



**QUNO**

Quaker United Nations Office

## Building Peace through Reconciliation

June 2020

Reconciliation, as noted in the Peacebuilding and Sustaining Peace Resolutions (S/RES/2282; A/RES/70/262)<sup>1</sup> is an integral component for building and sustaining peace and has a critical role to play in reconstruction and development. As states emerge from conflict and address fragility, they face myriad challenges, not least among them the need to foster societal cohesion and support healing processes at the national, community and individual levels. While a complex, painful and generational process, fostering reconciliation can contribute towards building the foundation for peacebuilding amongst affected communities and support preventing the recurrence of conflict.

The subject of reconciliation closely aligns with the work of the United Nations (UN) Peacebuilding Architecture (PBA) through the sharing of country experiences in and the convening power of the Peacebuilding Commission (PBC) and the allocation of dedicated financing by the Peacebuilding Fund (PBF). Peace operation mandates frequently include an emphasis on reconciliation, though it can sometimes be unclear how to implement this in practice, and reconciliation has periodically featured as a topic for thematic debate in the UN Security Council (UNSC). Such discussions have reaffirmed the vital importance of reconciliatory processes for international peace and security, the centrality of political inclusion to create peaceful and just societies, and the need for close cooperation across the UN system. However, despite the attention given by various UN bodies and entities, it has been observed that there is no single agreed-upon definition of reconciliation, or clear responsibility for its implementation, which can further contribute to a lack of coordination and coherence at the Headquarters and field levels.

This document shares key insights from the Quaker United Nations Office's (QUNO) long-standing exploration of reconciliation in peacebuilding. It serves to inform the 2020 Peacebuilding Architecture Review (PBAR) with actionable priorities and messages that can support Member States and the UN system as they seek to foster peaceful, just and inclusive societies.

### **I. Reconciliation: Definitional and operational challenges**

There is no universally agreed upon definition of reconciliation or what components should factor into a reconciliatory process. This ultimately can lead to challenges in practice as there is no clear guidance or consensus on how to approach such critical peacebuilding work or what measures it should entail. In many post-conflict settings, reconciliation has been applied on a small scale and at specific points in a given conflict cycle, often to varying degrees of success. Reconciliation, writ large, contributes towards building a just society, and involves a balancing act between the need for recognition of harm done and truth telling with the necessity of developing a shared and transformative way forward. When reflecting on research and country and practitioner experiences, it becomes evident that there are several key characteristics or factors that lay the foundation for what should be at the heart of a shared understanding of reconciliation.

Reconciliation is a ***long-term, generational process*** that is about ***looking forward as much as looking back***. If reconciliation is to fulfill the dual roles of building peaceful societies and preventing the recurrence of conflict, then it must be a sustained undertaking that is woven into peacebuilding initiatives at an early stage. Additionally, while recognition for past grievances

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<sup>1</sup> Relevant Resolution language includes: (...) *Recognizing* that 'sustaining peace'... should be broadly understood as a goal and a process to build a common vision of a society, ensuring that the needs of all segments of the population are taken into account, which encompasses activities aimed at (...) ensuring national reconciliation, and moving towards recovery, reconstruction and development (...) *Emphasizing* the importance of a comprehensive approach to sustaining peace, particularly through (...) national reconciliation and unity including through inclusive dialogue and mediation (...)

Op. 12. *Stresses* that a comprehensive approach to transitional justice, including promotion of healing and reconciliation (...) are critical to consolidation of peace and stability, promoting poverty reduction, rule of law, access to justice and good governance, further extending legitimate state authority, and preventing countries from lapsing or relapsing into conflict (...)

is vital, there also needs to be a concerted effort to foster a shared vision for the future. Central to this is the need for trust amongst stakeholders and the capacity for structural and societal transformation.

Such trust building should be driven by a *values-based approach*. Reconciliation is all too often solely discussed in the context of the application of individual tools, such as the establishment of Truth and Reconciliation Commissions, undertaking justice processes, or the provision of reparations and restitution to victims. However, reconciliation is also steeped in values ranging from mercy and forgiveness, to trust and hope. Effective reconciliation measures recognize its intensely personal nature and that it is an endeavor that seeks to restore not only trust but relationships.

Reconciliation can and should also be *understood as a lens unto itself* that is not timebound to a post-conflict setting and has the potential to enhance conflict prevention initiatives. When establishing projects in other sectors or responding to an emerging or ongoing crisis, measures can and should be devised to contribute towards and support longer-term peace needs. A “reconciliation lens” can help stakeholders understand how their efforts contribute to bridgebuilding, address existing grievances, and support the establishment or strengthening of relationships. The present context of the global health crisis caused by the spread of COVID-19 is a case in point. The world is already seeing that the impact of COVID-19 can exacerbate existing inequalities, drive wedges between communities and, in settings suffering from deficits of societal trust, may foment distrust or tensions between civilians and their governments. The responses taken by health and humanitarian actors may benefit by embedding a transformative, reconciliatory approach, ultimately contributing towards the longer-term development of resilient and peaceful societies.

## II. Reconciliation and the Peacebuilding Architecture

### *Peacebuilding Commission*

For numerous countries before the PBC, both through the Country-Specific Configurations (CSCs)<sup>2</sup> and ad hoc discussions in the Organizational Committee (OC),<sup>3</sup> the issues of promoting social cohesion, strengthening inter-communal relationships through dialogue, and developing or implementing reconciliation processes are of profound relevance and are national priorities for building sustainable peace. As such, the PBC’s *political accompaniment role*<sup>4</sup> makes it a suitable intergovernmental body to work alongside governments through the grounding principle of national ownership as they undertake measures towards healing and reconciliation. In addition to serving as a platform to accompany fragile and conflict affected states, the PBC provides an unparalleled mechanism for dialogue amongst Member States to share experiences, challenges and lessons learned when it comes to Peacebuilding and Sustaining Peace. Notably, the Commission has and can continue to serve as a vehicle to foster South-South and triangular cooperation and the sharing of experiences between countries similarly affected by conflict, including with regards to the theme of reconciliation.

As reaffirmed in the dual Resolutions, the PBC has a unique and critical function, notably “to serve a *bridging role*” and act as a “*platform to convene all relevant actors within and outside the United Nations.*”<sup>5</sup> This empowers the Commission to engage in actionable, cross-pillar discussions on the topic of reconciliation that can support coherent and coordinated UN strategies at the national level. The ability to welcome the expertise of outside actors can allow for more holistic and

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<sup>2</sup> For example, the topic of reconciliation is a direct priority for the Liberia, Burundi and the Central African Republic CSCs as those governments explore their national processes. For more information, see the Peacebuilding Commission’s website, [un.org/peacebuilding/commission](http://un.org/peacebuilding/commission) to access relevant country-focused materials.

<sup>3</sup> For example, the subject has been raised in ad hoc discussions on The Gambia and Sri Lanka, among others. Additionally, civil society participants from The Gambia spoke about national reconciliation measures in the thematic discussion on Youth, Peace and Security. For more information see the PBC’s thirteenth annual report.

<sup>4</sup> Visit the PBC’s website for succinct information on the mandate of the Commission; [un.org/peacebuilding/commission](http://un.org/peacebuilding/commission)

<sup>5</sup> See A/RES/262; S/RES/2282 (2016).

nuanced understandings of peacebuilding in practice, and thus directly contribute to the creation and implementation of more sustainable and impactful reconciliatory processes. Additionally, there is a great degree of untapped potential to learn from the expertise of those directly engaged in community or national level processes. The PBC, through its convening power, can be a leading body to bring this learning and information to the UN and support meaningful partnerships with practitioners.

Lastly, the PBC's **advisory role** to the UNSC provides a connection and entry point for the Commission to further engage on the subject of reconciliation. The Council acknowledged the "*importance of strong coordination, coherence and cooperation*"<sup>6</sup> with the PBC and in subsequent years there has been great progress in further aligning the work of these two bodies. Country-specific meetings in the Council provide ample opportunity for the PBC Chair or CSC Chairs to bring updates on the development or implementation of reconciliation efforts and the Commission's role in accompanying national governments. Additionally, the PBC can seek to uphold its advisory role by convening timely thematic discussions ahead of the periodic UNSC debates on reconciliation.

#### Recommendations:

- The Peacebuilding Commission should consider **convening a thematic discussion on reconciliation during the PBC's fifteenth session** to: assess the PBC's impact and contributions towards national reconciliation processes; provide a platform for learning and exchange across Member States and the UN system; and to further explore concrete avenues for the PBC, based on its mandate, to promote and support reconciliation as a component of Peacebuilding and Sustaining Peace. Such a discussion may also provide an avenue to **consider if Member States should request a thematic report by the UN Secretary-General on reconciliation** as a means of further exploring the practicalities of Peacebuilding and Sustaining Peace.
- The Commission should continue to strengthen its efforts to **uphold its advisory role to the UNSC with regards to the topic of reconciliation**. This can include convening timely and strategic PBC discussions ahead of future thematic UNSC debates. Additionally, building upon the work of the PBC and CSC Chairs, the Commission can seek to elevate the centrality of reconciliation in UNSC country briefings and discussions in the Council on Peacebuilding and Sustaining Peace.

#### *Peacebuilding Fund*

The Peacebuilding Fund has historically prioritized the allocation of resources for national reconciliatory processes. Its Strategic Investment Plan 2020-2024 articulates national reconciliation as a component of the investment priority focus area of "dialogue and peaceful coexistence."<sup>7</sup> The plan has elevated the issue of national reconciliation, among others in this focus area, based on contextual analysis of global trends. As noted in the plan, "*the Fund expects continued high demand from Member States to support national capacities with the peaceful and inclusive management of critical reform and transition processes, coping with the displacement crisis, and to deal with long-lasting legacies of violent conflict.*"<sup>8</sup>

By investing in the PBF's quantum leap in funding, Member States will support recipient countries, UN entities and civil society organizations as they develop and implement programming to promote peaceful and inclusive societies. Additionally, the relationship between the PBC and PBF can continue to be strengthened through convening ad hoc discussions in the Commission featuring briefings from recipient countries. Such meetings can be avenues to continue to elevate the PBF's support of national reconciliation processes and to learn from and assess the impact of such efforts.

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<sup>6</sup> See S/RES/2282 (2016).

<sup>7</sup> See, *Secretary-General's Peacebuilding Fund: 2020-2024 Strategy*.

<sup>8</sup> See, *Secretary-General's Peacebuilding Fund: 2020-2024 Strategy*.

### **III. Key messages on reconciliation**

The below provides key messages drawn from QUNO's learning and experience in our long-term exploration of the topic of reconciliation.

#### **Inclusive participation and a whole-of-society approach can enhance the impact of reconciliatory measures.**

Societies are not homogenous structures but are diverse and complex. Therefore, the exclusion of marginalized communities from political processes is a fundamental driver of instability. The meaningful inclusion of communities and marginalized groups in the design and implementation of a reconciliation process can greatly enhance the legitimacy and efficacy of such endeavors, and support broadening the scope of national strategies towards the cultivation of more resilient and stable societies.

#### **Reconciliation should be regarded as a lens through which to address structural inequalities and root causes of conflict.**

In designing reconciliation initiatives, impactful and sustainable methods are undoubtedly ones that address the root causes and grievances that underpin conflict. Developing and implementing comprehensive reconciliation processes will support efforts to address country specific peacebuilding challenges and will serve to enhance societal resilience to prevent the recurrence of conflict. Holistic reconciliation measures require strategic, meaningful and operational partnerships between national governments, societies and relevant external actors, such as the UN, to address structural inequalities and societal fragmentation. At the heart of such efforts should be a bottom-up approach that makes strides to address the roots of conflict.

#### **Trauma manifests as a by-product of conflict and, if left unaddressed, will negatively impact societies, including across generations.**

Trauma has far reaching psycho-social implications on the lives of those affected by conflict and tears at the very fabric that holds families and communities together. When left unaddressed, trauma can contribute to fostering mistrust between communities, widening existing societal cleavages, and precipitating returns to violence and instability. Thus, addressing societal trauma requires long-term, inclusive and contextualized responses. The severity and impact of trauma on individuals, communities, and thus on building sustainable peace, needs to be elevated within policy circles, including at the UN, and seen as a priority when accompanying countries during reconciliation processes.

#### **By implementing contextualized justice and reparation processes, reconciliation measures can complement peacebuilding efforts in settings where conventional justice remains elusive.**

Where the possibility for conventional justice exists, a commitment to contextual and conflict sensitive approaches can help build bonds of trust, ensure that the needs of victims are addressed, and that grievances are not allowed to simmer below the surface. However, in most situations of large-scale violence in which societies have been divided and traumatized, conventional justice can be elusive. The great majority of victims usually do not have their cases taken up in a court of law, and offenders are rarely brought to justice in a conventional sense. As a result, alongside customary mechanisms, there is a significant need for complementary processes of truth-telling that acknowledge the harm done in order to restore human dignity and foster the beginnings of trust.

### **IV. About the Quaker United Nations Office (QUNO)**

Since 1947, QUNO has worked with diplomats, UN officials, and civil society to support a UN that prioritizes peace and prevents war. Grounded in the Quaker belief that there is that of the divine in every person, we seek a United Nations that addresses key drivers of violence; that facilitates and supports change through peaceful means; and whose policies and practices reflect a diversity of voices, such that people around the world can safely and peacefully achieve their potential.