

Peacebuilding at the UN over the last 10 years

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1. Concepts

From the “Agenda for Peace” to the Brahimi Report

The term “peacebuilding” first entered the UN lexicon in Boutros Boutros-Ghali’s *Agenda for Peace* in 1992, where it was defined as “action to identify and support structures which will tend to strengthen and solidify peace in order to avoid a relapse into conflict.” The concept was initially defined in relation to a conflict cycle that passed from pre-conflict preventive diplomacy through peacemaking and peacekeeping to post-conflict peacebuilding, although Boutros-Ghali’s 1995 Supplement to the Agenda for Peace later expanded this understanding to include preventive action as well.

The 2000 Brahimi Report further refined the concept as “activities undertaken on the far side of conflict to reassemble the foundations of peace and provide the tools for building on those foundations something that is more than just the absence of war,” also stating that “effective peacebuilding is, in effect, a hybrid of political and development activities targeted at the sources of conflict.”

Narrow vs. broad conceptions of peacebuilding

The Brahimi definition was to be the last attempt by a major UN report to formally define what it meant by “peacebuilding.” Beyond the UN, the last decade has witnessed, different efforts to refine the concept, with scholars and practitioners falling into minimalist and maximalist camps – those arguing that peacebuilding should be aimed at preventing a recurrence of armed conflict versus those who advocate for the transformation of society by addressing fundamental grievances, horizontal inequalities, and other root causes of conflict, and by focusing on the development of capacities and institutions to manage conflict. The paradigm that came to dominate the 1990s and 2000s was that of “liberal peacebuilding” – a decidedly maximalist approach focused on the promotion of democracy, market-based economic reforms, and a range of other institutions associated with modern states as a driving force for building peace. Although the term can broadly apply to all countries affected by conflict, and sometimes encompasses preventive action, the discourse of peacebuilding at the UN and elsewhere has tended to focus on the post-conflict period.

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Building states to build peace?

In the 2000s, this discourse was married to a new focus on state fragility. Attention to “weak,” “failed,” “failing,” and “collapsed” states gained prominence after 9/11, spurred by concerns about weak states as “vectors” for terrorism and other global bads that threatened the interests and security of powerful Western countries. Concerns about fragile states as the weakest link in a world of interconnected threats and opportunities were paralleled by growing consensus, particularly in UN circles, around the centrality of the state for sustainable peacebuilding, and the need for effective and legitimate institutions to manage competition and conflict within society. In one camp, the concept of statebuilding initially emerged almost as an exit strategy for peacebuilders – an alternative way of thinking about war to peace transitions in response to the perceived pathologies of “liberal peacebuilding” and especially the paradoxes and dilemmas of post-war democratization.

As these various policy streams coalesced around the rhetoric of statebuilding, the initial focus was on building state capacity across various dimensions (particularly security, justice, and governance institutions, as well as capacity to deliver basic services). The early statebuilding discourse, in fact, looked a lot like liberal peacebuilding. If peacebuilding was a broad label for postwar efforts aimed at preventing the resumption of violence, statebuilding was initially proposed as peacebuilding with a particular accent on the longer-term challenge of strengthening the institutional foundations of the state. What was missing in this early discourse was a focus on legitimacy and the political processes through which a state gains legitimacy in the eyes of its citizens.

Contested concepts and confused definitions

While the concept of peacebuilding has evolved over time, it has also become a term that different actors use in different ways. Peacebuilding also competes with other terms, some of which reflect preferences of particular institutions (e.g. US tendencies to refer to “stabilization” activities). As a result, there is often confusion about what peacebuilding is, when it happens, how long it lasts, who does it, and how it differs from other activities.

The search for definitions...

Peacebuilding involves a range of measures targeted to reduce the risk of lapsing or relapsing into conflict by strengthening national capacities at all levels for conflict management, and to lay the foundations for sustainable peace and development.

Source: Conceptual basis for peacebuilding for the UN system adopted by the Secretary-General's Policy Committee in May 2007

Statebuilding is an endogenous process to enhance capacity, institutions and legitimacy of the state driven by state-society relations. Positive statebuilding processes involve reciprocal relations between a state that delivers services for its people and social and political groups who constructively engage with their state.

Source: OECD-DAC, *Statebuilding in Situations of Fragility: Initial Findings*, August 2008

Peace implementation: Actions undertaken by international or national actors to implement specific peace agreements, usually in the short-term. Where operable, usually defines—and either enables or constrains—the framework for peacebuilding.

Source: Charles T. Call and Elizabeth M. Cousens, “Ending Wars and Building Peace: International Responses to War-Torn Societies,” *International Studies Perspectives* (2008) 9, 1-21 at 4.

Stabilization: Actions undertaken by international actors to reach a termination of hostilities and consolidate peace, understood as the absence of armed conflict. The term of art dominant in US policy, usually associated with military instruments, usually seen as having a shorter time horizon than peacebuilding, and heavily associated with a post-9/11 counter-terrorism agenda.

Source: Charles T. Call and Elizabeth M. Cousens, “Ending Wars and Building Peace: International Responses to War-Torn Societies,” *International Studies Perspectives* (2008) 9, 1-21 at 4.

Links & Literature

[An Agenda for Peace](#)

Preventive diplomacy, peacemaking and peacekeeping | 1992

[Report of the Panel on United Nations Peace Operations](#)

"The Brahimi Report" | 2000

In May 2007, the UN Secretary-General's Policy Committee agreed on the following conceptual basis for peacebuilding to inform UN practice: "Peacebuilding involves a range of measures targeted to reduce the risk of lapsing or relapsing into conflict by strengthening national capacities at all levels for conflict management, and to lay the foundations for sustainable peace and development." This statement is perhaps the closest the UN has come to endorsing a definition of peacebuilding, yet, oddly enough, it is not well known, and is rarely referenced.

2. Practice

From concept to practice – and vice versa

There is no "official" UN definition of the concept of peacebuilding. The most obvious places where such a definition would reside--Security Council resolutions, the 2004 report of High-level Panel on Threats, Challenges, and Change, the 2005 founding resolutions of the UN Peacebuilding Commission, or the 2009 report of the Secretary-General on peacebuilding in the immediate aftermath of conflict--don't define the concept itself. Instead, what these documents tend to do is list the types of activities that peacebuilding may encompass, usually covering the full range of UN activities in post-conflict countries:

- support to electoral processes;
- disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR);
- strengthening the rule of law;
- security sector reform;
- governance;
- refugee return and reintegration;
- basic service provision,
- rehabilitation of basic infrastructure, and
- support to economic revitalization.

What this has meant is that peacebuilding at the UN has largely been defined through practice, shaped by the UN's experience throughout the 1990s and 2000s in assisting countries emerging from civil war—with mixed results. These experiences, and an appreciation for the costs of failure, generated new practices that attempted to respond to the complexity of post-war transitions, and the challenges of bridging the gap from relief to development.

Peacekeeping and peacebuilding – from multidimensional mandates to integrated missions

During this period, the aims and mandates of UN peacekeeping missions became considerably more refined, with the "second-generation" multidimensional peace operations of the 1990s giving way to "integrated missions" in the 2000s, where a range of UN security, humanitarian, political, and development actors and approaches were subsumed within an

overall political-strategic crisis management framework with unified leadership. Accompanying this expansion of peacekeeping was a proliferation of peacebuilding activities by multilateral and bilateral development actors, as international donors reoriented their thinking around the nature of post-conflict challenges and broadened their assistance efforts, particularly in the areas of governance and institution-building.

Efforts still tended to be supply-driven: agencies tended both to assess needs and develop responses through the prism of their preexisting mandates. A 2006 review of peacebuilding capacity found that most UN entities tended to overstate their capacities, and the overwhelming tendency was to take what each particularly agency was already doing in post-conflict situations and call it “peacebuilding.” There was thus a disparity between the conceptual models and institutional biases that agencies had, on the one hand, and on the other the needs and tasks of what was coming to be called peacebuilding.

Conceptual sequencing in practice was misleading

This had very real operational implications for what “peacebuilding” entailed and how it was actually done. Common to the peacebuilding experience at this time was the reliance on a somewhat technocratic and linear formula for the facilitation of durable war termination: a first phase in which external peacekeepers provide for security as emergency relief is delivered, disarmament occurs, and transitional governments are established; a second phase of transition in which elections are held, new constitutions are drafted and ratified, and the country is stabilized; and a third phase in which a continued international presence assists in the amelioration of root causes of conflict through economic development and further political liberalization—in short, the epitome of the “liberal peacebuilding” paradigm.

The limitations of such an approach were laid bare in several cases in the 2000s: for example, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where what became the UN’s largest peacekeeping mission by 2007 repeatedly failed to protect civilians from massacres by armed groups, let alone bring peace to a territory the size of Western Europe; and Timor-Leste, where in 2006 new international intervention was required to stem an outbreak of violence just a year after the departure of the UN peacekeeping mission, to name just two.

Siloed approaches in strengthening peacebuilding capacities at the UN

During the 2000s, different parts of the UN struggled to get peacebuilding “right”, both through political and policy debates (including a February 2001 debate in the Security Council that addressed the UN’s relationship with regional organizations – a trend that became increasingly important throughout the decade), and in UN engagement on the ground.

Ten years ago, in 2001, the UN fielded five peacekeeping missions with an explicit peacebuilding component in their mandates (this including missions in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, East Timor, Sierra Leone, and the DRC). In addition, there were four United Nations peacebuilding support offices (in Tajikistan, the Central African Republic, Guinea-Bissau, and Liberia). During the decade, that number swelled and ebbed. As of July 31 there were nine missions, deploying more than 96,000 military, police, and international and local civilian staff – and a new mission in Libya, UNSMIL, was mandated on September 16. In addition, the UN fields four peacebuilding support offices, in Burundi, CAR, Guinea-Bissau, and Sierra Leone. With the exception of Burundi, these are “integrated” peacebuilding offices – which means they are theoretically empowered to coordinate efforts across the range of UN agencies represented in-country (as opposed to the first sets of peacebuilding support offices mandated in the 1990s and early 2000s which had no such authority). UNDP and the other agen-

cies, funds and programmes tackle different aspects of peacebuilding and early recovery in all of these countries, as well as many others without a Council-mandated presence.

Across the UN system, efforts were made to strengthen capacity and develop greater expertise in peacebuilding; however these were uneven and mostly siloed. Within the UN Secretariat, DPKO was amassing a body of practice through the deployment of integrated peacekeeping missions, and the department's overall expertise in a range of issues was strengthened through the increasingly analytical and robust work of its Best Practices Section. At UNDP, the Bureau for Crisis Prevention and Recovery was established in 2001, with a mandate to tackle both preventive and post-conflict aspects of peacebuilding, particularly in the governance sector. DPA's peacebuilding support offices were under-resourced and their record was mixed. Some progress was made to join up political, security, and development actions, including through a Joint UNDP-DPA Programme on Building National Capacities for Conflict Prevention that largely focused on the deployment of "Peace and Development Advisors" to support UN Country Teams in the field. At the same time, turf battles were developing, particularly among DPA (which nominally was the lead agency for peacebuilding, but lacked capacity), DPKO, and UNDP. The capacities that did exist were dispersed across the system, with poor coordination, which resulted in crucial gaps in some areas, and duplication of efforts in others (e.g. multiple focal points for rule of law across the system).

These issues reflected larger problems in marshalling support – both in terms of political will and resources – from UN member states for longer-term assistance to countries once the most intensive post-crisis period was over. The system overall was oriented to meet emergency humanitarian needs and urgent peacekeeping security priorities in the short-term, and to provide longer-term development assistance. What was missing was a bridge between security and development approaches, where critical institution-building and peace consolidation needed to take place.

Links & Literature

[UN Department for Peacekeeping Operations – Best practices section](#)

[UN Development Program – Bureau for Conflict Prevention and Recovery](#)

[UN Department for Political Affairs](#)

[Joint UNDP/DPA program on building national capacities for conflict prevention](#)

3. The Peacebuilding Commission

The call to close the UN's institutional peacebuilding gap

In late 2003, in response to the perceived failure of the UN to prevent unilateral US action in Iraq, then-Secretary-General Kofi Annan created the High-level Panel on Threats, Challenges, and Change, mandated to "assess current threats to international peace and security; to evaluate how our existing policies and institutions have done in addressing those threats; and to make recommendations for strengthening the UN so that it can provide collective security for all in the 21st century."

In its 2004 report, the High-level Panel identified a number of problems with the UN's arrangements for peacebuilding. These included (1) failure to link decisionmaking on peace and security – particularly in the Security Council – with development expertise and engagement of the IFIs, particularly the World Bank; (2) inadequate coordination among UN agencies and departments, and between the UN and other actors; (3) lack of timely and adequate financing for the critical issue of start-up and maintenance of government institutions;

and (4) lack of medium-term attention to countries emerging from the most security-intensive phase of post-conflict, particularly after the drawdown of a peacekeeping mission.

Identifying a major institutional gap in the UN's peacebuilding efforts, the High-level Panel recommended the creation of a "single intergovernmental organ dedicated to peacebuilding, empowered to monitor and pay close attention to countries at risk, ensure concerted action by donors, agencies, programmes and financial institutions, and mobilize financial resources for sustainable peace." The Panel's proposal for the creation of a Peacebuilding Commission (PBC) was later endorsed by the Secretary-General in his report "In Larger Freedom," although he proposed a narrower focus on post-conflict peacebuilding rather than the preventive role originally envisioned.

Establishment of the PBC in 2005

Following endorsement by UN member states at the 2005 World Summit, the PBC was established as an intergovernmental advisory body by corresponding resolutions of the General Assembly and Security Council. These resolutions mandated the PBC:

1. To bring together all relevant actors to marshal resources and to advise on and propose integrated strategies for post-conflict peacebuilding and recovery;
2. To focus attention on the reconstruction and institution-building efforts necessary for recovery from conflict and to support the development of integrated strategies in order to lay the foundation for sustainable development;
3. To provide recommendations and information to improve the coordination of all relevant actors within and outside the United Nations, to develop best practices, to help to ensure predictable financing for early recovery activities and to extend the period of attention given by the international community to post-conflict recovery.

The resolutions also called for the creation of a standing multi-donor peacebuilding trust fund, the Peacebuilding Fund (PBF), and a small Peacebuilding Support Office (PBSO) within the UN Secretariat charged with administering the PBF, supporting the PBC, and coordinating peacebuilding efforts across the UN.

A political body for peacebuilding

In creating the PBC, there was an explicit recognition that many of the problems plaguing peacebuilding are political ones – challenges of political will, commitment, setting priorities and holding various actors accountable for their commitments-- and they require a political body to address them. Hence the decision was made to create the PBC as an intergovernmental body, with membership drawn from across the UN system (seven countries from the Security Council, including the P5, seven from the General Assembly, seven from the Economic and Social Council, five of the top ten troop contributors to UN peacekeeping, and five of the top ten financial donors to the UN).

However, the real innovation of the PBC would be in its country-specific configurations (CSCs). In an attempt to operationalize the maxim that there is no "one size fits all" approach to peacebuilding, and that every country requires a differentiated response addressing its unique political context, each country on the PBC's agenda would have a unique format, drawing not only upon the 31 PBC members, but also the country itself, the IFIs, regional organizations, neighboring states, and key bilateral partners. In short, the PBC was meant to provide a forum where all actors involved in a country's recovery would agree upon a common strategy and set of priorities to guide action by national and international stakeholders.

Slow setup and burdensome start

Predictably for an intergovernmental body, the PBC was slow to take shape. Protracted bickering over membership delayed election of its first members, and six months elapsed before the first formal meeting took place in June 2006. By September 2006, the PBC had adopted the first two countries on its agenda, Sierra Leone and Burundi, and announced the first allocation of PBF funds to those countries. However, the PBC's initial engagement with Sierra Leone and Burundi was fraught with challenges and confusion. The PBC's approach in those first two cases, which entailed the development of "integrated peacebuilding strategies" to guide engagement in both countries -- a process which proved extremely burdensome for UN leadership in the field and country actors -- did not appear to add value.

New countries on the PBC's agenda

The PBC appears to have learned from its early missteps, and as later countries have come onto its agenda (Guinea-Bissau in December 2007, Central African Republic in May 2008, Liberia in October 2010, and Guinea in February 2011), it has moved towards a more flexible approach. Subsequent strategic frameworks have been developed more quickly, drawing on existing strategies, and have focused more on monitoring commitments and providing political support and attention from New York. The PBC has had some documented success in bringing political, security and development actors together and building confidence among the key players (national and international), through an ongoing and relatively inclusive dialogue on immediate peacebuilding needs. It has also increased international attention to the countries on its agenda, making a difference at key moments. However, it has struggled in its resource mobilization role, and there is little evidence to date of increased or new funding (apart from PBF funds) coming to a country by virtue of its being placed on the PBC's agenda. Similarly, the PBC's ability to drive coordination among international actors has been limited, though the PBC's ability to unite all UN actors behind the government's national peacebuilding strategy in Sierra Leone is often cited as a model for PBC engagement in future cases.

Victim of unrealistic expectations

A key problem has been the tendency to view the PBC as an actor whose purpose is to shape operations. This is a misunderstanding of its structure and its original intention: the PBC does not shape mandates or implement programs in the field, but was designed as a forum for enhancing the coherence of other actors. Its key attribute is not its technical knowledge, proximity to the field or linkages with operations but its composition; the political clout and leverage it can bring to bear and its role in enhancing strategic coordination among other actors.

Expectations for the PBC should be tempered by realism about how fragmented the international response to countries emerging from conflict really is, and how much we can reasonably expect the PBC to do. Although the UN has deep capacities in peacebuilding, these capacities and resources are broadly dispersed across the system. In addition to the principal organs of the UN, there are 30 specialized agencies, funds, and programmes, and 17

Links & Literature

[A more secure world: Our shared responsibility](#). Report of the UN Secretary General's High Level Panel on Threats Challenges and Change | 2004

Resolutions of the UN General Assembly and the UN Security Council establishing the Peacebuilding Commission:

[General Assembly Resolution 60/180](#)

[Security Council Resolution 1645](#) | 2005

[Review of the United Nations Peacebuilding Architecture](#) | 2010

[Statement of mutual Commitment PBC – Liberia](#)

[Statement of mutual Commitment PBC – Guinea](#)

departments and offices. Many, if not all, of these entities, feel they have some important role to play in peacebuilding. Unlike the PBC and PBSO, many of them are operational agencies, with projects and programs in the field. And the UN is only one of several actors working to support post-conflict countries. Across this dispersed and fragmented international response, a political consensus among key players is essential to align a variety of actors' political and funding decisions in support of the host country; to create the space for actors on the ground to respond dynamically to a fluid situation; and to provide the UN Secretary-General's senior representative in-country with the necessary leverage to corral UN and non-UN actors behind a coherent peacebuilding strategy. The PBC was created as a space where this consensus could be forged, but thus far the actors who would have to use it in this way have not, for various reasons, chosen to do so.

PBC review in 2010

The PBC (along with PBSO and PBF) was formally reviewed by the SC and GA in 2010, over a six-month consultative process. In the months leading up to the review, there was a pervasive sense of stagnation and fears that the PBC had “lost its way” and risked obsolescence. At the same time, there was broad recognition that most of the challenges the PBC faced didn't actually have to be addressed through a formal review process; what was obviously missing was a basic consensus among PBC members on the interpretation of its mandate. The review process itself was unusually consultative, including field visits to PBC countries and discussions with civil society, and helped lead to a sense of renewed political engagement from PBC member states and other important actors.

The report, issued in June 2010, concluded that the momentum that led to the creation of the PBC had not been sustained, and an overall vision for the PBC was lacking. The report laid out a number of recommendations aimed at making the PBC *more relevant* – through better coordination, better resource mobilization, and genuine national ownership; *more flexible* -- through the use of “multi-tiered” engagements (lighter in some countries; more intensive in others); *better-performing* -- more empowered vis-à-vis the Security Council; *better-supported* by a strengthened PBSO and PBF; *more ambitious*, with a diverse range of countries; and *better understood*, with a strengthened communications strategy. The report placed considerable emphasis on the concept of national ownership – of both peacebuilding processes and outcomes – and the important political accompaniment role the PBC could play.

Liberia and Guinea: test cases for a reformed PBC

In the months after the report was endorsed by both the General Assembly and the Security Council, the two newest countries came onto the PBC's agenda (Liberia in October of 2010; Guinea in February 2011). Both countries are seen as test cases for some of these recommendations, particularly in broadening the diversity of cases on the PBC's agenda, its ability to take a more differentiated approach, and its relationship with the Security Council. Liberia, of course, is the first country to come onto the PBC agenda with an active DPKO-led peacekeeping mission, and the first case where PBC engagement is intended to inform decisions about peacekeeping drawdown. Guinea, on the other hand, does not host either a peacekeeping or special political mission, is not formally on the Council's agenda, and comes closer to a “preventive” engagement than “post-conflict.” The approach the PBC has taken in both countries also demonstrates learning from past experience: both CSCs have acted much more quickly to adopt lighter instruments of engagement referred to as “statements of mutual commitments,” rather than the more intensive strategic frameworks adopted in earlier cases.

4. Mainstreaming peacebuilding within the UN

One of the unfortunate side effects of the creation of the PBC and its related architecture has been the tendency among both UN and non-UN actors to equate “peacebuilding” with the work of the PBC. As discussed above, this misrepresents the PBC’s role, and diminishes the fact that the actual work of UN peacebuilding overwhelmingly is done by other parts of the UN system: primarily DPA and DPKO-led field missions, and the UN agencies in the field (especially UNDP). Apart from continued UN efforts towards integration – including strengthened planning processes for integrated missions, and requiring field missions and UN Country Teams to complete an “integrated strategic framework” to establish joint priorities in pursuit of peace consolidation – the departments and agencies have independently continued to strengthen their capacities and expertise. Elsewhere, the Security Council itself has stepped up its consideration of peacebuilding in recent years, including thematic debates at least once a year since 2008 on issues including the linkages between peacekeeping and peacebuilding, partnership with regional organizations in peacebuilding, comprehensive approaches to security and development, women’s participation in peacebuilding (a topic which itself was the subject of a Secretary-General’s report in 2010), and institution-building.

The 2009 report of the Secretary-General on peacebuilding in the immediate aftermath of conflict

In 2009, responding to a request from the Council, the Secretary-General issued a landmark report on peacebuilding in the immediate aftermath of conflict. Focusing on the challenges that post-conflict countries and the international community face in the immediate aftermath of conflict (defined as the first two years after the main conflict in a country has ended), the report reflected on past peacebuilding experiences, emphasized the importance of context and national ownership, and highlighted recurring peacebuilding priorities for UN support in five critical areas (1) basic security and safety; (2) support to political processes; (3) provision of basic services; (4) restoring core government functions; and (5) economic revitalization. Building on this analysis, the Secretary-General set out an agenda to strengthen the entire UN response in the immediate aftermath of conflict as well as to facilitate an earlier, more coherent response from the wider international community, including:

- stronger, more effective and better supported UN country teams on the ground, as well as early agreement on priorities and alignment of resources behind the teams;
- strengthening national ownership and capacity development from the outset;
- rationalizing and enhancing the UN system’s capacity to provide knowledge, expertise and deployable personnel to meet the most urgent peacebuilding needs; and
- working with member states, particularly donors, to enhance the speed, alignment, flexibility and risk tolerance of funding mechanisms.

Interestingly, the report gave relatively little attention to the role of the PBC and PBSO, focusing instead on recommendations for the more field-oriented, operational actors within the UN system.

The UN issued a follow-up report in July 2010, which gave a mixed picture of progress made in implementing these recommendations, with improvements in some areas like revised guidelines for integrated mission planning, but shortfalls in others, including coordination with the World Bank, and supporting national capacity development.

Recognizing that issues of recruiting and deploying civilian staff with the right skills and expertise lay at the heart of many of the shortfalls in UN peacebuilding efforts, a separate study by an independent Senior Advisory Group was launched to take on the issue of civilian capacity in the aftermath of conflict. Delivered in February 2011, the report builds on the 2009 recommendations and lays out seventeen concrete recommendations designed to “strengthen the capacity of countries emerging from conflict to make a successful transition to sustainable peace.”

Guided by principles of ownership, partnership, expertise, and nimbleness, the recommendations include, *inter alia*, steps to:

- prioritize the use of national capacities and enhance the local economic impact of UN operations through greater procurement of locally-produced goods and services;
- prioritize the role of women through a 20% quota for all UN police deployments;
- establish a new mechanism for civilian partnerships, to serve as a single “docking station” for member states, civil society, and other centers of expertise to provide experts to UN missions
- develop a cluster system, modeled on the humanitarian agencies, identifying lead agencies for core peacebuilding activities;
- reform UN recruitment processes and conditions of service;
- develop new models for South-South cooperation; and invest in training for UN leadership and core civilian staff.

A report of the Secretary-General building on these recommendations – the latest iteration in what has become a process of constant reform – is due to the Council in September 2011. It remains to be seen what kind of support will come from UN member states, although the reception thus far has been largely positive.

5. Conclusion

When describing a decade of peacebuilding developments at the UN, it is easy to lose sight of a bigger question: what do we talk about when we talk about “peacebuilding” at the UN, and how has that changed over the last 10 years? As discussed earlier, the UN’s understanding of peacebuilding has tended to flow from, rather than shape practice. From the SG’s 2009 report to the content of strategic frameworks guiding the PBC’s engagement in its agenda countries, the focus has been on a set of activities, or what might be thought of as the peacebuilding “package” – DDR, security sector reform, elections, rule of law, governance reform, delivery of basic services, socioeconomic recovery, youth employment, political dialogue. There is no argument that these are all important tasks, and current reform efforts address criticisms that this approach is too supply-driven and fails to prioritize among competing tasks. Despite these improvements, there is a danger of “projectizing” peacebuilding and reverting to a technocratic approach that assumes that by undertaking a certain set of activities and performing them well, external actors can build peace in war-torn societies.

Until recently, the point that has been missed in all of this is the essentially political character of peacebuilding. Peace can really only be built person by person, community by com-

Links & Literature

[Report of the UN Secretary General on Peacebuilding in the immediate aftermath of conflict](#) | 2009

[Civilian Capacity in the immediate aftermath of conflict](#). Report of the senior advisory group | 2011

[Follow-up report of the secretary general on civilian capacity in the aftermath of conflict](#) | 2011

munity, as a society knits itself back together after the trauma of war. Peacebuilding entails constant negotiation and renegotiation of expectations and relationships and the distribution of power and wealth in society. These are messy, deeply political, processes. And, as this year's World Development Report pointed out, these are processes that in the best case can take at least a generation.

Increasingly, there is a sense that the UN is learning from its own experiences – in PBC countries and elsewhere – about the extraordinarily complex processes of social and political transformation that underpin the transition from war to peace. But we still need to learn more – both about how such transformation happens and ways in which internationals can actually play a useful role in supporting these processes. Until we do, there is a danger in losing sight of what kind of peace we're trying to build – the difference between “peacebuilding” and actually building peace.

If the last decade has proved anything, it is that, however flawed, the UN has a unique legitimacy and indispensable role to play in peacebuilding. Aside from powerful states who act in their own self interest, the UN is the only international actor with the full range of security, economic, and political tools for peacebuilding. Ahead of all other actors, the UN is seen as the most legitimate and impartial. The UN attempts to do peacebuilding in more places than anyone else, and it has a better track record in helping countries slowly rebuild after years of conflict. Despite criticisms of the slow pace of UN reforms, the UN has come much further than other actors in joining up its security, political, and development efforts, and much of the best thinking on peacebuilding has been born from UN experiences.

What have we learned over the last decade? Building peace is hard. It cannot happen without domestic political leadership, the restoration of trust between citizens and their institutions, and the slow work of transforming political processes so that conflict within society can be managed without violence. Peace cannot be imposed from the outside, as the US has learned the hard way in Afghanistan and Iraq. Lasting peace can really only be built from within. But it might just not happen without the UN.

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