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# The Challenges of Institution Building

## Prospects for the UN Peacebuilding Architecture

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Norsk Utenrikspolitisk Institutt
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Working Paper

The Future of the Peacebuilding Architecture Project

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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

Different theories of international relations, institutions, and organizations have insights into both the constraints the new UN peacebuilding architecture is likely to face, as well as potential ways of overcoming some of them. Emphasising that the UN remains a state-centric organization marred by political frictions, political realists would focus on the importance of leadership, interestingly echoed in the June 2009 Secretary-General's report. Rational institutionalists tell us that issue linkage should be pursued in heterogeneous institutions, something the Peacebuilding Commission (PBC) should explicitly try to foster. Public choice analysts would advise that one recognize, and try to work within, the structure of institutional interests, by developing indicators of performance that are outcomes, rather than process-oriented. Organization theorists highlight the limited repertoire of possible policy options and the means-driven nature of many decision-making processes, calling for outside appraisals and deliberate efforts to break routines and engage in forms of broad-based self-reflection. Constructivists emphasize the importance and potential power of ideas in framing discourse and shaping debates, and would advise that the Peacebuilding Support Office (PBSO), the Working Group on Lessons Learned (WGLL), or some other entity might become locations for the generation of new ideas about peacebuilding. In the final analysis, the success of the UN peacebuilding architecture will not be determined by the number of countries requesting its institutions' assistance or the size of its operating budgets, but by the added value it provides. There is an extraordinary wealth of experience concerning the challenges of peacebuilding within the UN system, if it could only be mobilized in a systematic manner.[1]

# Introduction

The United Nations peacebuilding architecture is a new and relatively recent institutional creation, composed of three interrelated entities: the Peacebuilding Commission (PBC), the Peacebuilding Support Office (PBSO), and the Peacebuilding Fund (PBF). Like all new institu-

[1] This Working Paper is based on a longer, more substantive chapter to be published in a forthcoming edited volume of the Future of the UN Peacebuilding Architecture project. The authors would like to thank Roland Paris, Richard Caplan, and the participants of the CIPS workshop at the University of Ottawa on 24 September 2009, for their comments and suggestions on an earlier version of the text. Thanks also go to Georg von Kalckreuth for research and editorial assistance, as well as to Cedric de Coning and NUPI for their work on this publication.

tions, it reflects the concerns, the issues, the interests, and the politics of its time.

The UN's involvement in peacebuilding did not begin with the establishment of the institutions that comprise the peacebuilding architecture in 2005, but rather emerged in the context of its long experience with the complex and interconnected challenges of conflict resolution, peacemaking, peacekeeping and post-conflict peacebuilding, reconciliation and development. Unlike many UN bodies operating principally in one domain, the PBC and its supporting office is tasked with developing an integrated strategy involving politics, economics, and security, areas traditionally treated separately by different agencies or divisions of the UN.

As a new institutional creation, the UN peacebuilding architecture has faced some predictable institutional challenges. There has been contestation over its membership, questions about its scope of authority, resistance to its attempts to coordinate the activities of already existing institutions, difficulties in organizing and staffing its operational activities, problems in establishing rules and operational procedures, and challenges in translating lessons learned from other countries. In thinking about what role (or roles) the UN peacebuilding architecture *should* perform ten years from now, it is important to consider what role it realistically *could* be expected to perform.

Different theories of international relations, institutions, and organizations have insights into both the constraints new institutional entities are likely to face, as well as potential ways of overcoming some of them. To address the issue of what role the UN peacebuilding architecture could realistically be expected to perform ten years from now, we briefly examine what different theories have to tell us about the origins of new institutions, their operational dynamics, their challenges, their constraints, their pathologies, and their realistic possibilities.

## What would political realists say?

The United Nations was created out of the very specific circumstances at the end of the Second World War, circumstances that have long since changed quite significantly. Political realism, which posits the existence of self-interested actors in a self-help system with no overarching authority, would emphasize these circumstances, and would

view the prospects of the UN peacebuilding architecture to be a direct function of them.

Major Powers use the UN to pursue their sometimes very narrow foreign policy interests. The UN remains a profoundly state-centered organization divided by political frictions not only between the Security Council and the General Assembly, but also more generally between states of the North and the South. These structural constraints are not about to go away, and the peacebuilding architecture will be forced to operate within them for the foreseeable future.

What is more malleable and offers promise of change in the next ten years is the quality of the leadership of the new UN peacebuilding architecture. While new technologies and information platforms have the potential to generate more rapid, inclusive, and effective approaches to "collective" peacebuilding efforts, revising bureaucratic approaches to priority-setting, planning, and monitoring – arguably the crux of the current dilemmas facing the PBC and PBSO – will require innovative leadership, both in the UN Secretariat and in key positions in the government administrations of Member States.

Already in 1948, when discussing the functions of the General Assembly, Hans Morgenthau, for many a "founding father" of the realist school in international politics, was quick to point out that "[w]here there is no opportunity for constructive action, talent cannot prove itself and responsibility declines."[2] The rule-bound nature of bureaucracies breeds not Morgenthau's "talented statesman," but rather narrowed professionals seeking secure careers within the system, people who may well be "lacking in heroism, human spontaneity, and inventiveness."[3] Morgenthau would thus have welcomed the call for an increase in leadership capacity that was repeatedly expressed in the June 2009 Secretary-General's report.[4]

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2 H. J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948), 380.

3 M. N. Barnett and M. Finnemore, "The Politics, Power, and Pathologies of International Organizations", *International Organization*, 53 (1999), 699-732, at 709.

4 UN Secretary-General's Report on peacebuilding in the immediate aftermath of conflict, 11 June 2009, 9-13, 26.

# What would rational institutionalists say?

Rational institutionalists agree with political realists that "states use international institutions to further their own goals, and they design institutions accordingly."[5] But they challenge realist arguments that tend to see international institutions primarily as vehicles for the expression of state power, and constructivist views (considered below) that see international institutions as exogenous actors with independent agency that often play a critical role in the spread of norms. Rather, they contend that the design of different international institutions is "the result of rational, purposive interactions among states and other international actors to solve specific problems."[6]

Some of the institutional constraints identified by rational institutionalists are largely fixed and likely to remain relatively fixed over the short to medium term. The size of the body is unlikely to change, and it is likely to be slow to adapt its recently adopted rules of membership, terms, and procedures. This has important implications for its decision-making rules and the range and scope of its operations, as well as for its institutional flexibility. These constraints are not about to dissipate, and the peacebuilding architecture will be forced to operate within them for the foreseeable future.

What is more malleable in the next ten years is the prospect of using issue linkage and trade-offs among actors with different interests to create opportunities for resolving conflicts and reaching mutually beneficial arrangements. While the size of an institution increases its heterogeneity and reduces its ability to reach agreement, size also enables conditions under which issue linkage among actors with heterogeneous interests "may generate new opportunities for resolving conflicts and reaching mutually beneficial arrangements."[7]

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5 B. Koremenos, C. Lispon and D. Snidal, "The Rational Design of Institutions", *International Organization*, 55 (2001), 761-99, at 762.
6 *Ibid.*
7 *Ibid.*, 785-6.

# What would public choice theorists say?

Public choice theorists take issue with the idea that international organizations exist to promote a general public interest; instead, they view them fundamentally as bureaucracies.[8] As such, they are populated by unelected and overpaid international civil servants who are not publicly accountable and are highly susceptible to interest group pressure.

International organizations, like all organizations, are interested first and foremost in their survival. One of the best ways to ensure institutional survival is to expand, often by taking on new tasks. All bureaucracies try to maximize their power in terms of budget size, staff size, building space, and freedom of action. These tendencies are even more pronounced in international organizations than they are in national ones.

UN peacebuilding efforts predated the founding of the UN peacebuilding architecture, even though they were distributed across a large number of different institutions (with different founding missions and institutional mandates). Thus, its new institutions – the PBC, the PBSO, and the PBF – have encountered suspicion, quiet institutional sabotage, and occasionally outright opposition from their predecessors, the very institutions they are expected to coordinate.

Everyone is in favour of coordination in the abstract, but very few appreciate being coordinated – particularly if it has implications for their expansion, development, or survival as an institution. Many existing agencies are more interested in protecting their turf than being coordinated by a well-intentioned new player with limited or untested political backing. This has proven to be a particularly acute challenge for the PBSO, mainly due to a lack of political resources and clout to do much more. It not only has implications for the countries with which the PBC chooses to work, but also for the probability for perceptions of its long term success or failure as an institution.

Because much of the work of the new peacebuilding architecture is supply-determined, and because all organizations are interested in their survival and expansion, we should not expect the PBC and PBSO to be exempt from the core tendencies identified by theories of public choice. We should also not be surprised that their creation has pro-

8 R. Vaubel, "International Organization", in C. Rowley and F. Schneider (eds.), *Encyclopedia of Public Choice* (New York, NY and Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2004), 319-20.

duced such predictable, if sometimes discouraging, responses from other UN institutions and agencies. These institutional constraints and tendencies are normal, but need not be entirely determining. For example, if the criteria for the evaluation of the success of the peacebuilding architecture are performance and outcomes-oriented, rather than based on intermediate, operational indicators – such as growth in personal, number of countries added to the PBC roster, or annual budget expenditures – some of the institutional pathologies identified by public choice theorists can be mitigated.

## What would organization theorists say?

A cybernetic approach to organizations would assert that the goals of establishing the UN peacebuilding architecture were hazily defined and that outcomes are consequently uncertain. Contrary to the claims of theories of public choice and rational institutions, decision-makers do not construct maximizing policies, but instead assemble policies that "suffice" from a repertoire of existing policies, processes, and legal perspectives.

Cybernetic organization theorists contend that means-ends analysis is often limited or unfeasible,[9] and we might be faced with the situation in which policy-making may be driven more by available solutions than by existing problems.[10] Arguably, the new emphasis within the UN on the peacebuilding architecture, and the subsequent institutional creation of the PBC, PBSO and PBF, can be explained with reference to the way decision-makers were attempting to "muddle through" using the limited repertoire of policy options at their disposal. A focus on peacebuilding was simultaneously the means through which to generate greater coordination, and the end in itself, namely an integrated approach to post-conflict situations and fragile states.

Over the past decade, the UN has increasingly been faced with calls to reform its institutional set-up in such a way as to increase coordination and policy coherence in an environment in which individual Members States voiced considerable concern over the way their financial con-

9 C. E. Lindblom, "The Science of 'Muddling Through'", *Public Administration Review*, 19 (1959), 79-88.
10 M. Cohen, J. March and J. Olson, "A Garbage Can Model of Organizational Choice", in J. March (ed.), *Decisions and Organizations* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), 294-334; J. March and J. Olson, *Rediscovering Institutions: The Organizational Basis of Politics* (New York, NY: The Free Press, 1989).

tributions were being spent. Everyone agreed that "something had to be done," but there was far less clarity over what could be possible given the limited repertoire of "problem-response" elements at the disposal of policy-makers. From an organizational point of view, the introduction of the language of peacebuilding cannot be explained as the product of rational action based on a number of key variables that generate predictable outcomes. The creation of the new peacebuilding architecture was arguably not a rational or deliberate decision. Rather, it was a product of the decision-making arena and limited repertoire of responses from which it emerged from principal actors at the time.

Organization theorists would posit that the UN's approach to peacebuilding will be determined more by tendencies to simplify assumptions about the complexity of peacebuilding, pre-existing institutional routines, and existing policy instruments, than by a fresh re-thinking of institutional practices and a fundamental reconsideration of ways to address the challenges of peacebuilding. Coordinating so many diverse actors – especially those not traditionally accustomed to working closely in collaboration with UN agencies – will be a particularly difficult challenge. One way to ameliorate these tendencies would be to invite outside appraisals of the performance of the new peacebuilding architecture of the sort being undertaken by the project that stimulated this paper. Another would be to institutionalize periodic retreats where policy practitioners and outside analysts meet to reflect candidly not only on best practices, but also on worst practices, in a constructive attempt to learn from the initial experiences with peacebuilding in Burundi and Sierra Leone.

# What would social constructivists say?

Social constructivism is based on a fundamental insight concerning the constitution of knowledge that has long been part-and-parcel of linguistics and pedagogy. This is the view that meaning assigned to labels is a product of language and experience, and that the production of knowledge is a socially and historically contingent discursive process of accommodation and assimilation.[11] In the study of international politics, this amounts to the assertion that shared ideas cannot be separated from material forces, that they matter just as much, and that the interests and goals of purposive actors do not constitute a pre-

[11] Cf. P. L. Berger and T. Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967).

determined belief and preference system, but are continuously shaped by these ideas themselves.

International organizations engage in categorizing information and knowledge, fixing meanings of concepts, and articulating and diffusing norms – a process that ultimately generates both autonomy and authority. The flip-side of such power, however, is the propensity for a variety of dysfunctional institutional behaviour that may well result in ingrained and permanent pathologies, ranging from organizational insulation and universalizing blueprints to incommensurable institutional cultures and the normalization of deviance.[12]

Calls for a new UN peacebuilding architecture stemmed from growing unease, expressed by both Member States and functionaries at the UN, over an obvious lack of coordination among the 30+ agencies, funds, and programmes that the UN deploys in the field, making up the staggering total of over 90,000 military and civilian personnel in 2006.[13] The solution was perceived to lie in a new bureaucratic machinery that would not only go on to classify all these actors and activities as working towards a common cause ("peacebuilding"), but would subsequently shift the focus of the term "peacebuilding" to the "immediate aftermath of conflict", (i.e. in "the first two years after the main conflict has ended"), thereby helping to articulate and diffuse the norm that this narrow conceptualization of peacebuilding constituted.
It is a tribute to the autonomy of the United Nations (but arguably also testimony to its organizational insulation) that it can impose a terminology that is not employed by the majority of government administrations of Member States. Having indirectly "authorized" the creation of the new peacebuilding architecture, Member States are now playing catch-up to an organizational logic that self-perpetuates according to internal mechanisms of bureaucratic universalization: each and every actor and activity that is linked to a post-conflict setting is now classified as being part of, or in an as yet to be defined relationship with, the goal of peacebuilding.

Operational blueprints and "one-size-fits-all" solutions may be discursively shunned, yet entities such as the PBC's Working Group on Lessons Learned (WGLL) are searching for the common ground in "general principles" for effective peacebuilding, including the promotion of national ownership, the provision of sustained engagement, and the fostering of mutual accountability. These principles, stakeholders are

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12 M. N. Barnett and M. Finnemore, "The Politics, Power, and Pathologies of International Organizations", *International Organization*, 53 (1999), 699-732; Barnett and Finnemore would go on to expand the article into a book, *Rules for the World: International Organizations in World Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004).

13 R. Ponzio, "The United Nations Peacebuilding Commission: Origins and Initial Practice", *Disarmament Forum*, 2 (2007), 5-15, at 6.

being told, have to be adapted to "country-specific realities."[14] Bearing the potential for dysfunctional behavior in mind, the Working Group would do well to recognize that the blueprint they are attempting to avoid can be ideational as much as operational. But herein, the social constructivist might argue, also lies an opportunity, for "effective peacebuilding" is as much about sharing a common set of ideas and a common vocabulary, as it is about deploying material resources to those who need them most.

# Conclusions and recommendations

While it is easy to identify deficiencies or even pathologies in all institutions, there are some institutional aspects of the UN peacebuilding architecture that cannot feasibly be changed, no matter what their desirability. The PBC, PBSO, and PBF are institutional creations of the United Nations. They will invariably reflect the structural constraints and political challenges that exist throughout the organization – the ongoing North/South confrontation, the organization's growing democratic deficit, its state-centrism, and its use by powerful states to pursue their narrow foreign policy interests. The peacebuilding architecture is a joint creation of both the UN General Assembly and the UN Security Council, and it will invariably continue to be caught up in the politics of and between both of them. Its relevance and salience will be dependent on its degree of political support from states and international organizations that have the most clout in these issue domains.

Given the political context of its origins, the PBC is not likely to be reduced in size, and will therefore face challenges of issue scope, consensus decision-making, and limited flexibility. Both the PBC and the PBSO are bureaucracies and therefore will operate like bureaucracies everywhere, with their rivalries, struggles for power, and core interests in their own survival. The actors they are called upon to coordinate, and the policy instruments they bring to the table will be determined more by satisficing than by original approaches to the challenges of peacebuilding. Finally, the fixing of meanings has already evidenced some institutional pathologies in the UN peacebuilding architecture, and the concept of peacebuilding itself continues to paper over some unarticulated contradictions.

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[14] See the Synthesis Report of the Special Session of the Working Group on Lessons Learned, 12 June 2008, entitled "Key Insights, Principles, Good Practices and Emerging Lessons in Peacebuilding".

Morgenthau's realist emphasis on the importance of leadership, interestingly echoed in one of the Secretary-General's most recent reports, suggests that the director of the PBSO should be an institutional entrepreneur. An institutional entrepreneur within the UN is someone who knows the inner workings of the organization well, but has also demonstrated a capacity to get things accomplished (both within the existing institutional structure and by mobilizing resources from Member States and organizations outside of the UN).[15] Rational institutionalists tell us that issue linkage should be pursued in heterogeneous institutions, something the PBC should explicitly try to foster. Public choice analysts would advise that one recognize, and try to work within, the structure of institutional interests, by developing indicators of performance that are outcomes, rather than process-oriented. Organization theorists highlight the limited repertoire of possible policy options and the means-driven nature of many decision-making processes, calling for outside appraisals and deliberate efforts to break routines and engage in forms of broad-based self-reflection. Constructivists emphasize the importance and potential power of ideas in framing discourse and shaping debates, and would advise that the PBSO, the WGLL, or some other entity might become locations for the generation of new ideas about peacebuilding. There is an extraordinary wealth of experience concerning the challenges of peacebuilding within the UN system, if it could only be mobilized in a systematic manner. Building alliances with existing research networks, possibly sub-contracting research to them on priority subjects, would be more efficient than trying to create a full-scale research operation within the PBSO. It might also facilitate the generation of additional resources.

In the final analysis, the success of the UN peacebuilding architecture will not be determined by the number of countries requesting its institutions' assistance or the size of its operating budgets, but by the value-added it provides. Thinking counterfactually, the UN peacebuilding architecture could be considered as a success in ten years if it becomes clear that there are some things that reasonably would not have taken place without it. The performance of the UN peacebuilding architecture should be evaluated by the amount of resources mobilized for countries seeking its assistance, compared systematically with countries not on the PBC's agenda at a comparable or similar stage of its transition from conflict to sustainable peace. Similar comparative assessments of PBC and non-PBC countries should be undertaken, examining the amount of bureaucratic attention given to focus countries by major powers (including regional powers), whether continued media coverage is given to them by the global media, their ability to

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[15] Both the PBC and the PBSO were fortunate during 2009 to have been led by highly capable individuals (Heraldo Munoz and Judy Cheng-Hopkins). As long as they are given adequate political backing, this bodes well for the future of the enterprise.

engage international financial institutions and major non-governmental actors, and the extent to which peacebuilding programmes begin to address some of the root causes of violence and insecurity

There are already a few anecdotal examples that the UN peacebuilding architecture has delivered some things that probably would not have taken place without it. It has facilitated the release of previously frozen World Bank funds for one country, and it has ensured the increased interest of the chairs of the country-specific meetings in the design of programmes and adequacy of resources for target countries under their mandate. Whether these steps merit being considered a real success, however, needs to be tempered by the amount of resources already invested in this new institutional arrangement.

## List of Working Papers – The Future of the Peacebuilding Architecture Project:

**Kwesi Aning** and **Ernest Lartey**: *Establishing the Future State of the Peacebuilding Commission: Perspectives on Africa*

**Thomas Biersteker** and **Oliver Jütersonke**: *The Challenges of Institution Building: Prospects for the UN Peacebuilding Commission*

**Cedric de Coning**: *Clarity, Coherence and Context: Three Priorities for Sustainable Peacebuilding*

**Rob Jenkins**: *Re-engineering the UN Peacebuilding Architecture*

**Carolyn McAskie**: *2020 Vision. Visioning the Future of the United Nations Peacebuilding Architecture*

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**Angelika Rettberg**: *The Private Sector, Peacebuilding, and Economic Recovery: A Challenge for the UN Peacebuilding Architecture*

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

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