



# Quaker United Nations Office

## **Towards Defining the Comparative Advantage of the PBC**

A previous draft of this paper was presented at the roundtable discussion at the International Peace Institute in New York on March 30, 2010 entitled “Reviewing the PBC: Perspectives from Civil Society”.

### **I. Introduction**

It has been suggested that the Peacebuilding Commission, and its associated entities, has struggled to define its strategic role in relation to the rest of the UN system and the many other actors that are engaged in post-conflict countries. I would propose that, to be clear about the comparative advantage of the Peacebuilding Commission, in order to define its optimal distinct role, its core competency, necessitates, first, that we articulate the unique needs of post-conflict settings, that we define what is different about peacebuilding environments, and secondly, that we then consider how the Commission’s composition and mandate distinguish it from other actors and equip it to succeed in particular types of activity in post-conflict settings. These considerations then assist us in identifying specific ideas for how to optimize the work of the Commission going forward.

### **II. The unique needs of post-conflict environments**

*Peacebuilding is different – it’s about people and relationships*

At first sight, post-conflict settings may look similar in many ways to other environments where international help is offered, such as a region struggling to recover after a natural disaster, or another affected by underdevelopment, poverty and state fragility. But a society affected by conflict is different in key ways. Much of the damage that has been done, the deaths, the destruction, the hurts, the poverty, the mistrust and fear, were caused by the actions of other human beings. And that changes things. The emotional and psychological impact on individuals, communities and societies is different when the damage is caused by human agency. Yes, there are wounds to be bound, bellies to be filled and livelihoods to be restored. But beyond that, there is trauma to be addressed, there is trust to be rebuilt, there is reconciliation that must happen, before those individuals, those communities and that society can know peace. Relationships between people have broken down and need to be repaired. Violence begets violence, and a community, a society cannot move on until that cycle is broken, until the hurts and wrongs are named, and people re-learn how to address their needs in non-violent ways and work together.

“Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defenses of peace must be constructed”. These words are of course from the preamble to the constitution of UNESCO and are familiar to us all. They are particularly relevant to this discussion, because they remind us that decisions to wage war or peace, to address disputes using violent or peaceful methods, are choices made by people, by individuals and communities and nations. In conflict-affected environments, particularly those affected by

civil war, many segments of the population have become habituated to using violence as a tool to attain their objectives, to protect themselves and to address disputes. One of the key challenges in restoring peace, in breaking cycles of violence, is therefore to change those habits.

This has implications for peacebuilding activities on the ground, and for the work of the PBC, the PBF and the PBSO. If it is in people's minds that the "defenses of peace must be constructed", then peacebuilding needs to prioritize issues such as trauma healing, reintegration of ex-combatants and displaced families, dispute resolution mechanisms, local and national reconciliation – everything that has to do with restoring relationships at every level. Indeed, all actions in conflict-affected societies need to be not only conflict-sensitive (that is, structured so as not to make things worse) but where possible, restorative (programs designed in such a way as to bring people together and rebuild relationships).

### *Peacebuilding involves everyone*

War affects everyone in a society, particularly the poor, women and children and minorities. While the early stages of peacemaking inevitably tend to involve mediation between the main armed groups, the reality is that most of the people who will be impacted by a peace agreement don't carry guns. The peace process needs to evolve in each case from a ceasefire between armed groups, and power-broking among elites, to include all elements of society in laying the foundations for an inclusive peace that benefits everyone.

Including all of society is particularly important in identifying locally appropriate governance and institutional solutions. In the immediate aftermath of war, national levels of decision making and authority are likely to have been eroded, leaving non-state and community level mechanisms to sustain the fabric of society, maintaining some level of services, providing justice, and supporting economic activity. Societies are surprisingly robust. In conflict-affected countries, what remains of the glue that holds society together is either at a local, community level, or exists in non-state networks, such as religious organizations or private sector and commercial groupings, supported in many cases by diaspora. People *will* have found ways to survive together, to get livelihoods, resolve disputes and act communally, while central authority is weakened or absent during years of war. International peacebuilding actors have a responsibility to identify and, where appropriate, to support these local institutions and processes where possible, as they form the building blocks of sustainable governance.

### *Peacebuilding is political*

The third unique characteristic of post-conflict environments is that they are, above all, political. First, such situations may be only nominally or at best unevenly "post-conflict". Violent conflict itself can be seen as a form of renegotiation of power relationships, and typically this renegotiation has not been completed at the time of a ceasefire or peace agreement. There are frequently issues of authority and legitimacy that continue, the acceptance of a peace agreement may vary significantly between different actors and in different regions of the country, and spoilers inside and outside the country may remain. In addition, central authority may be weak and confined to certain parts of the country. The route to a stable governance solution with widespread and accepted legitimacy may be a long one.

Secondly, many of the challenges faced by the new government will be political. On the one hand, there are internal political issues. There may be accommodations required with other internal political actors, there may be social changes that need to be negotiated, and some of the principal components of the transition to sustainable peace (such as truth and reconciliation processes, or elections) are inherently

political. There are also external relationships to be managed, with multilateral organizations, trading partners, regional powers and others. Even activities that appear to be entirely humanitarian (such as food distribution) or focused on development (such as road building) are likely to have significant political aspects to them in post-conflict environments.

### **III. The unique nature of the Peacebuilding Commission**

Not only is the setting for the Peacebuilding Commission's activities unique, the composition and mandate of the Commission itself sets it apart from other actors.

#### *The PBC is focused on peacebuilding*

First, the Peacebuilding Commission is focused on peacebuilding – it was created out of an acknowledged need for a new approach to “post-conflict peacebuilding and reconciliation” (A/RES/60/1 para 97). This in itself distinguishes it from the great majority of other actors, be they other UN bodies, multilateral organizations, donors, regional actors, private sector entities or civil society groups. Those other actors have agendas that are differently defined, whether more narrowly or more broadly: they may be focused on humanitarian needs, or addressing urgent conflict situations, or development, or on national or commercial interests. Many actors have a role to play in post-conflict situations, but few have peacebuilding as their primary focus. This is important when we come to identifying situations where the Commission has a distinct role – to put this another way, the PBC will tend to be at its least effective when it is duplicating what one or more other actors are doing already, and at its most effective when it is focusing on its primary function of peacebuilding, and filling a clearly perceived gap. In addition, this provides it with a clear position when it comes to convening other actors and coordinating their activities

#### *The PBC is intergovernmental and advisory*

Secondly, the PBC is an intergovernmental advisory body with a mandate to support national efforts as it co-ordinates with other actors. This creates a unique relationship between the commission and the government of the country concerned: it is a body of peers, of other governments, not just donors, but governments with a wide array of expertise, often with direct relevant experience in their own countries, and its role is designed to be supportive. This gives it a distinct and authoritative position, one that is different from other actors such as the representative of the Secretary-General, although their roles can and should be complementary. In particular, this unique relationship with the national government means that the PBC has the potential to be particularly effective in fulfilling its advisory role around political challenges. Indeed, some of the unsung successes of the PBC have been the actions of the country configuration chairs in carrying out activities that might be best described as high-level political accompaniment, assisting the government in its external relationships (such as with multilateral financial institutions) and advising around internal political accommodations, for example in increasing the space for broader political dialogue in the run-up to elections.

The PBC, as a representative body of member states, should theoretically be in a good position to coordinate with other bodies of member states. At the UN that would include the Security Council, the General Assembly and ECOSOC, as well as the funds and programs via their boards and funding relationships. Beyond the UN, this should include donors and development agencies, the multilateral financial institutions (via their boards), regional state groupings, and so on. The limits to the effectiveness of the coordination in practice have not been due to the structure of the PBC, so much as in the lack of clarity around the role of the PBC itself, and in particular questions about its added value from the

perspective of a bilateral or multilateral donor. This is another area where greater definition around what the PBC brings to the table could pay considerable dividends.

#### **IV. Implications for the future of the PBC architecture**

The more the PBC can carve out a clearly defined and recognized role, a more distinct voice, the more effective it will be in its interactions with other UN bodies, including the Security Council, with other international actors, including the MFIs, donors, and regional bodies, and in-country with the government concerned and with local private sector and civil society. Such clarification would also help focus the activities of the PBF and the PBSO.

We have considered the unique needs of post-conflict environments and the unique nature of the PBC itself. It may be supposed that the areas of activity where the PBC would be most effective, where its comparative advantage would lie, would be at the intersection between the two, and moreover, these would be the areas where the work of the commission might most effectively be focused.

##### *Priority Setting*

One of the roles that the PBC is clearly intended to take in the foundational documents is facilitating the agreement to a shared set of peacebuilding priorities between the government of the country under consideration and all other relevant actors. One of the more frustrating aspects of the work of the commission in practice has been the confusion created by a multiplicity of strategies and plans for particular countries, a confusion made worse in some cases by deployment of funds from the PBF prior to the agreement of an overall plan.

A first step is for the PBC to avoid duplicating the work of other actors. In many cases, strategies around humanitarian and development action may largely be in place (for example, in the form of a PRSP). In such a case, the most effective role for the PBC may be in emphasizing actions that speak to its core competency in building sustainable peace, particularly when those priorities have not been articulated by others – using the analysis above and focusing on those activities which are unique to conflict-affected situations, this could include emphasizing issues such as political actions to complete peace processes, reconciliation on a community and national level, transitional and restorative justice mechanisms and so on. The key role for the PBC in this area would therefore be to focus sustained attention on what in many cases are seen as the thorniest and least attended issues. The danger is that the PBC, wanting to avoid duplication, simply endorses existing frameworks without going through the exercise of identifying what those frameworks may be missing.

##### *Focus for the PBF and the PBSO*

We have suggested that the core competency of the PBC, its distinct voice, should be in those areas which are unique to conflict-affected settings. This suggests a way forward on another much-discussed issue – the question of the PBSO's role as a source of 'qualified experts' and a locus for the analysis and transmission of 'best practices' (quotes from A/RES/60/180 para. 23). The difference between this vision of the PBSO as a kind of peacebuilding think tank, and the reality of an understaffed and underfunded office with personnel often on short-term assignments from other parts of the UN system has been particularly acute, but in reality, for the PBSO to establish expertise on all aspects of peacebuilding and statebuilding would require a much larger and better resourced office or department. However, the more it

is possible for the PBC to narrow its focus, the more realistic it becomes for the PBSO to house the relevant expertise to provide the appropriate professional support.

A similar argument applies to the PBF, although the PBF revised Terms of Reference already encompass some of the focus that is being suggested here, with the first two out of four types of initiatives eligible to be funded being those that (a) respond to imminent threats to the peace process and initiatives that support peace agreements and political dialogue, or (b) build or strengthen national capacities to promote coexistence and peaceful resolution of conflict.

#### *The PBC's political role*

In the preceding analysis it was noted that peacebuilding is inherently political, and that the PBC, by its composition and mandate, is particularly suited to carrying out its responsibilities in relation to certain political challenges. Given this, it could be useful to uphold this role by providing more support to the PBC, and in particular the chairs of the country configurations, in carrying out this type of political activity, which requires skills in areas such as mediation and on occasion needs meaningful support. This could take the form of enhancing the capacity of the PBSO in this area, or of establishing better links with elements of the UN system with appropriate expertise.

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