

ASSESSING THE REFORM OF THE UN'S PEACEBUILDING ARCHITECTURE: PROGRESS AND PROBLEMS, TWO YEARS ON

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How empty or full is the UN's Peacebuilding glass? Two years after the publication of its report, the chair of the Advisory Group of Experts (AGE) for the 2015 Review of the United Nations Peacebuilding Architecture assesses the pluses and minuses of the UN's performance.

The intergovernmental decision to create the Peacebuilding Commission (PBC), the Peacebuilding Support Office (PBSO) and the Peacebuilding Fund (PBF)—collectively known as the “peacebuilding architecture” (PBA)—was broadly hailed as one of the most significant achievements of the 2005 World Summit on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the United Nations. However, five years later, the first review of the “peacebuilding architecture” was characterized as one of “unrealized hopes.” Recommendations were formulated by three permanent representatives to the UN in New York (of Ireland, Mexico and South Africa) charged with undertaking the review to narrow the gap between hopes and performance.¹ They also recommended that an in-depth review be performed in 2015, on the 10th anniversary of the PBA. By 2015 the “unrealized hopes” had, if anything, intensified, according to some surveys.²

Accordingly, in 2015 a new review was undertaken, based on specific terms of reference approved by both the General Assembly and the Security Council.³ This review was not limited to the entities mentioned above, but covered the United Nations system as a whole, including the development organizations that customarily had been ignored for what was seen mainly as an issue linked to the maintenance of international peace and security. It was to be undertaken in two phases. First, an independent advisory group was tasked to prepare its own assessment and recommendations, to be followed by a second inter-governmental phase, which would presumably translate the recommendations into consensual policy decisions aimed at improving the UN's performance in peacebuilding.

The first phase of the review was concluded at the end of June 2015 with the presentation of the report of the seven-member Advisory Group of Experts.⁴ The report began with a brief description of the changing contexts confronted by the United Nations in attempting to deal operationally with the challenges of peace, security, development, and the defense of human rights. It then assessed the world organization's performance since 2005 with specific reference to peacebuilding. It concluded with general and specific recommendations aimed at dealing

with the challenges identified, as well as enhancing the UN's performance in what the review called “sustainable peace.”

The main conclusion was that the “unrealized hope” from the “peacebuilding architecture” was misplaced: rather than inherent shortcomings of the PBC, the PBSO and the PBF, the actual problems were systemic and structural. In other words, while peacebuilding entailed numerous and complex activities that fell under the purview of several principal organs, which acted in separate “silos”—the Security Council on matters of international peace and security, but the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and the General Assembly on development, governance, and human rights—there were little or no interactions. Indeed, the Security Council tended to perceive peacebuilding as activities that occurred only after the end of a war, which thus relegated the essential activities to a relatively peripheral role because ending the war always took priority. However, the AGE review suggested that peacebuilding actually can and should occur during all phases of the cycle of armed conflict—before, during, and after—and that peacebuilding should be framed as part of the toolbox of preventive measures at the UN's disposal.⁵

Another overarching conclusion related to the institutional and organizational implications of how peacebuilding should be conceived. While the Security Council is mandated to maintain international peace and security, it also is the main principal organ involved in UN peacebuilding. However, most members of the council do not perceive themselves as peacebuilders, despite the fact that virtually all resolutions about peace operations contain numerous references to the panoply of classic peacebuilding functions such as state building, capacity building, and promoting the rule of law. The review pointed to the obvious: part of those activities, and especially the development aspects, also fall within the purview of the General Assembly and ECOSOC, and thus require a much clearer definition of “who does what” to counter the long-standing and legendary fragmentation of the system. Moreover, the same type of fragmentation observed at the inter-governmental level was mirrored in the internal distribution of responsibilities among the different departments of the UN Secretariat as well as between them and the

rest of the UN system. And perhaps even more so was the incoherence among the various actors in the UN's presence on the ground, where peacebuilding actually takes place.

Indeed, an additional point made by the AGE refers to the crucial role of domestic stakeholders, who need to reach a common understanding about how to accommodate different views and interests without recurring to violence. The report invokes "inclusive national ownership" as a process that must be forged between the state and civil society in order to ensure that peace becomes sustainable. It suggests that the United Nations can play an essential enabling role in that endeavor—it may have a comparative advantage as the only institution that can bring to bear an entire range of services.⁶ Nonetheless, the UN will never be the only external actor, and often it is not even the main one. Hence, the AGE report emphasized the vital importance of partnerships, in addition to national ownership.

To address the issue of fragmentation, the AGE insisted on the decisive role that the Peacebuilding Commission, an advisory body, could and should play to bridge the activities of the three principal inter-governmental organs. In other words, it suggested that the Peacebuilding Commission could only be effective if the other principal organs accepted working with it in a partnership mode, something that had not happened in the past, except on rare occasions. And a final central point raised by the AGE was that a commitment to peacebuilding involved predictable long-term financing. In that regard, the report pointed out that the Peacebuilding Fund had played an essential catalytic role in helping to mobilize additional resources, and it recommended strengthening this role.

PROGRESS TO DATE: THE FULL PART OF THE GLASS

Now that two years have passed since the AGE report was presented, it is useful to assess its evolution. On balance, the results have been surprisingly positive for an organization in which the implementation of any proposal takes time, given the inherent difficulties of decision making in large multilateral settings. Part of those positive developments are direct offshoots of the review process put in motion in 2015, and part are the product of parallel factors; three of which deserve special mention.

The first is related to the adoption in September 2015 of the landmark 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in General Assembly resolution 70/1, which not only offers a strategic framework for the UN's work for the next decade and a half, but incorporates into the sustainable development goals (SDGs) a specific commitment in Goal 16 to "promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels." In other words, any proposals related to the work of the world organization in peacebuilding fit neatly into this broader framework.

The second factor refers to the exceptional leadership that the PBC enjoyed during three consecutive years by permanent representatives in New York, beginning with Brazil's Antonio de Aguiar Patriota in 2014 and continuing with Sweden's Olof Skoog in 2015 and Kenya's Macharia Kamau in 2016. This unusually productive and extended period in the PBC's work also coincided with a change in leadership at the level of the PBSO and a concerted effort in promoting stronger interactions by the PBC with its organizational committee and its country-configurations,

on the one hand, and with the principal intergovernmental organs of the United Nations, on the other hand.

The third factor is related to the start of the mandate of the ninth secretary-general, António Guterres, on 1 January 2017 as well as to the process that led to his selection.⁷ As is well known, in 2016 a somewhat more open selection process was in place, which meant that candidates published vision statements and met with all delegations in the General Assembly as well as with civil society. As part of his campaign, Guterres emphasized conflict prevention, including the need for the United Nations to address the root causes of violence and war. He has used the term "sustainable peace" repeatedly in his remarks to the General Assembly and the Security Council,⁸ and he has also insisted on forcefully addressing the problem of atomization within the UN system.

Clearly, the most positive development in the implementation of the AGE report's recommendations was the conclusion of the second phase of the review. With the able facilitation of another two permanent representatives, Gillian Bird of Australia and Ismael A. Gaspar Martins of Angola, and after a lengthy negotiation, member states adopted two resolutions on 27 April 2016: resolution 70/262 in the General Assembly and resolution 2282 (2016) in the Security Council. With virtually identical texts, the titles of both resolutions nonetheless differed somewhat. The assembly's label was "Review of the United Nations Peacebuilding Architecture," whereas the council tellingly called it "Post-conflict Peacebuilding"—the generic term used on its agenda. While the AGE report was only designed to inform member states in carrying out the second phase of the review, the resolutions clearly reflected the main thrust of the conceptual framework and the specific recommendations from the AGE report in the first phase. Thus, that the General Assembly and the Security Council simultaneously found common ground on the way forward for the UN's work on peacebuilding must be viewed as a major achievement.

Because peacebuilding is a system-wide responsibility—that is, not limited to the PBC, PBSO, and PBF—that should not be confined to post-conflict situations, the AGE's language in the report's title, "sustaining peace," has found its way into the lexicon of the key inter-governmental bodies, and appears frequently in statements and resolutions. At the same time, the discourse has given rise to controversy about its exact meaning.

The first opportunity to analyze the resolutions after their adoption was the open debate organized during the Venezuelan presidency of the Security Council on "Post-conflict Peacekeeping: Review of the Peacebuilding Architecture." This debate on 23 February 2016 had no formal outcome,⁹ but it was followed shortly thereafter by the "High-level Thematic Debate on the United Nations, Peace and Security" organized by the president of the General Assembly on 10-11 May. The latter attracted broad participation from member states, and it reaffirmed support for peacebuilding and for sustaining peace, as well as confirming the importance of synergies among the General Assembly, the Security Council, ECOSOC, and the PBC.¹⁰

Since that time, both the Security Council and the General Assembly have continued building on the joint landmark resolutions of April 2016. For example, on 10 January 2017, the Security Council, under the presidency of Sweden, organized a ministerial-level open debate on the "Maintenance

of International Peace and Security,” which focused on “Conflict Prevention and Sustaining Peace.” In addition to the secretary-general’s remarks, all 15 members of the Security Council and over 75 non-members (an unusually large number taking advantage of Rule 37 of the Rules of Procedure) participated.¹¹ Not to be outdone, the president of the General Assembly also organized a high-level dialogue on “Building Sustainable Peace for All: Synergies between the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and Sustaining Peace.” This event of 24-25 January took place in plenary and interactive sessions. Again, the secretary-general’s opening remarks¹² were followed by 81 presentations by member states.¹³ The two sets of debates in January indicated that “sustainable peace” remained on the UN’s proverbial “front burner.”

Another important development with potentially far-reaching consequences was the formation of an informal “Group of Friends of Sustainable Peace” to maintain the pressure for the fuller implementation of the April 2016 resolutions. Under the current coordination of Mexico, and with a cross-regional membership of over 35 delegations, the “friends” have become an important advocate for systemically addressing peacebuilding. Its formation could also announce a new trend in the way inter-governmental organs manage their interactions by clustering around topics instead of regional groupings or along the traditional North-South cleavage.¹⁴

Finally, it is worth pointing out that the latest Quadrennial Comprehensive Policy Review (QPCR) of Operational Activities for Development of the United Nations System, adopted at the end of 2016, is very supportive of moving sustainable peace forward, in the broader context of the 2030 Development Agenda. General Assembly resolution 71/243 recognizes explicitly that “a comprehensive whole-of-system response... is fundamental to most efficiently and effectively addressing needs and attaining the Sustainable Development Goals” (para. 14). It also calls upon the entities of the United Nations development system to “enhance coordination with humanitarian assistance and peacebuilding efforts at the national level” (para. 24).

In sum, there is reason to be optimistic about the progress achieved in the past two years. As the PBC’s own report on its tenth session indicates: “The upcoming reporting period will present an important opportunity for the Commission to demonstrate successful implementation of the resolutions on the review of the peacebuilding architecture. In that regard, the Commission will continue to pursue several important work streams that could further strengthen its country-specific and policy-related engagements, including the implementation of the resolutions on the review of the peacebuilding architecture.”¹⁵

PROBLEMS: THE EMPTY PART OF THE GLASS

Unsurprisingly, there have also been shortcomings in the implementation of the review, which can be divided into three categories: specific areas of contention; continued resistance to ending or at least mitigating fragmentation; and, perhaps most importantly, insufficient funding for the Peacebuilding Fund. First, the frequent appearance in documents and speeches of the term “sustainable peace” is still contested by some countries, which fear the “securitization” of development. This concern, harbored especially by some G-77 members, finds its roots in the traditional tensions between the Security Council and the General Assembly, and was the object of intense deliberations during the

preparatory phase of the post-2015 agenda negotiations, which finally led to the compromised wording in SDG 16. Additional work is needed to clarify common understanding of this terminology, perhaps promoted by the secretary-general himself.

Second, the concern expressed mostly by developing countries that are wary about the Security Council’s considerable power has a mirror image in the continuing resistance by some of the permanent members to allow non-member states of the Security Council to encroach on its work through the “back door” that sustainable peace potentially offers. In short, in spite of the adoption of resolutions 2282 (2016) and 70/262, fragmentation is still an obstacle, fueled by mutual mistrust between some members of the Security Council and some of the General Assembly. The AGE report explicitly calls for a change of mind-set on the part of member states to overcome the “silo effect” and to foster greater coherence in the work of the three principal inter-governmental organs; it is still a work in progress.

Third, the AGE report stressed the importance of the PBF as a singularly meaningful instrument at the UN’s disposal to be in a position to offer rapid financial assistance and play a catalytic role in mobilizing funds from bilateral and multilateral financial institutions. It recommended assessed contributions to provide the PBF with a firm enough financial footing to engage in predictable and long-term planning. This support has been absent despite the clear recognition of the value in the original resolutions. However, the door remains open to comply with the AGE’s recommendation by inviting the secretary-general to provide, among other things, “options on increasing, restructuring and better prioritizing funding dedicated to United Nations peacebuilding activities, including through assessed and voluntary contributions, with a view to ensuring sustainable financing.” A pledging conference in New York in September 2016 mobilized over \$150 million in voluntary contributions. However, these commitments were insufficient for present needs and obviously do not provide the basis for predictable disbursement in the long term. The opening of the report by the secretary-general expressed clearly concerns about the PBF’s future: “The Fund’s financial health remains in question at a time when the demand for its assistance has reached historic highs.”¹⁶

CONCLUSION

The implementation of the AGE report began well, but of course much more should be done to fulfil the ambitions of the seven members of the group and, more importantly, by the member states of the Security Council and the General Assembly. It remains to be seen if the momentum of the past two years can be maintained in putting more liquid in the UN’s peacebuilding glass. Indeed, the United Nations faces new and emerging challenges given the continuing impasse on the part of the Security Council to resolve some long-standing issues and the uncertainty surrounding the change in leadership of the main contributor to the UN’s budgets.

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NOTES

1. UN, *2010 Review of the United Nations Peacebuilding Architecture*, UN document A/64/868 – S/2020/393, 21 July 2010.
2. Only 20 percent of respondents believed that the RBC was performing effectively. See FUNDS, "Survey on the UN's Peacebuilding Record—The Results Are Out!," www.futureun.org/en/Publications-Surveys/Article?newsid=63.
3. UN, "Letter Dated 15 December 2014 from the President of the General Assembly and the President of the Security Council to the Secretary-General," UN document A/69/674–S/2014/911, 17 December 2014.
4. *The Challenge of Sustaining Peace: Report of the Advisory Group of Experts for the 2015 Review of the United Nations Peacebuilding Architecture*, UN document A/69/968 S/2015/490, 29 June, 2015.
5. The Security Council recognized this matter as early as 2001 in "Statement by the President of the Security Council," UN document S/PRST/2001/5, 20 February 2001; but it never seems to have assimilated it fully in its decision-making.
6. Stephen Browne and Thomas G. Weiss, eds., *Peacebuilding Challenges for the UN Development System* (New York: Future UN Development System Project, 2015).
7. See Thomas G. Weiss and Tatiana Carayannis, "Windows of Opportunity for UN Reform: Historical Lessons for the Next Secretary-General," *International Affairs* 92, 2 (2017): 309-326; and Stephen Browne and Thomas G. Weiss, "Ninth Secretary-General Takes Office Amidst Clarion Calls for Change," *FUNDS Briefing No. 44*, <http://futureun.org/en/Publications-Surveys/Article?newsid=101&teaserid=1>.
8. The secretary-general's remarks to the Security Council in its open debate on "Maintenance of International Peace and Security: Conflict Prevention and Sustaining Peace," on 10 January, 2017, <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/speeches/2017-01-10/secretary-generals-remarks-maintenance-international-peace-and-security>.
9. UN, "Security Council, 7629th Meeting," UN document S/PV.7629, 23 February 2016, http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/spv_7629.pdf.
10. UN, *Report of the Peacebuilding Commission on Its Tenth Session*, UN document A/71/768-S/2017/76, 27 January 2017, 7. A summary of the meeting is contained in an annex to the letter addressed by the president of the General Assembly to all member states on 20 May 2016.
11. For a full report on the meeting, see UN, "Security Council, 7857th Meeting," UN document S/PV.7857, 10 January 2017, <http://www.peacewomen.org/sites/default/files/Meeting%20record.pdf>.
12. The secretary-general's remarks are available at <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/speeches/2017-01-24/secretary-generals-building-sustainable-peace-all-remarks>.
13. There is no formal record of the meeting, but as is customary, the President of the General Assembly circulated a letter among member states on 29 March 2017, offering his own summary in an annex to the letter.
14. See, for instance, the remarks of Mexico's permanent representative, Juan Jose Gómez Camacho, at the seminar on "Sustaining Peace" held at the International Peace Institute on 7 June 7 2016, <https://www.ipinst.org/2016/06/2016-new-york-seminar-sustaining-peace#2>.
15. UN, *Report of the Peacebuilding Commission on Its Tenth Session*, 15.
16. UN, *The Peacebuilding Fund: Report of the Secretary General*, UN document A/71/792, 14 February 2017, 1.

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