilding activities in conflict-affected countries, advises the General Assembly and Security Council on peacebuilding, acts as a bridge amongst relevant UN bodies involved in peacebuilding and connects with all other relevant actors inside and outside the UN (UNPBC 2021). The PBC is currently composed of 31 member states (Security Council 2020

Since its inception, the PBC has engaged in peacebuilding operations in numerous countries and regions to address 'political, socio-economic, and security challenges' (UNPBC 2021). However, despite reforms to the PBC, it has failed to resolve intrastate conflicts and redress peacebuilding operations, including conflicts in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Mali, South Sudan, Afghanistan (Von Der Schulenburg 2014:2) as well as Sierra Leone, Burundi and Central African Republic (CAR) (Torrent 2021: 3). Consequently, there is a loss of credibility in the eyes of member states and a need for further reform (Von Der Schulenburg 2014: 12).

The importance of a strengthened and effective PBC and peacebuilding agenda is critical to the credibility of the UN in future peacebuilding operations. In addition, if left unchecked, threats from fragile states engulfed in intrastate conflict 'will continue to dominate the UN peace agenda' (Von Der Schulenburg 2014: 12). To respond to these challenges, the UN peacebuilding process needs to be reexamined. This report aims

to identify 3 key challenges to the current UN peacebuilding approach before making 3 main recommendations to address these challenges.

Challenges with Prevailing Peacebuilding Approach

One clear advantage of the current UN peacebuilding structure within the PBC is that due its broader and therefore more representative membership, it has potential to resolve complex intrastate conflicts, however, to do so depends on the cooperation of member states and for the responsibilities of PBC to be clearly defined (Von Der Schulenburg 2014: 13).

Furthermore, UN Peacebuilding is based on the theory for change, accountable institutions, central government authority providing law and order and security, and the need to respect human rights (Anderson 2012: 224). Although the above factors are ideal and in theory provide a good foundation for promoting lasting peace, the concept is difficult to actualize in practice, as there are many actors at play and each host state comes with its own individual challenges, thus a need to formulate individualized peacebuilding operations (Torrent 2021: 2). Below are some of the key problems with the prevailing peacebuilding approach and the international organizations involved.

(1). The UN peacebuilding agenda continuing to adopt a largely top-down approach with conflated agendas that lack a clear sense of priority areas

Despite the 2000 UN Brahimi report emphasizing the ‘need for the United Nations to reach out to civil society’ who can be useful in promoting peace and security in the host state and more recently, the 2015 final report from the High-level independent Panel on Peace Operations (HIPPO) reinforced the importance of civil society feedback to improve outcomes, externally-led peacebuilding processes continue to be mostly top-down (Peter and Kari 2021; Torrent 2021: 4; UNGASC 2000: 45; UNGA and UNSC 2015,). Despite UN policy makers focusing on locally led peacebuilding operations, ‘externally-led engagements are increasingly becoming protracted and real self-government remains deferred’ (Torrent 2021: 4). The peacebuilding approaches have been criticized by most scholars as lacking input from local actors (Osland and Peter 2021: 3). One of the key factors that will determine success of local civil society engagement is external-local relations (Torrent 2021: 4). Often external actors (in this case UN peacebuilders) create peacebuilding discourse that hinges on the locals to subscribe to these externally-led endeavors. Two good examples of the failure to engage local populations is the case of Sierra Leone and to a lesser extent Afghanistan.

According to Torrent (2021: 4-5) in Sierra Leone, despite emphasis on local engagement, peacebuilding efforts were hampered by PBC mandates mostly dealing with state actors and disregarding local civil actors. Consequently, there was a clear imbalance in power relations, not representative at the grass-root level. Furthermore, the minimal engagement with civil society was highly technical and institutionalised.

In Afghanistan, although the UN had a minimal role in peacebuilding efforts and most of this task was left up to the ‘Coalition of the willing’ similar issues surfaced (Kfir 2010). Despite emphasizing a ‘light footprint’ in engaging locals (Ponzio 2007; Dodge 2021), this commitment was abandoned in 2003 and instead focused on ‘extending central

government authority to all parts of Afghanistan' (Dodge 2021: 49), thus leaving locals who were distrustful of foreign interference to sway towards the Taliban. In contrast, the Taliban reached locals, mostly at a grass-root level in rural areas, and managed to run a government parallel to the Afghan government (Mishra 2021). Therefore, Afghanistan is a great reminder of why it was critical to reach out at the grass-root level, the Taliban were able to tap into existing feelings of alienation and distrust and sway local Afghans to support them. Although, the UN had a minor role in peacebuilding in Afghanistan, the importance of reaching the local civil society cannot be over emphasised.

(2). The UN Peace Building Commission (PBC) being highly institutionalised and lacking coherence amongst various UN agencies and departments

The second key challenge to UN peacebuilding is that it is highly institutionalised and lacks an integrated approach. Despite efforts to reform, the UN has failed to reach system-wide coherence and coordination between its various bodies. According to Torrent (2021: 8-10) the example of Burundi demonstrates how problematic this can be in achieving effective peacebuilding outcomes. Torrent (2021: 8-10) reports that there were UN turf battles, conflicts of interest and failure of PBC to deploy a coordinated peacebuilding action in Burundi.

In addition, the PBC finds itself competing with other UN peacebuilding/peacekeeping missions and there is overall confusion over respective responsibilities, thus resulting in a fragmented system. The existence of multiple UN agencies in any given state with various roles in the peacebuilding process leads to fragmentation, turf wars, competition for funding and administrative/managerial challenges (Von Der Schulenburg 2014: 12-14).

(3). There is a multiplicity of peacebuilding actors including civil society, NGOs, international donors, regional actors who often undermine a purposeful and integrated approach to peacebuilding in the host state

To add to the lack of coordination and integration within the UN, there is a multitude of actors acting outside the UN, including civil society actors, NGOs, international donors, regional actors and local stakeholders all with individual interests and various peacebuilding goals (Torrent 2021: 11). In Afghanistan, despite the multitude of peacebuilding efforts by various actors, the country is where it was 20 years ago. A major actor in Afghanistan's peacebuilding outcome is Pakistan. Islamabad is inclined to keep its influence in Afghanistan as part of its strategy against India by maintaining close contact with Afghan Taliban insurgents (Mishra 2015). Thus, peacebuilding efforts that ignore external actors will inevitably fail, calling for a need to build relationships with external actors whilst developing a single peacebuilding agenda set out by the PBC for each state.

Recommendations

Thus far, this report has highlighted three main challenges with the current UN peacebuilding approach. This has included (1) a lack of local civil society engagement and a deference to international rather than local expertise (2) Highly institutionalised structure within the UN peacebuilding bodies, and lack of coordinated/integrated

activity within the PBC and finally (3) multiplicity of peacebuilding actors influencing peacebuilding outcomes thus increasing the complexity of peacebuilding efforts. To address the above challenges, this report suggests the following 3 recommendations:

(1). Engage with civil society and adopt a bottom-up approach

To achieve local support for any peacebuilding reform in the host state, the peacebuilding agenda needs to come from a grass-roots level reflecting the needs of the local population, not just major donors. This means international actors such as the PBC need to step back and instead empower local peacebuilders and encourage community engagement. This grass-root approach has been extensively supported in the literature including by Mahmoud (2020), Torrent (2021) and Osland and Peter (2021). In addition to engaging local civil society groups, there is a need to empower local populations and avoid protracted externally led engagements. The success of peacebuilding can hinge on the will of the locals to accede to externally-led peacebuilding approaches, when this emanates from the local level where local perceptions and concerns are taken into account, it is more likely to be accepted.

A possible challenge to working at the local level is to receive information from various localities and regions and then convert this information into plausible policy plans that will likely require resources and potentially pose a security threat in areas where conflict continues (Call 2015). However, despite the risks, identifying ways to engage and include local populations is imperative for peacebuilding efforts to be successful long term.

(2). Help achieve organizational system-wide coherence by strengthening the PBC and defining its role as an intergovernmental body.

Despite recently undergoing several reforms and increased engagement with the Security Council, there is a real need for the PBC to be empowered, with a clearer defined relationship with the Security Council in line with its 'intergovernmental body' role within the UN and a greater emphasis on peacebuilding as a main tool of the PBC (Security Council 2020). Some ways to strengthen and empower the Peacebuilding Commission are for all peacebuilding issues to be debated in this single platform with advice being forwarded to the General Assembly and Security Council, the PBC should formulate policies and operational agendas and advice Security Council accordingly, and finally the PBC should focus on greater national ownership of the PB mission, monitor and advice the SC, and include various non-state and local actors.

(3). Adopt a streamlined peacebuilding agenda specific to each host state by creating one main peacebuilding agenda for each host state with each state having one PBC office as its head and then working alongside local civil society and external actors

Currently as mentioned, there are a multitude of actors in the peacebuilding agenda of each host state. Each actor has its own agenda and interests and various level of funding streams. UN peacebuilding operations can consist of various UN agencies within the same country and this is complicated with managerial, administrative and funding differences. To address these issues, the role of the PBC needs to be consolidated, and a streamlined approach adopted when addressing peacebuilding

agendas within the UN in each host state. There needs to be a single peacebuilding agenda in each host state, one PBC office in each state as its head and this office then works closely alongside local civil society and external actors who can play an important role in the PB process.

For the UN peacebuilding process to remain credible, the Security Council's role in authorizing PB operations is not enough, the SC decisions need to be effectively implemented. This can be achieved by strengthening peacebuilding mandates/agendas within the PBC and implementing the decisions of the SC while connecting with the local population at a grass-root level to advice and propose policies specific to the host-state. This creates a feedback loop at the local, governmental and international level. Without a meaningful reform to the prevailing UN peacebuilding process, the UN will likely continue to fail to address intrastate conflicts, resulting in worsening violence in these states and undermining the UN's credibility in creating lasting peace and stability in the world.

Note: The bibliography and references has not been put till it is published in an academic journal.