
PEACEBUILDING OR
'UN-BUILDING'?
AFRICAN
INSTITUTIONAL
RESPONSES TO THE
PEACEBUILDING
COMMISSION

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Introduction

The United Nations Peacebuilding Commission (PBC) was launched in June 2006 amid much fanfare and measured optimism. It was conceived as an institutional framework through which a greater degree of coherence would be achieved in peacebuilding and post-conflict reconstruction. On 10 March 2008, the UN Assistant Secretary-General for Peacebuilding Support, Carolyn McAskie, briefed the Peace and Security Council of the African Union, reiterating the significance of the PBC to Africa. Indeed, the first four countries on the PBC's agenda are African – Burundi, Sierra Leone, Guinea-Bissau, and Central African Republic – and seven African countries serve as members of the PBC's organisational committee.¹

The African Union (AU) has enumerated its own 'Policy Framework on Post-conflict Reconstruction and Development' (PCRD) adopted by the Executive Council in Banjul in June 2006 (African Union 2006). Despite McAskie's emphasis in her briefing on the PBC's importance to Africa, there is still the perennial problem of a lack of coordination in peacebuilding processes on the African

continent. After more than two years in operation, therefore, the initial optimism has been replaced by a dawning realisation that there are political and structural limitations in terms of PBC and AU collaboration which need to be overcome. In particular, the series of PBC country-specific meetings that have been convened in New York have not necessarily translated into more coordinated and enlightened peacebuilding processes on the ground. AU involvement in these has been minimal. The politicisation of the Commission, notably during events leading up to its inception, means that it has become hostage to the internal dynamics of the UN system. Did the establishment of the Peacebuilding Commission represent a paradigm shift in the way things are done at the UN, or has it reinforced the notion – perhaps misguided – that the system is more geared towards 'UN-building' rather than genuine peacebuilding? This briefing explores this question, outlining critical issues for a more constructive AU-PBC relationship towards ensuring enhanced peacebuilding in Africa.

Parallel Mandates: The PBC and AU PCRD Framework

Given the articulation of the PBC's work programme and the enumeration of the AU's PCRD policy framework, the Commission and AU have effectively developed *parallel mandates*. These mandates should ideally be predicated on *complementarity* in order to avoid the duplication or replication of functions and strategically, to target the disbursement of mobilised resources. In September 2005 at the UN World Summit and the 60th session of the General Assembly an 'Outcome Document' was issued which recognised, in paragraph 97, 'the need for a coordinated, coherent and integrated approach to post-conflict peacebuilding and reconciliation'. The document also identified the importance of 'achieving

sustainable peace and recognising the need for a dedicated institutional mechanism to address the special need of countries emerging from conflict towards recovery'. According to the joint UN Security Council and General Assembly Resolution 60/180 which launched the Peacebuilding Commission, the PBC has the mandate to 'bring together all relevant actors to advise on and propose integrated strategies for post-conflict peacebuilding and recovery' (UN General Assembly 2005). The core work of Peacebuilding Commission will be its country-specific activities, and in these efforts it will need to liaise with regional and sub-regional organisations. The AU post-conflict reconstruction policy framework will coordinate and guide the Union, regional economic communities, civil society, the private sector and other internal and external partners in the process of rebuilding war-affected communities.

The policy framework also acknowledges that each conflict situation is context-specific. As such, the post-conflict reconstruction strategy adopted must correspond to the specificities of each situation. The policy framework outlines a post-conflict reconstruction system with at least five dimensions: security; political transition, governance and participation; socio-economic development; human rights, justice and reconciliation; and coordination, management and resource mobilisation. It is therefore evident that UN and AU policy planning has to proceed on the basis of establishing coherence among the strategies that both organisations have adopted.

A key activity of the PBC has been to develop 'integrated peacebuilding strategies' for the countries on its agenda. This includes convening 'country-specific meetings to look at issues particular to individual focus countries and bring in all the political, financial and development actors, including, as an essential element the country itself' (McAskie 2008b:5). The integrated peacebuilding strategy is developed within the country committees. Specifically, 'the PBC engages with the

country to develop a clear strategy based on priorities and commitments from the country and its partners to address the priorities' (McAskie 2008b:5). Over its first two years, the PBC held a series of country-specific meetings, on Burundi and Sierra Leone, in New York aimed at fostering more institutional coherence with regard to peacebuilding processes in these two countries. However, the evidence on the ground suggests that this has not yet been achieved. UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon has lamented the lack of a 'culture of coordination' which would ensure that 'all operational actors, whether political, security, development or human rights, could come together in support of the strategies being developed by the Peacebuilding Commission' (Ban 2008).

Peacebuilding or 'UN-Building'? Turf Battles within the System

The internal dynamics of the UN system means that the PBC has not received the 'buy-in' from the key players within the UN system whose 'regal' assent is required to make initiatives work. McAskie bemoaned this fact in her closing remarks to the Peacebuilding Commission on 23 June 2008, when she stated that peacebuilding 'is one of the most important challenges facing the UN today', but regrettably that this is 'not yet fully recognised as such by all the players' (McAskie 2008:1).

Like all other bureaucracies, the UN system has a genetic propensity towards its self-replication, multiplication and expansion. Once a bureaucratic arm of the UN has been established, it becomes increasingly difficult over time to contain it, downsize it or even terminate it when that becomes necessary. The net effect is that there are a number of UN agencies that are providing functions and services that overlap and even replicate the activities of other bodies within the UN system. This phenomenon can be described as a tendency toward 'UN-building'. Currently, the UN system is gripped by a degree of soul-searching in its

quest to ensure system-wide coherence and in its commitment to 'delivering as one'. Such initiatives are self-explanatory and indicative of the prevalence of system-wide incoherence and an abject failure to deliver to the people as an integrated and effective bureaucracy. This phenomenon is not a recent development, but is perhaps symptomatic of a bureaucratic system that has persisted for more than 60 years without an internal mechanism to revitalise, re-energise, re-invent or even retire itself. The UN Peacebuilding Commission was born into this context, and some commentators questioned whether this would represent a marked departure from the 'UN-building' of old, towards peacebuilding for the people.

The diplomatic negotiations leading up to the formation of the PBC were acrimonious and defined by brinkmanship between a range of competing national and regional interests. The most contentious issue was the independence of the Commission from the pervasive oversight of the UN Security Council, and in particular from the intrusive political presence of its permanent five members on the PBC's organisational committee. Countries from the so-called developing world, including a number of key African countries, were keen to ensure that the Commission would not become embroiled in the power politics of the permanent five members of the Security Council. As a consequence, a number of UN Member States were not as enthusiastic about the launch of the Commission given this apparent infiltration by the super-powers. The initial objective of creating an institutional architecture to address the challenge of helping countries transition from war to lasting peace became mired in the politics of power and patronage which afflicts the internal process of the UN system.

The PBC was beset with a range of practical challenges as it tried to integrate itself into the UN system. McAskie has observed that even though the PBC is still experiencing 'procedural growth', there nevertheless 'remain serious challenges to overcome'

(McAskie 2008:4). In particular, when the PBC was established, a number of UN agencies, working on what could be broadly defined as peacebuilding issues, questioned what their future roles would be in the context of this new creation. In effect, the concern was whether the Commission represented a new departure in terms of streamlining and consolidating peacebuilding activities. Would the PBC and the Peacebuilding Support Office in the UN Secretariat become 'operational' on the ground, or would they merely retain a nebulous 'coordinating' function restricted to the upper echelons of UN bureaucracy? It was essentially this concern over potential turf battles that compelled McAskie to make a non-threatening statement observing that 'given the broad basis for peacebuilding, there is no monopoly over peacebuilding activities within the UN system. Many organisations and bodies have peacebuilding mandates and components' (McAskie 2008c). Clearly, this would have been in response to the concern that the PBC and Peacebuilding Support Office (PBSO) would monopolise peacebuilding activities within the UN system. This is more a reflection of the fact that the principle of 'UN-building' is very much alive within the system. There is a reluctance to consolidate, or collapse, aspects of the system even if this might mean improving the lives of people on the ground. The PBC and PBSO have thus found themselves embroiled in UN turf battles that have made it difficult for them to lead effectively on peacebuilding issues.

Peacebuilding operations in Africa have suffered from this lack of coordination of international actors on the ground, in ways that offer important lessons for the UN's new peacebuilding bodies. The disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration (DDR) and security sector reform (SSR) experiences in Sierra Leone and Liberia, for example, were plagued by poor co-ordination and a lack of planning, which in part resulted from a refusal to internalise lessons learned from past experiences. At crucial moments of the DDR processes in Sierra Leone, there was

insufficient funding to continue demobilising ex-combatants. In Liberia, services were missing rather than duplicated. There was insufficient funding for rehabilitation and reintegration because more than double the number of individuals submitted themselves for demobilisation and disarmament than had initially been anticipated by the UN. The reluctance by external agencies to learn from their mistakes further demonstrates the need for a synchronised international institutional architecture for peacebuilding. If the PBC and PBSO were to do effectively what their mandates state, there would necessarily have to be a degree of streamlining the peacebuilding services that the UN provides in order to avoid duplication and overlap. Whether this would represent a monopolisation of the peacebuilding processes at UN headquarters in New York and at country level would very much depend on which UN turf one was assessing this process of consolidation.

The Peacebuilding Fund: Aiding Recovery in Africa

Created at the same time as the PBC, the UN's Peacebuilding Fund was launched on 11 October 2006 to address the immediate needs of countries that are emerging from conflict and those at an early stage of recovery. The Fund was established to reduce the propensity of countries to relapse into violent conflict as a result of faltering peacebuilding processes due to the absence of sufficient funds to run projects. It essentially supports countries on the PBC agenda, but also makes funding available to other war-affected countries that have been designated as eligible to receive funds by the UN Secretary-General.²

Through its 'emergency window', PBF funds can also be disbursed to support urgent peacebuilding activities. To date, the head of the PBSO has approved emergency window-funded projects to support peace talks for Côte d'Ivoire (August 2007); inclusive political dialogue in the Central African Republic (September 2007); national dialogues in Guinea Conakry

(November 2007); reconciliation processes in Nimba County, Liberia (December 2007); the implementation of the Plan of Action to advance the Burundi peace process (March 2008); reinforcement of prison security in Port-au-Prince, Haiti (April 2008); and an emergency volunteer scheme in Kenya (June 2008).

The Liberia case illustrates the complexities of engaging with the PBF and PBC. The government of Liberia received and accepted funds from the Peacebuilding Fund. In addition, emergency window funds were received specifically for the purpose of supporting reconciliation in Nimba County. However, the government and local civil society actors adopted a paradoxical stance with regard to the PBF: while the funds were welcome, there was a reluctance to entertain what was perceived as PBC 'interference' in terms of ideas. Nonetheless, the creation of the Fund is a welcome innovation, particularly for the African continent where more resources need to be targeted for post-conflict reconstruction and development, and one, which might contribute towards fulfilling one of the key, mandates of the PBC – preventing the relapse into violent conflict.

African Institutional Responses to 'UN-building'

Responding to a referral from the Security Council, the PBC added Guinea-Bissau to its agenda in December 2007, with intensive country-specific work (including two field visits) launched in the winter and spring of 2008. More recently, in June 2008, the Central African Republic was formally added to the agenda. These countries have every right to, and should, question what the PBC will deliver in terms of greater system-wide coherence and consolidation in laying the foundations for peacebuilding and reconstruction. Even though Burundi and Sierra Leone were engaged by the PBC through numerous country-specific meetings and in-country visits and trips by UN officials, peace has not yet been fully consolidated. The root causes of the conflict

have not been fully addressed. Furthermore, the link between economic development and peacebuilding needs to be emphasised. It is therefore too early to reduce the degree of international attention on peacebuilding in Burundi and Sierra Leone. If either of these countries relapses into violence, then the basic utility of the PBC will be brought into question.

A coherent African institutional response is necessary to manage and offset the tendency towards 'UN-building' in Africa. The African continent has a strong vested interest in ensuring that the PBC functions effectively. Peacebuilding will not be served by the PBC becoming merely another adornment in the inevitable process of UN-building. A more proactive and pronounced institutional effort by the AU is required as well as a greater degree of coordination and capacity development within the African Group of member states of the UN in New York.

As far as the AU is concerned, the PCRD policy framework which it has enumerated now has to be implemented, but in coordination with the PBC and PBSO. The AU Peace and Security Council has 'stressed the need to explore practical modalities of cooperation between the AU and UN in peacebuilding, including in the exchange of information and the conduct of joint fact-finding and other peace- and security-related missions on conflict in Africa at their various stages' (African Union 2008). The African Union has established a Ministerial Committee on Post-conflict Reconstruction and Development, which will take a lead on the implementation of the policy. The ministerial committee needs to establish an institutional interface with the PBC's organisational committee. Specifically, the PBC should ensure that the AU receives a standing invitation to participate in all country-specific configurations for African countries. In terms of developing a collective and coordinated response to the PBC, the Africa Group of countries at the UN in New York can also complement the work of the ministerial committee and effectively serve

as its eyes and ears on matters relating to peacebuilding. In this context, there is a need to support and enhance the capacity of African diplomats to the UN system to interface effectively with the PBC and its organisational committee.

Conclusion

In the final analysis, the idea of the UN Peacebuilding Commission and its significance to Africa cannot be questioned. There is a vital need to ensure that the UN system strives, and succeeds, in enabling African countries make the transition from war to sustainable peace. Therefore, it is necessary to have an institutional architecture that fulfils this role. As the 'Report of the Peacebuilding Commission on its First Session' observes, the PBC has been moderately successful at the very least in putting the issue of peacebuilding coordination within the UN system on the agenda (UN General Assembly and Security Council 2007:2). In addition, the Peacebuilding Fund has had a qualified success in marshalling financial support for a range of initiatives in Burundi, Sierra Leone, Guinea-Bissau and Liberia. Ultimately, the added value of the PBC will be in its ability to sustain international attention and positively impact the lives of people in the countries that it engages. One cannot underestimate the value added in the Commission's working closely with the AU to ensure that their joint mandates fulfil this objective. Ultimately, this institutional collaboration is crucial because peacebuilding and post-conflict reconstruction have become a necessary component of the revival of the African continent.

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Endnotes

¹ As of July 2008, they are Angola, Burundi, Egypt, Ghana, Guinea-Bissau, Nigeria, and South Africa.

² In addition to the four countries on the PBC's agenda, the Comoros, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea Conakry, Liberia, and Nepal have all been declared eligible to receive PBF funding as of July 2008.

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