



Quaker United Nations Office

Security, Peacebuilding & Civil Society

Paper presented at the EU-ISS seminar in New York on 26th April, 2010, “Peacebuilding and the Security-Development Nexus”, in Section 1 “Security, global governance and peacebuilding: What institutions and resources for sustainable peace?”

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen

My thanks to our hosts and the organizers, and for the very interesting contributions of my fellow panelists.

I. Initial Observations on Security, Peacebuilding and Civil Society

I wanted to begin my comments by making three observations:

Security. The first is about the nature of security. Earlier this month, representatives of countries experiencing conflict and fragility met in Dili, Timor Leste for the country partners meeting of the g7+ group. On this occasion the group included representatives from Burundi, the Central African Republic, Chad, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Liberia, Nepal, the Solomon Islands, Sierra Leone, Southern Sudan and Timor Leste. In their official statement, these conflict-affected countries identified priorities for their national plans - and in the Security priority they listed five issues. Now, just think for a minute what you imagine the main security priorities of these countries might be – terrorism perhaps, or organized crime, or security sector reform? Well, the priorities they listed, in order, were: Conflict Resolution and Prevention, Reconciliation, Social Inclusion, Peacebuilding & Dialogue, and Rule of Law. That is the list of security priorities put together by a representative group of fragile states. So my first observation is that security isn't always what we think it is –on the basis of this evidence, at least, from the point of view of the countries themselves, *security is about conflict transformation*, for lack of a better phrase. Put another way, the implication is that security will not be achieved until internal conflicts are addressed, reconciliation achieved, and mechanisms put in place by which future conflicts can be addressed peacefully.

Peacebuilding. My second observation is about peacebuilding. At a recent meeting in New York, where civil society groups were giving feedback to the General Assembly facilitators of the Peacebuilding Commission review, one comment that was fed back from civil society groups on the ground was that the ‘spirit’ of peacebuilding seemed to be missing from many of the activities in-country. This is a perception that bears examination. One of the biggest challenges of peacebuilding is that it apparently encompasses everything. Much energy is spent by internal and external peacebuilding actors in trying to prioritize long lists of possible actions and funding candidates. How then might we break this logjam? One way would be to focus on what it is that is unique to conflict-affected societies. At first sight, conflict affected settings may look similar to other environments where international help is offered, such as a region struggling to

recover after a natural disaster, or another affected by underdevelopment and poverty. But a society affected by conflict is different in key ways. Much of the damage that has been done was caused by the actions of human beings - and that changes things. Societies are made up of webs of relationships between people, and between people and institutions, and in conflict affected societies this web of relationships has been damaged to a greater or lesser degree. So my second observation is that it can be considered that *peacebuilding is about restoring relationships*, and that using this perspective can be quite helpful in prioritizing and designing programs on the ground.

Civil Society: My third observation is about civil society. We were pleased to see that civil society was mentioned several times in the very thoughtful concept note for this seminar, and it is worth dwelling for a moment on the role of civil society on the ground in fragile states. In such societies, national levels of decision making and authority have often been eroded, leaving non-state and community level mechanisms to sustain the social fabric, maintaining some level of services, providing justice, and supporting economic activity. Societies are surprisingly robust. In conflict-affected countries, what remains of the glue that holds society together is either at a local, community level, or exists in non-state networks, such as religious organizations or private sector and commercial groupings, supported in many cases by diaspora. People will have found ways to survive together, to get livelihoods, resolve disputes and act communally, while central authority is weakened or absent during years of war. So my third observation is that, in many cases *civil society is where governance happens in weak states*.

II. Implications for the peacebuilding architecture

These observations have several implications for the way in which international and regional actors approach peacebuilding. The Peacebuilding Commission was created out of a perceived need for a new approach to “post-conflict peacebuilding and reconciliation” (A/RES/60/1 para 97) – it appeared clear to governance actors at the time that there was a gap in the international architecture related to peacebuilding, and that the creation of the PBC would go some way towards filling that gap. Since inception, however, the PBC has struggled to carve out a unique role for itself. In recent discussions it has been suggested that the more the commission (along with the Peacebuilding Support Office and the Peacebuilding Fund) is able to define its distinct voice, its uniqueness, the better it will be able to clarify its niche in the overall international peacebuilding architecture, and maximize its impact on the ground.

There are two approaches that can be taken to defining such a ‘distinct voice’. One is to examine the unique, core needs of conflict-affected environments and consider whether the PBC might develop expertise in addressing them. The other is to consider the extent to which the PBC’s unique structure and mandate equip it to carry out certain types of role most effectively.

III. The core elements of peacebuilding

Our initial observations were first, from the perspective of fragile countries, that security is about conflict transformation, and secondly, when we consider the unique character of conflict-affected settings, that peacebuilding is about restoring relationships. This implies that *there is a core set of peacebuilding activities that are concerned with directly addressing the human aspects of conflict*. Related areas of activity exist at many levels, at an elite level, which may involve mediation and preventive diplomacy, at a community level, involving trauma healing, community reconciliation and dispute resolution, and at a national level, involving national reconciliation processes, establishment of rule of law and achieving legitimacy for government and its institutions.

This is not just a theoretical approach. For example, there have been discussions in the case of Burundi as to how the existing Peacebuilding Strategic Framework might be collapsed down to the PRSP, leaving the PRSP as the primary framework going ahead, particularly to the extent that if the elections this year are successful, then the activities of the PBC in relation to Burundi might be transitioned. The concern that has been raised, by local civil society and others, is that certain key elements of the PBC framework might be lost in the process, particularly those which are not emphasized in the same way in the PRSP. And those elements are precisely those identified above as being ‘core’ elements of peacebuilding.

Although further work would need to be done on more clearly defining these core elements, this approach could go a long way towards helping the PBC focus its activities and deliberations, and allow it to take on a larger number of cases. In addition, a more focused approach might more easily enable the PBC to develop as a center of expertise over time, and would provide the PBF with a ready-made approach to prioritizing the disbursement of funds.

IV. The PBC as a political actor

The unique structure and mandate of the PBC, compared to other governance actors, also suggest that it is particularly suited to certain types of activity. One characteristic of post-conflict environments is that they are, above all, political. First, such situations may be only nominally or at best unevenly “post-conflict”. There are frequently issues of authority and legitimacy that continue, the acceptance of a peace agreement may vary significantly between different actors and in different regions of the country, and spoilers inside and outside the country may remain. Secondly, many of the challenges faced by the new government will be political. On the one hand, there are internal issues. There may be accommodations required with other internal political actors, there may be social changes that need to be negotiated, and some of the principal components of the transition to sustainable peace (such as truth and reconciliation processes, or elections) are inherently political. There are also external relationships to be managed, with multilateral organizations, trading partners, regional powers and others.

The PBC is an intergovernmental advisory body with a mandate to support national efforts as it coordinates with other actors. This creates a unique relationship between the commission and the government of the country concerned: it is a body of peers, of other governments, not just donors, but governments with a wide array of expertise, often with directly relevant experience in their own countries, and its role is designed to be supportive. This gives it a distinct and authoritative position. In particular, this unique relationship with the national government means that the PBC has the potential to be particularly effective in fulfilling its advisory role around political challenges. Indeed, some of the unsung successes of the PBC have been the actions of the country configuration chairs in carrying out activities that might be best described as high-level political accompaniment, assisting the government in its external relationships (such as with multilateral financial institutions) and advising around internal political accommodations, for example in increasing the space for broader political dialogue in the run-up to elections.

IV. Conclusion

In summary, a PBC which is more focused on core peacebuilding tasks, and which plays to the strengths of its structure and mandate, a PBC that has better defined its value-added, is one that will be more effective on the ground and in the way it interacts with other governance actors.

To conclude, I’d like to go back to the g7+ Dili statement on security priorities, which went on to say the following:

“We acknowledge that we have a responsibility to address and resolve our internal conflicts. Common to the experiences of fragile States is the occurrence of conflict and the existence of latent tensions and disagreement. We have all dealt with what have often seemed intractable problems and social division. We acknowledged these problems and agreed on the approaches that are necessary to bring peace and security. This includes the need for reconciliation, social inclusion, dialogue, the institution of the rule of law and for an honest examination of the root causes of conflict and our national mentality. There must be recognition that a change of national mentality is a long process that takes time.”

In reading this and the reference to the need for a change in ‘national mentality’ I am reminded of the preamble from the UNESCO constitution: “Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defenses of peace must be constructed”. In the final analysis, this is one of the best definitions of peacebuilding that I know.

Thank you.

Andrew Tomlinson

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