



Briefing Paper

Quaker United Nations Office - Geneva

The UN Peacebuilding Commission: Getting Down to Work

“At this very point there is a gaping hole in the United Nations institutional machinery: no part of the UN system effectively addresses the challenge of helping countries with the transition from war to lasting peace.” Former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan in “In Larger Freedom” (2005)

The institutional “hole” recognized by Kofi Annan was based on evidence that nearly half of the situations of civil war where there had been a peace settlement following UN peacekeeping interventions were back into conflict within five years, due in part to the lack of sustained commitment by the international community. His solution to this was to call for the creation of a UN Peacebuilding Commission (PBC), which was formally established in December 2005 by joint resolutions of the UN Security Council and the UN General Assembly. The PBC began work half a year later and has struggled for a variety of reasons – political, financial and bureaucratic, as well as the fact that UN system is trying to do something new.

The basic mandate of the PBC broadly speaking is four-fold:

- To propose integrated strategies for post-conflict peacebuilding and recovery;
- To help to ensure predictable financing for early recovery activities and sustained financial investment over the medium- to longer-term;
- To extend the period of attention by the international community to post-conflict recovery;
- To develop best practices on issues which require extensive collaboration among political, military, humanitarian and development actors.

These are big tasks. Pitfalls abound, not least because there are differing understandings about what ‘peacebuilding’ means and difficulties in achieving effective cooperation among UN system actors. The PBC is not an operational body in itself. It works through active engagement with all the actors concerned, most importantly the governments of the countries under concern to the Commission, presently Burundi and Sierra Leone.

The PBC is made up of three basic elements: the Organisational Committee (composed of 31 UN member states), the Peacebuilding Support Office (the ‘secretariat’ to the Organisational Committee and its working bodies), and the Peacebuilding Fund (a goal of \$250 million has been set for pledges by governments, the money to be used as a ‘catalyst’ to peacebuilding work in the countries under concern). However, in establishing the PBC, UN Member States built into its structure and support a number of weakening factors. The politicized membership of Organisational Committee guarantees that decision-making will not be smooth. Support Office costs have had to be met ‘from existing resources’, the euphemism meaning other parts of the system will be raided for staffing and for funds. The separate Peacebuilding Fund will provide very modest means for helping focus countries to get started, especially as the PBC turns its focus to additional countries.

Prior to the launch of the PBC, an inventory was made in autumn 2005 to determine existing UN activities in the area of peacebuilding. That inventory focused on four broad categories: security and governance, justice and rec-

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conciliation, governance and participation, and social and economic well-being. These functions appear to be more about state-building than about peace-building, but, to the extent that there is state failure in these broad categories, the prospects for sustainable peace will be greatly reduced.

During the months since the PBC began its work and the initial focal countries were chosen, much work has been undertaken in developing integrated national strategies with the governments of Burundi and Sierra Leone. In one of its first major country-specific decisions, the Organisational Committee formally adopted a Strategic Framework document for Burundi on 20 June 2007. This Burundi-led proposal will now be conveyed to the UN General Assembly, the UN Security Council, and ECOSOC, the three bodies jointly responsible for the work of the PBC.

Of crucial relevance to the success of the peacebuilding enterprise in different countries will be the relationship with civil society actors, both international and domestic. The resolution establishing the PBC takes note of the importance of this relationship by encouraging the Commission 'to consult with civil society, non-governmental organisations, including women's organisations, and the private sector engaged in peacebuilding, as appropriate.' (para. 21.) The challenge will be to give reality to these words, a challenge which rests not only with the PBC but also with civil society organisations themselves. The record so far is not substantial, but encouraging steps have been taken which need to be built upon.

The PBC constitutes an important institutional experiment of great relevance to the ability of the United Nations to meet the kinds of security and development needs of today. Being a joint creation of the UN Security Council and General Assembly, it commands more 'democratic legitimacy' than many other UN bodies. Moreover, if the PBC proves successful it will also help improve the credibility of the UN as an institution whose record in peacebuilding has thus far been mixed at best. Finally, the very constraints facing the PBC, including financial ones, might also represent an opportunity for the realization of broader evolutionary possibility in the UN system, that of learning to incorporate the contribution of civil society organisations and other non-governmental actors in its activities and functions. It is likely that the PBC will lack the capacity to deal with all aspects of post-conflict peacebuilding with which it is charged. Civil society organisations and others will have an important role to play, both at the planning and operational stages of post-conflict reconstruction efforts, if the political and institutional constraints to this inclusion can be overcome.

The Quaker UN Office and the Peacebuilding Commission

The formal recognition of the peacebuilding function of the UN system represented by the PBC is to be celebrated. The challenge will be to make it work. The Quaker United Nations Office in Geneva and New York is committed to assisting in appropriate ways.

In New York, QUNO has been actively linking with other civil society actors in engaging the formal PBC mechanisms based there. In Geneva, we have been working with the Geneva Centre for Security Policy and others not only in raising awareness among Geneva actors of the work of the PBC, but also in seeking to make Geneva institutions an active partner in the work of the PBC. Geneva is the home to many organisations—international and civil society—of great relevance to peacebuilding work. A 'mapping' of Geneva capacities is currently underway and an 'International Geneva Peacebuilding Guide' will be produced in the coming months. Together, QUNO Geneva and New York are building our own inventory of Quaker peacebuilding capacities in particular countries and will be seeking to bring these to bear on the PBC itself as well as in the focus countries of the PBC. This is already bearing fruit in Burundi, where there are many local Quaker peacebuilding programmes.