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Escaping Path Dependency

A Proposed Multi-Tiered Approach for the UN's Peacebuilding Commission

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Working Paper

The Future of the Peacebuilding Architecture Project

Escaping Path Dependency: A Proposed Multi-Tiered Approach for the UN's Peacebuilding Commission

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Preface – From the Project Director

At the 2005 World Summit in New York City, member states of the United Nations agreed to create “a dedicated institutional mechanism to address the special needs of countries emerging from conflict towards recovery, reintegration and reconstruction and to assist them in laying the foundation for sustainable development”. That new mechanism was the UN Peacebuilding Commission and two associated bodies: a Peacebuilding Support Office and a Peacebuilding Fund. Together, these new entities have been characterized as the UN’s new peacebuilding architecture, or PBA.

This Working Paper is one of nine essays that examine the possible future role of the UN’s peacebuilding architecture. They were written as part of a project co-organized by the Centre for International Policy Studies at the University of Ottawa and the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs. All of the contributors to the project were asked to identify realistic but ambitious “stretch targets” for the Peacebuilding Commission and its associated bodies over the next five to ten years. The resulting Working Papers, including this one, seek to stimulate fresh thinking about the UN’s role in peacebuilding.

The moment is ripe for such rethinking: During 2010, the UN will review the performance of the PBA to date, including the question of whether it has achieved its mandated objectives. Most of the contributors to this project believe that the PBA should pursue a more ambitious agenda over the next five years. While the PBC and its associated bodies have succeeded in carving out a niche for themselves, that niche remains a small one. Yet the need for more focused international attention, expertise, and coordinated and sustained assistance towards war-torn countries is undiminished. It remains to be seen whether UN officials and the organization’s member states will rise to the challenge of delivering on the PBA’s initial promise over the next five years and beyond, but doing so will at least require a vision of what the PBA can potentially accomplish in this period. The Working Papers produced in this project are intended to provide grist for this visioning effort.

Roland Paris
Ottawa, January 2010

Summary

The UN's new peacebuilding architecture was created to address the persistent shortcomings of international support to countries emerging from war and violent conflict. Recognizing that peacebuilding is a multi-dimensional effort involving myriad actors, it was envisaged that the Peacebuilding Commission (and the related Peacebuilding Fund and Peacebuilding Support Office) would serve as catalysts to improve international policies and practices, thereby contributing to sustainable peace.

While the PBC is now well-established, its performance to date has fallen short of expectations. One of the main reasons is the PBC's pursuit of a '*standard approach*' in its engagement with countries on its agenda. Every peacebuilding context is unique. Yet the PBC has so far been '*path dependent*' – replicating the same approach in successive countries. Its efforts have been driven by process rather than substance.

This paper argues that unless the PBC adopts a '*multi-tiered approach*' which is designed to better identify and respond to multiple peacebuilding challenges, it will remain a marginal actor in an already overcrowded peacebuilding field. A multi-tiered approach would require the PBC to define three existential questions regarding the scope, focus and function of its work. The Commission needs to engage with a range of countries at different points on the non-linear transition from conflict to peace; it needs to focus on peacebuilding outcomes and impact rather than activities and inputs; and finally, it needs to establish itself as a proactive and sought out advisory body. These are consistent with the PBC's formal mandate. However, they do necessitate a fundamental rethinking of the PBC's current configurations, instruments, and modes of operation.

Introduction

In the last two decades, there has been a growing understanding of the complex challenges of building peace in conflict-affected areas as well as the shortcomings of international efforts to support post-conflict peacebuilding. As a result, there have been many efforts to improve peacebuilding assistance through new policies, practices and institutional reforms. Among these, the creation of the UN's new

peacebuilding architecture merits special attention since it was designed to fill a major gap in the international system. Consisting of the PBC, the PBF and the PBSO, the UN's peacebuilding architecture has now been in operation for three years and has inevitably changed the UN's landscape in various ways. However, there is an acute awareness that the peacebuilding architecture – especially its main pillar the PBC – has fallen short of addressing the challenges that continue to beset international support for peacebuilding. Having invested in the creation of the new architecture, there is a legitimate concern among its many supporters that the PBC has yet to become an effective player in peacebuilding. The forthcoming 2010 review of the PBC provides an important opportunity to assess the extent to which the PBC has achieved its original objectives and how it can best chart a more effective course for the future.

This briefing paper¹ aims to contribute to that effort. Informed by close observation of the PBC's work in the last three years, it presents a friendly critique of the PBC's operations to date and offers some suggestions for its future.² As other papers in this collection provide detailed accounts of the creation and evolution of the PBC, this one starts with a quick overview of the reasons that led to the PBC's creation and a general assessment of the extent to which the PBC met the expectations of its creators. Arguing that the Commission's work to date reflects a strong tendency toward path dependency, the paper urges the PBC to adopt a multi-tiered approach to supporting peacebuilding in order to meet the complex and differentiated challenges facing countries emerging from conflict.

I. A Quick Review

The UN's peacebuilding architecture was created to redress the recognized shortcomings of international efforts to support the complex and simultaneous humanitarian-security-development needs of countries emerging from conflict. These shortcomings are well known and have been convincingly detailed in the rich peacebuilding literature that was produced in the last fifteen years.³ Yet, despite much knowledge and innovative institutional reform, international peacebuilding re-

¹ This paper draws liberally from the extant literature on peacebuilding and the UN's peacebuilding architecture. However, it is also based on the author's two year tenure at PBSO as an in-house consultant, serving as a Senior Policy Advisor.

² From 2001 to 2005, the author was Vice President of the International Peace Academy (now the IPI) in which capacity she advocated strongly for the creation of the PBC.

³ For a useful survey of the field and the relevant literature, see www.peacebuildinginitiative.org

mains a highly problematic enterprise – as evidenced by the continuing production of new reports detailing persisting problems and obstacles.⁴ Paradoxically, one of the obstacles to the advancement of peacebuilding has been the steady influx of new-comers who end up re-discovering the field anew rather than moving the agenda forward. As a result, peacebuilding has become a field of self-perpetuating concepts and principles rather than their application and impact evaluation in concrete contexts with a view to advancing peacebuilding policy and practice.⁵ Indeed, the UN’s peacebuilding architecture was created for that very reason.

Given the rich literature on the origins and antecedents of the UN’s peacebuilding architecture, I will not cover that ground anew. Instead, I believe that there is sufficient agreement on why we needed a new set of institutions at the United Nations. The aim was to redress the fragmented, piecemeal, erratic nature of international support to peacebuilding by creating a set of institutions with the explicit mandate to overcome these weaknesses. In a nutshell, the PBC (and by extension, the PBF and PBSO) were designed to

- bring sustained attention to the pressing needs of countries emerging from conflict;
- promote better coordination and coherence among the myriad actors involved in peacebuilding;
- marshal resources for peacebuilding; and
- increase the knowledge base for more effective peacebuilding policy and practice.⁶

To what extent has the PBC succeeded in meeting these expectations? More importantly, what does its record to date suggest about its future prospects and promises? The next two sections specifically address these questions. It should be noted that while the UN’s new peacebuilding architecture also includes the Peacebuilding Fund (PBF) and the Peacebuilding Support Office (PBSO), this paper focuses primarily on the PBC. It is recognized that any consideration of the PBC’s performance is incomplete without adequate attention to these two related entities. Thus, the analysis in this paper needs to be linked to parallel discussions about strengthening the PBF and the PBSO.

⁴ See, for example, “*Report of the Secretary-General on Peacebuilding in the Immediate Aftermath of Conflict*,” UN document A/63/881-S/2009/304 (11 June 2009); <http://daccessdds.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N09/367/70/PDF/N0936770.pdf>

⁵ It is for this reason that the Peacebuilding Roundtable held in Ottawa in December 2008 proposed putting a moratorium on certain types of research and analysis so that we can more effectively contribute to improved policy and practice.⁵

⁶ The founding resolutions of the PBC are also available at www.un.org/peace/peacebuilding

II. An Inauspicious Beginning: Process Trumps Substance

As one of the two main institutional reforms to emerge from the 2005 World Summit (the other being the Human Rights Council), the PBC started its work with great expectations but without a road map or a practical guidebook. Initially, it was primarily concerned with establishing itself and finding its niche within the UN labyrinth. Gradually, like other UN entities, it adopted a set of procedures and made a number of critical choices which have continued to shape its operations. In a nutshell, the PBC organized its work into three distinct configurations: 1) the Organizational Committee (OC); 2) the Country-Specific Meetings (CSMs); and 3) the Working Group on Lessons Learned (WGLL). Collectively, these three configurations were designed to advance the PBC's objectives. In reality, they have proceeded on separate tracks. The OC spent its first year primarily on procedural issues. Since then, it has held meetings on a number of policy issues ranging from the role of the private sector in peacebuilding to peace consolidation.⁷ Meanwhile, the WGLL organized more than twenty informal sessions on a wide range of topics.⁸ The core of the PBC's work, however, has been concentrated in the CSMs, focusing first on Sierra Leone and Burundi, and more recently on Guinea-Bissau and the Central African Republic.⁹

As required by its founding resolutions, the PBC has so far prepared three annual reports for the Security Council and the General Assembly. These provide a formal record of the PBC's activities and achievements. In addition, there have been several external reviews of the PBC.¹⁰ While identifying a number of shortcomings, these external reviews have generally given the PBC the benefit of the doubt in terms of its effectiveness on the grounds that it is premature to make firm judgments about its performance and potential in light of its short tenure. Yet, to date, there has not been a formal and independent evaluation of the PBC.¹¹ In 2010, five years after its creation, the PBC is

⁷ For a chronology and review of the OC's work, see the PBC's three annual reports on the PBC website.

⁸ Ibid. In specific, see the *Synthesis Report* of the work of the PBC prepared by PBSO in June 2008 and the Chair's Summary of the WGLL review meeting held on 9 December 2009.

⁹ For the extensive documentation of the PBC's engagement with the four countries, see the PBC website under each configuration.

¹⁰ See for example, NYU Center on International Cooperation and the International Peace Institute, "Taking Stock, Looking Forward: A Strategic Review of the Peacebuilding Commission", April 2008

<http://www.cic.nyu.edu/peacebuilding/docs/takingstocklookingforward.pdf>

¹¹ In the meantime, there have been internal and external evaluations of the PBC leading to a formal revision of the terms of reference of the PBC. This suggests that there is more de-

undertaking a “strategic review” of its work. However, unless it is undertaken by an external body to provide an independent evaluation, the strategic review is likely to be fairly circumscribed in its scope and ambition.

In the absence of a formal evaluation, any assessment of the PBC’s performance should be considered incomplete, partial and subjective. Nonetheless, after three years, there is a growing understanding of how the PBC is unfolding and what this might mean for its future. I believe that it is important to try to address three interrelated questions regarding the PBC’s role and performance so far:

1. How do other critical actors view the role of the PBC?
2. How has the PBC carried out its responsibilities?
3. What is the link between the PBC’s work and peacebuilding outcomes on the ground?

Admittedly, the answers that are offered below were not obtained through a systematic and rigorous evaluation process but through direct personal knowledge of the PBC’s operations, interviews with numerous stakeholders, and careful reading of relevant documents as well as the larger peacebuilding literature.

Perception of the PBC by other actors

There are numerous signs suggesting that the PBC has yet to become a significant player in peacebuilding. For one thing, the Commission is little known beyond its own immediate constituencies. Apart from people who are directly involved in the work of the PBC in UN headquarters or abroad, there is very little knowledge or understanding of the work of the PBC in capitals, among local peacebuilding practitioners and the public at large.¹² Even among the larger peacebuilding community, PBC is conspicuous by its absence. Besides its lack of a strong and visible profile (which is acknowledged in the PBC’s own reports), there is evidence that the PBC’s role is not acknowledged or sought after even by key constituencies. Three recent examples serve to confirm this:

- The recently-released *New Horizons* report by the Departments of Peacekeeping Operations and Field Support makes no reference to the PBC even though the report views peacebuilding as a critical dimension of the UN’s work. The omission of any re-

mand for formal evaluations of funding mechanisms rather than of political processes which can have more impact on peacebuilding outcomes.

¹² During my extensive travels related to peacebuilding, I regularly ask local officials, academics, civil society organizations about the PBC. More often than not, they admit no knowledge of it.

ference to the PBC (or PBSO) in a UN report discussing peacebuilding is extremely telling.¹³

- Equally significant, there has not been a strong demand from post-conflict countries for PBC's assistance. Although more than two dozen countries struggle with serious peacebuilding challenges, PBC finds itself focusing only on four countries. So far, potential PBC candidate countries (e.g. Liberia) have declined proposals for PBC engagement. Meanwhile, some national and international officials from the first two countries on the PBC's agenda seem anxious to initiate a process of disengagement.
- Turning to the UN system's reception of the new peacebuilding architecture, perhaps the most striking indication emerged during the preparation of the Secretary-General's recent report on "*Peacebuilding in the immediate aftermath of conflict*". The months' long report-preparation process displayed intense competition among the various UN entities for the lead role in peacebuilding and strong resistance to assigning a special role to the new "peacebuilding architecture" beyond countries on the PBC's agenda and/or receiving PBF funding. Many parts of the UN system still consider the new "architecture" as one among other entities and, in fact, take issue with the suggestion that the PBC/PBF/PBSO have a broad mandate that is not confined to a few countries.

PBC's view of its role and responsibilities

Since its inception, the PBC has sought to define its role and functions through its various configurations and activities. However, there is no consensus or clarity on what these involve. In fact, there has been a running debate among the PBC member states as to the proper role of the PBC: Should it focus exclusively on particular countries or should it take on a larger advisory role? Should it be proactive or respond to incoming requests? These questions have been raised repeatedly and never resolved satisfactorily.¹⁴ Instead, the PBC seems to have fallen into a safe routine, a "path dependency" – replicating its approach in

¹³ Annex 1 of the New Horizons report which summarizes its recommendation, also makes no mention of the PBSO, stating: "To contribute to a broader peacebuilding effort, DPKO and DFS will:

- Develop a coherent strategy for sequencing, resourcing and implementing mandated early safety and security stabilization tasks.
- "Request missions, as relevant, to include information on progress in peacebuilding in their regular assessments on mandated tasks, as well as on related actions of UN agencies, funds and programmes and other partners, and to collectively draw attention to critical gaps." p. 42.

¹⁴ See, for example, the minutes of the PBC's two retreats to date.

each new country with little variation.¹⁵ Moreover, PBC has embraced the time-honored UN tradition of holding an ever-increasing number of meetings with few concrete results. As a result, the Commission's approach has cast doubts on its ability to serve as an innovative actor that can bring novel and multi-dimensional perspectives to peace-building. Several examples demonstrate the PBC's shortcomings in this regard.

- Many analysts and advocates saw the PBC's unique composition and diverse constituency as a hopeful sign – suggesting that the PBC would be able to overcome UN's conventional practices, including competition within regional groupings for membership on UN bodies, in pursuing its mandate. However, intense competition within GRULAC states for PBC membership during the Commission's very first rotation of members in June 2008 and the resultant postponement of the turn-over of PBC membership suggested that the PBC is highly susceptible to member state politics to the extent of disrupting the Commission's work.
- While member states compete vigorously for PBC membership, their performance does not reflect a similar level of commitment to its work. Although the Commission has held many meetings, undertook various field missions, and produced numerous reports, these were largely due to the initiative of a relatively small number of member states (mainly donor countries) who also took on heavy responsibilities as chairs of the various configurations of the PBC. Other states have remained passive members of the PBC – generally following the lead of the few activist members. Indeed, with the exception of countries chairing the PBC's various configurations, there is scant evidence that PBC member states have assumed additional financial or political responsibilities as part of their membership on the PBC.
- Perhaps one of the most telling signs of the disconnect between the PBC's internal processes and the needs of its potential clients is the time it takes for the PBC to respond to incoming requests. In the case of Sierra Leone and Burundi, there was a long lag time between their referral to the PBC and the completion of their IPBSes which defined the relationship between the PBC and the country in question. This was largely due to the fact that the PBC was only just getting started and

¹⁵ The term “path dependence” is used to explain how decisions taken in any given circumstance are limited by previous decisions, even when past circumstances may no longer be relevant.

defining its role. However, both Guinea-Bissau and the Central African Republic had to wait over a year before their formal request was relayed to the PBC via the Secretary-General and the Security Council and the PBC finally became engaged with the two countries. In the meantime, there was little sense of urgency or proactive advocacy on the part of the PBC. Given the oft-repeated dictum that the narrow “window of opportunity” in post-conflict contexts should not be wasted, these delays reflect the shortcomings of the PBC’s institutional arrangements which militate against quick and effective action.

Link between the PBC’s work and peacebuilding outcomes

While external perceptions and internal operations matter, ultimately the PBC’s performance has to be seen in light of its contributions to improving peacebuilding outcomes on the ground. In the absence of a formal evaluation, any assessment is inevitably impressionistic and subjective. It is also inconclusive since it is extremely difficult to attribute causality or responsibility to any single actor in a complex and multi-faceted field such as peacebuilding. However, several indicators suggest that the PBC’s work has at best been modest, if not marginal in all its configurations. Both the Organizational Committee and the Working Group on Lessons Learned have held many meetings on important issues, but these have essentially been inconsequential in terms of leading to new policies, strategies or action. There is no evidence that peacebuilding policy or practice at the United Nations or beyond has been influenced by the deliberations of the OC or the WGLL.¹⁶

More seriously, however, the work of the CSMs has also been quite modest – certainly in relation to the time, energy and resources that have been devoted to the PBC. This is not to minimize the PBC’s efforts; it is simply to put them in perspective in light of the enormous needs that remain to be met. Here, again, several examples offer a useful reality check:

- There is no evidence that the two countries where the PBC was involved for the last three years (Sierra Leone and Burundi) have fared better than other countries (such as Liberia or Rwanda) where the PBC was not involved.
- While analysts recognize the PBC’s positive contributions at certain critical moments in both Sierra Leone and Burundi, it is difficult to assert that the PBC’s role was essential or indispensable – especially since there were already integrated UN mis-

¹⁶ See the synthesis report of the WGLL’s proceedings prepared in June 2008 and December 2009.

sions in both Sierra Leone and Burundi with the specific mandate to bring a coherent and strategic approach to peacebuilding in each country. On the other hand, there is evidence that the PBC's extensive engagement in these countries generated new tensions and considerable additional work for the national and international actors on the ground.

- Perhaps most serious of all, violence erupted repeatedly in one of the countries under the PBC's watch and PBC was largely a bystander in the process. The PBC's own report on its engagement in Guinea-Bissau is a revealing testimony of the PBC's limitations. Paragraphs 45-53 of the PBC's third annual report deal with Guinea-Bissau, primarily describing procedural matters and various activities. In between, three paragraphs make a reference to a) an armed attack on the residence of President Vieira; b) the assassinations of the President and his Chief of General Staff; c) the assassination of a former Minister and presidential candidate. In each of these cases, the PBC's response is described as expressing concern, condemning the use of violence and reiterating support in favor of peacebuilding efforts.¹⁷ There is little reflection on the implications of these violent events on the PBC's engagement with Guinea-Bissau or even any sense of urgency about the need for a different course of action.

Indeed, the Guinea-Bissau case captures the most serious shortcoming of the PBC. There seems to be a deep gap (as well as cognitive dissonance) between the PBC's intensive and lengthy processes and realities on the ground. This is true for the PBC's country configurations as well as its Organizational Committee and the Working Group on Lessons Learned. Process repeatedly seems to trump substance.

It is recognized that the PBC is a new entity; that for an advisory UN body, its work is just gaining momentum; that it first needed to establish its processes in order start delivering on its promise; that it is only one player among many that are engaged in peacebuilding. All of this is true. And there are various short-term proposals for improving the PBC's operations which should be embraced and implemented as soon as possible. However, this paper argues that if the PB architecture proceeds in its current path with only marginal fine-tuning or incremental change, it will fail to realize the worthy goals for which it was created, namely, to help improve peacebuilding policy and practice in countries emerging from conflict. It is not too soon to start ask-

¹⁷ See the third annual report of the PBC at www.un.org/Docs/journal/asp/ws.asp?m=PBC/3/OC/L.1

ing the hard questions about the PBC's long-term future if it is eventually going to get there.

III. Moving the Agenda Forward: A Multi-Tiered Role for the PBC

As the 2010 review of the PBC approaches, the PBC needs to confront several existential questions about the scope, focus and nature of its work. Without a serious re-examination of these fundamental issues, the PBC – and the UN's peacebuilding architecture – risk becoming a marginal player among the myriad actors engaged in peacebuilding rather than the much-needed catalyst and innovator envisaged by its supporters and creators. None of the following questions is new. As noted, they have all been raised by the PBC as well as various analysts and have generated considerable debate.¹⁸ However, they all remain pending:

1. Should the PBC confine its work primarily to post-peacekeeping cases or should it engage earlier in conflict contexts where there is an opportunity to promote peacebuilding alongside peacemaking and peacekeeping?
2. Should the PBC have a limited, country-specific role or a broader peacebuilding role?
3. What is an appropriate role for a UN subsidiary advisory body that reports both to the Security Council and the General Assembly? What are the boundaries of an advisory role? As a UN body representing diverse constituencies, can the PBC be empowered to serve as an overseer of internationally-agreed standards and policies?

There are multiple possible responses to each question ranging from a minimalist to a maximalist vision. Inevitably, different choices have fundamentally different implications for the long-term effectiveness of the PBC. They also carry different operational implications, with varying degrees of feasibility. However, in lieu of addressing each question individually, this paper argues that they should be addressed jointly. Only by examining their necessary inter-dependence can we

¹⁸ See the minutes of the PBC's two annual retreats as well as the June 2009 Stanley Foundation conference report at <http://www.stanleyfoundation.org/publications/report/PeacebulidingRpt809.pdf>

begin to visualize how best they can be incorporated into the work of the UN's peacebuilding architecture in the coming 3-5 years. What follows, therefore, is an attempt to envisage a PBC that can realize its full potential as an indispensable actor whose role and contributions in peacebuilding are recognized, sought after and, most importantly, consequential in terms of improving peacebuilding policy, practice and outcomes.

The options outlined below are congruent with the PBC's original mandate and do not depend on radical changes requiring another round of extensive intergovernmental or inter-departmental negotiations. Thus, the purpose of this exercise is to identify ways of making the current peacebuilding architecture more effective rather than creating a different architecture that would further detract attention and resources from the overall goal of improving peacebuilding outcomes.

1. Scope of the PBC's Work: Situating the PBC within the Non-linear Conflict to Peace Continuum

It has become axiomatic that in most intra-state conflicts (which are the core of international peacebuilding efforts) there is a conflict cycle that cannot easily be divided into identifiable phases such as pre-conflict, in-conflict or post-conflict. Similarly, it is recognized that international responses in terms of humanitarian aid, peacemaking, peacekeeping and peacebuilding cannot be provided in a sequential manner but often need to be provided simultaneously.¹⁹ Nonetheless, so far the PBC has only focused on late post-conflict, post-peacekeeping contexts. Moreover, all the cases on the PBC's portfolio come from Africa and are countries that are not high on the international agenda.

While it might have been necessary to limit PBC's early work to relatively "easier" post-peacekeeping countries, that decision is no longer defensible in light of the fact that in most cases peacebuilding cannot be postponed until after the peacekeepers have left. If the PBC does not get involved in "hard" cases where peacemaking, peacekeeping and peacebuilding are often co-terminus, it is likely that the PBC will steadily be marginalized and weakened vis-à-vis its relations with the Security Council and other international actors involved in conflict contexts. The question is not simply a sequential division of labor between the Security Council and the PBC. Indeed, the Security Council is still involved in the four cases on the PBC's agenda. The question is more about their respective areas of competence. The PBC needs to demonstrate its special competence and value-added in supporting

¹⁹ See "*United Nations Peacekeeping: Principles and Guidelines*" (or the so-called Capstone doctrine) on the DPKO website.

peacebuilding in a range of different contexts. The PBC's mandate is multi-faceted and distinct from the Security Council's focus on maintaining peace and security. It is also different from the mandates of other relevant actors such as donors, IFIs and NGOs which are primarily concerned with longer term development. The PBC is the designated intergovernmental body where security-diplomacy-development come together. It is also the only international body that can bring national, regional and international actors together to address the multi-faceted challenges of peacebuilding in different contexts.

Moving from its current late post-conflict case load to engage in conflict-torn countries with a peacekeeping mission would require a radical re-tooling of the PBC as well as a better delineation of its role vis-à-vis the Security Council. In specific, the PBC would require better and more rigorous analysis of opportunities and options for effective peacebuilding in a wider range of countries. It would also need to organize itself differently in order to develop greater expertise and knowledge that would enable it to provide relevant advice to the Security Council.²⁰ At the moment, it is unlikely that the Security Council would bring "hard cases" like the DRC, Afghanistan or Iraq to the attention of the PBC even though it is recognized that these countries are struggling with difficult peacebuilding challenges alongside ongoing military and security problems. It is only when and if the PBC can demonstrate its ability to contribute something "indispensable" to the work of the Security Council (and other relevant actors) that it would be taken more seriously.

2. Focus of the PBC's Work: Aiming for Peacebuilding Outcomes and Impact

If the PBC is to get involved in a wide range of conflict contexts to promote peacebuilding earlier rather than later in the messy transition from war to peace, it cannot proceed with its current focus on only a few countries to the exclusion of others where its intervention might, in fact, be more necessary. This means that the PBC has to conceive of its role more broadly and consider its engagement on multiple levels. It can continue to engage with relatively "safe", late post conflict case like Sierra Leone or Burundi or countries facing chronic insecurity and instability like Guinea-Bissau. However, it also needs to assume responsibility in other cases where there is a clear need for a non-partisan multilateral entity to bring knowledge, political influence, convening power and resources to address difficult challenges to peacebuilding.

²⁰ In this connection, the role of the PBSO in supporting the PBC to take on expanded responsibilities is essential.

However, expanding its portfolio means that the PBC needs to adopt a differentiated and tailored strategy requiring varying levels of engagement with the countries on its agenda – i.e. a so-called “*multi-tier*” approach. The Commission cannot proceed with its current standardized and path-dependent approach consisting of the development of an IPBS, periodic reviews and meeting-heavy procedures. Instead, the specific role and value-added of the PBC will have to depend upon the context which, after all, should be the starting point of any effective peacebuilding strategy. In some cases, PBC’s help might be needed to overcome specific blockages in how the international community provides assistance in a given country. In such cases, the PBC’s role would be as a facilitator or even a neutral “third party.” In other cases, the PBC might facilitate a regional approach to peacebuilding involving several neighboring countries. Indeed, the regional dimension of contemporary conflicts is well-recognized although very few organizations currently have regional strategies.²¹ In still other cases, the PBC might play the key role in supporting a government to develop an integrated peacebuilding strategy when there are no national planning frameworks or effective UN presence on the ground. In order to respond to these diverse needs, the PBC would need to organize itself into new configurations and develop a new range of instruments besides the current IPBS to help shape its engagement in different context. In fact, there is growing appreciation within the PBC of the limitations of the current IPBS process and product. Beyond formal tools and instruments, the PBC also needs to re-consider its current configurations. In addition to some variation of the CSMs, the PBC might have other standing or provisional mechanisms such as “*Groups of Friends*” or “*Special Observers*” to undertake specific tasks and functions.

Equally important, PBC support need not be confined to country-specific challenges. Instead, the PBC needs to take on systemic, policy or institutional issues that are often the main blockages to peacebuilding in conflict-prone countries. These might include observing the implementation of agreed international cooperation frameworks across various countries; working with other actors to establish policy guidelines and standards for resource mobilization, including the operation of the PBF and multi-donor trust funds for peacebuilding; reviewing and helping to synchronize UN’s diverse sectoral policies in post-conflict contexts; and identifying institutional impediments to effective collaboration. In each of these cases, PBC’s help would be directed to serving as a catalyst or facilitator to bring myriad actors to

²¹ For regional approaches to peacebuilding, see the WGLL’s discussion of the topic on several occasions. For an African perspective, see the parallel Briefing Paper by Kwesi Aning and Ernest Ansah Lartey.

identify a solution to common problems across geographic, national or institutional boundaries.

For example, the Secretary-General's report on "*Peacebuilding in the immediate aftermath of conflict*" has identified a number of areas where the UN as well as the international community need to make significant changes in the way they respond to peacebuilding in the immediate aftermath of war. There is no other entity than the Peacebuilding Commission with the mandate to oversee that these changes are undertaken. While the PBC does not have an enforcement mandate, it has the delegated authority to review, assess and advise how the international community is living up to its responsibilities in the area of peacebuilding. However, as with all the other tasks identified above, taking on such a role would require a significant re-thinking of PBC's current internal organization.

So far the PBC has concentrated its work primarily on its country-specific configurations (CSMs) while the Organizational Committee and the Working Group on Lessons Learned have examined assorted thematic or policy issues largely in isolation from the work of the CSMs and with little concern for their utility or practical application. Indeed, the CSMs have generally convened their own thematic sessions instead of taking advantage of the OC or the WGLL as useful platforms. As a result, there has been very little accumulation of knowledge or cross-fertilization among the PBC's three configurations. The lack of synergy among the PBC's three configurations is well recognized although efforts to overcome this have not yielded any results.²² This is largely because, in the absence of a clear idea about their mutual interdependence, each group has proceeded on separate tracks. A differentiated and multi-tiered approach to its work would require the PBC to organize itself differently in order to ensure that all its configurations contribute actively to strengthening the PBC's knowledge and expertise in different areas. The PBC's current configurations provide a useful model for considering how best to organize the Commission's roughly three dozen member states and other participating entities to take on additional roles through an effective division of labor.

3. PBC's Institutional Role and Functions: Becoming a Pro-active and Sought-out Advisor

The previous discussion about the scope and the nature of the PBC's work also requires a significant re-formulation of the PBC's relations with other key actors, and especially the Security Council and the

²² See, for example, the concept note and the Chair's summaries of the WGLL meetings of 12 June 2008 and 9 December 2009.

General Assembly. As a June 2009 report by the Stanley Foundation notes:

Overall, there seemed to be two visions for the PBC: (1) a body that complements the work of other UN organs and agencies, and many other international actors, by filling the much-needed role of a flexible and fast provider of peace dividends in the early recovery period; and (2) a body that more ambitiously informs the Security Council of needs and potential crises at a strategic level, mainstreams peacebuilding throughout the UN system, raises far more funds than is currently the case for peacebuilding needs, integrates peacebuilding with other existing “pillars” in the UN system (peacemaking, peacekeeping, development), and even acts as a top-down unifier of other global actors via the strategic peacebuilding plan produced by its own CSM mechanism.²³

So far, the PBC has primarily played the former role – albeit in a limited capacity. There has not been strong support within the PBC to assume the second role. However, this expanded role was in fact the main rationale for the PBC’s creation. The PBC was not intended to be yet another actor in an already crowded-peacebuilding field. It was designed to bring sustained attention, knowledge, experience, resources, expertise and, perhaps most important of all, rigorous advice and guidance on the multi-faceted and complex challenges of peacebuilding faced by various actors in different contexts.

It is true that the PBC was created as a subsidiary advisory body. However, the advisory role of an intergovernmental, multilateral body need not only be reactive – providing advice upon request. The PBC has the authority to define its advisory role in its various permutations. It can serve as an independent voice; a convener of diverse stakeholders who bring their unique perspectives and contributions to peacebuilding; a watchdog or overseer of international policy and practice with a view to identifying problems and proposing corrective solutions; a solicitor of technical inputs from academics, experts and civil society groups, including commissioning rigorous evaluation studies as necessary; a repository of knowledge and information on a wide range of topics that are relevant to peacebuilding; a recognized body of expertise and experience whose advice/guidance is sought after; and not least of all, an effective advocate for more effective peacebuilding.

These functions are consistent with the PBC’s advisory role. However, the PBC needs to grow into them through its own efforts with a view to establishing its credibility and utility for the Security Council, the General Assembly, and other key national and international actors.

²³ “*Peacebuilding Following Conflict*,” A Report of the Conference Organized by the Stanley Foundation on 19-21 June 2009
<http://www.stanleyfoundation.org/publications/report/PeacebulidingRpt809.pdf>

This would require the PBC to increase its capacities and knowledge base through a significantly strengthened PBSO as well as stronger relations with other knowledge-based and policy-oriented institutions such as think tanks, universities, the OECD-DAC, practitioners networks, and civil society organizations – especially in conflict-affected countries. As covered by other contributions in this series, there are already various elements of such a “virtual” knowledge network in place, including the UN Peacebuilding Community of Practice (PB CoP) and the PBSO/HPCR-supported Peacebuilding Initiative, www.peacebuildinginitiative.com.²⁴ Recognizing its own catalytic role and resource limitations, the PBC needs to draw extensively upon the work of operational entities engaged in different aspects of peacebuilding within as well as outside the United Nations. After all, neither the PBC nor the PBSO are operational actors. Ultimately, their work has to be informed by the individual and collective contributions of many national, regional and international actors to peacebuilding around the world. The PBC can best contribute to improved international policy and practice by distilling relevant lessons from diverse experiences and serving as a repository of what works and what does not in peacebuilding.

IV. Conclusion and Next Steps

The three-pronged and multi-tiered vision outlined above is not a far-fetched fantasy. It is, in fact, eminently feasible provided there is sufficient interest within the PBC to push its envelope or, alternatively, sufficient pressure on the PBC to do so. The 2010 review provides an ideal opportunity for the PBC, as well as friends of peacebuilding who continue to believe in the utility of the UN’s peacebuilding architecture, to start discussing how this or alternative models can be advanced to ensure that the PBC lives up to its worthy goals.

The UN’s peacebuilding architecture (including the PBC, the PBF and the PBSO) are still relatively new entities, seeking appropriate roles within the UN and the larger international community. Their internal organization, modes of operation and relationships are still sufficiently fluid as to allow significant change. Moreover, all three entities have already acquired considerable experience over the last three years which, in turn, has demonstrated their capacities and weaknesses. As already noted, there is a need for an independent, external evaluation

²⁴ For a fuller discussion of this point, see the parallel Working Paper by Erin McCandless.

of the work of the UN's peacebuilding architecture as the basis for any significant re-orientation.

The PBC is at an important crossroads. It can continue in its current path with only minimal adjustments to the way it works with the serious likelihood that it will become yet another entity in an already overcrowded peacebuilding field. In that case, given its limited resources and ambitions, it might well find itself as a peripheral appendage to other bigger and more powerful actors such as the Security Council, donors, IFIs, regional organizations, and various operational actors in the field. Alternatively, it can re-visit its role and responsibilities based on its experiences to date and decide that it is ready to take on an expanded agenda. In that event, it might find it useful to start by reviewing the range of ideas advanced by individuals who still believe in the original mandate of the PBC but feel that it has to make a serious course correction to become an effective entity.

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