

Building Peace across the United Nations: The Advisory Role of the Peacebuilding Commission

Virtual Roundtable | 20 April 2022

Summary Note

The 2020 peacebuilding architecture review (hereafter, the 2020 review) concluded on 21 December 2020 with the adoption of dual resolutions on Peacebuilding and Sustaining Peace by the UN General Assembly (A/RES/75/201) and the Security Council (S/RES/2558). The resolutions call on Member States, the UN, and other stakeholders to “continue to take action to implement the resolutions on peacebuilding and sustaining peace, and to advance efforts to bring greater coherence to peacebuilding efforts” (S/RES/2558, OP1). In line with this call, the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation (the Foundation), the Global Network of Women Peacebuilders (GNWP), the Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict (GPPAC), and the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI) are continuing a series of roundtable discussions to examine strategies and pathways towards the operationalization of the 2016 resolutions on Peacebuilding and Sustaining Peace.

Summary

Over the years, the Peacebuilding Commission (PBC) has made significant progress in solidifying its advisory and bridging roles and in enhancing the overall visibility of its work in diverse fora. Various modalities have been adopted to better suit the purpose of supporting efforts for sustaining peace in the broader peace and security agenda at all levels.

During the twentieth roundtable discussion in this series, participants focused on how the PBC should best utilize its advisory and bridging roles to convene UN bodies beyond the Security Council, as well as non-UN entities.

One of the key takeaways from the discussion is that formal interactions have helped to strengthen engagement with the Security Council and other UN bodies, although a more informal and flexible approach seems to yield more pragmatic results. The use of informal coordinators eases the burden placed on the PBC Chair and allows Member States to take the lead and show initiative on specific thematic areas. The PBC can further exercise its bridging role to support a coherent approach to and engagement in peacebuilding and sustaining peace efforts with all relevant stakeholders involved.

The following key themes emerged during the discussion:

Relationships of the Peacebuilding Commission with the broader UN System

The report of the PBC from its first session (2007) reveals that the quest to strengthen and institutionalize its cooperation with other UN organs, including the Security Council, the General Assembly, and the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) started early in the Commission’s existence. The document identifies periodic interactions as an appropriate mechanism for providing advice and follow-up while improving inter-agency coordination.¹ In this sense, it is necessary to delve into the modalities, timing, and content of these interactions to understand the

¹ United Nations, 2007, Report of the Peacebuilding Commission on its first session, para. 48, accessible at: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/604365?ln=en>

extent to which the Commission has been fulfilling its mandate and how it has been exercising its advisory and bridging roles.

Since its establishment in 2005, the Commission has made significant strides in operationalizing its advisory and bridging roles and in enhancing the overall visibility of its work in diverse fora and extending beyond New York. Various modalities have been adopted to better suit the purpose of supporting efforts for sustaining peace in the broader peace and security agenda and to build on other developments within the UN system. In 2021, some concrete outcomes included advice provided to the Security Council nine times; to the General Assembly four times; and three submissions to the ECOSOC.² Throughout the roundtable discussion, participants highlighted the critical role of the Commission in advancing peacebuilding analysis and recommendations, acknowledging that, ultimately, the recognition and uptake by other bodies of this type of expertise reaffirms its unique mandate and value to the UN system.

While formal interactions have helped to strengthen engagement, particularly with the Security Council, a more informal and flexible approach seems to yield more pragmatic results. Informal interactive dialogues (IIDs) provide a platform for a comprehensive and frank exchange, especially when discussing agenda items that are prone to a high degree of polarization among Member States. In these situations, the Commission is key to bridge some of the differences and focus on the core thematic areas under discussion. During recent years, the PBC has also been able to forge practical relationships with international financial institutions and civil society and to advance South-South Cooperation.

The use of informal coordinators is also considered an efficient and innovative practice to operationalize the Commission's advisory and bridging roles. Internally, informal coordination eases the burden on the Chair, as Member States can take the lead in specific initiatives, engage in meetings and hold consultations that strengthen the link with the Security Council presidencies. In their capacities, informal coordinators help to align and complement the Commission's work program. Kenya in its coordinator role with the Security Council, South Africa with the General Assembly, and South Korea with ECOSOC have been proactive in identifying meaningful entry points and engagement opportunities to enable the integration of regional and context-specific priorities and needs, as well as thematic issues. For instance, during the analysis of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the PBC drew the Council's attention to early engagement, gaps, and possible avenues for cooperation during informal interactive dialogues.²

Similarly, the 2021 Commission's annual report outlines progress in the engagement with non-UN actors, like international financial institutions, and ad hoc groups. In 2021, non-UN briefers to the Commission included 74 per cent of women peacebuilders, compared to 22 per cent in 2019.³ Expanding to new fora, exploring new opportunities, and forging effective partnerships help drive complementarity in peacebuilding and sustaining peace.

Optimizing the Commission's advisory role

Roundtable participants agreed that a useful mechanism for optimizing the content of its advice is for the Secretariat to share advance copies of the Secretary General's reports with the Commission whenever possible. Another good practice is for exchanges with the Commission to align with the respective calendars and agenda items of the UN organs. An example of a successful interaction is reflected in the unanimous adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 2594 (2021).⁴ The

² United Nations, 2020, The Advisory Role of the Peacebuilding Commission (PBC) to the Security Council (SC), accessible at: https://www.un.org/peacebuilding/sites/www.un.org.peacebuilding/files/documents/20201221_coordinators_summary_informal_stock-taking_meeting.pdf

³ United Nations, 2020, Report of the Peacebuilding Commission on its fifteenth session, para. 20, accessible at: <https://www.un.org/peacebuilding/sites/www.un.org.peacebuilding/files/documents/n2224988.pdf>

⁴ UNSC 2594 addresses the role that peace operations play in the pursuit of sustainable political solutions and building peace. It emphasizes the need for peace operations to engage at the earliest possible stage in integrated planning and coordination on transitions with the host state and other national stakeholders. Accessible at: <http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/doc/2594>

Commission was able to provide background information and concrete updates on what was happening at the country level. It was also stressed that the Commission's expertise could and should be further utilized in supporting political transitions at an early stage through operative and strategic advice to the Council and meaningful engagement with the national governments in respective countries.

Participants highlighted written input provided to the Security Council, such as field mission reports as submitted by Switzerland in its capacity as the country configuration chair for Burundi, as a good precedent. Alternatively, to ensure the utility and timeliness of the advice, informal presentations or read-outs were suggested, including discussions with Council members on the advice being provided prior to the relevant Council meetings or mandate renewals. A challenge, however, has been that the scope of the advice being put forward by the PBC has been narrowed, at times with language being watered down to suit the agenda of some Council members and thus hampering the role of the Commission.

In addition, the Commission faces an issue of capacity, largely as a result of its development and success over recent years. Participants suggested that the Commission should therefore focus on the quality of the advice it provides rather than on the quantity, honing in on areas where the PBC has demonstrated added value. While recognized as a political body in itself, the PBC is seen as offering a platform where politics can to some extent be circumvented or minimized, with situations of transition (in particular in contexts going through mission drawdown) being one important area. Consistent follow-up is important to analyze what has been done with the advice provided and to reflect on challenges and potential improvements. Similarly, the Commission should reflect on the type of advice being provided to ensure that the language is formulated to reflect action-oriented advice. The advice should be substantive, clear and aligned with the Council's priorities to encourage regular requests, allowing for effective and timely integration.

It is important to recognize that the demand for the Commission's support and advice to other UN activities is growing and the Commission is not always able to fulfill those demands given limited capacity. Consideration should be given to strengthening the capacity of the UN Peacebuilding Support Office and the Commission's Secretariat to ensure sufficient support for practical implementation and operationalization of the Commission's activities. The constraint of limited capacity by the Commission could also be mitigated by more Member States taking leading roles and initiative in the Commission. The financing for peacebuilding discussions is a good example of various Member States in the Commission showing leadership on a variety of topics. Such initiative can be expanded to further support the PBC Chair in relevant activities.

Recommendations

Based on the key takeaways of the discussion, the following recommendations have been identified:

- The Commission should utilize its advisory and bridging roles to convene UN bodies beyond the Security Council, as well as non-UN entities, and **explore new opportunities for collaboration and joint analysis**. One avenue to do so could be to enhance its relationship with Geneva-based UN entities to nurture expertise in various areas. The PBC's engagement with the Human Rights Council should be further explored. At the same time, the Commission should focus on the quality rather than the quantity of advice, with an emphasis on providing timely analysis and action-oriented recommendations.
- The Commission should **adopt a collaborative and inclusive approach to enhance national ownership**, examining what can realistically be achieved to facilitate engagement with countries, including countries in transition at the early stages of the process. This would enable the Commission to meaningfully support considerations by the Security Council through the provision of technical advice and strengthen the language on transitions as part of peacekeeping mandates.

- The Security Council and the Commission should work with the Secretariat to institutionalize practices that **facilitate the formulation and provision of substantive and timely advice**, such as sharing advance copies of Security General's reports, where possible, and aligning their respective calendars and agenda items.
- Member States should continue to **strengthen the capacity of the Commission's support systems** by enhancing the role of the informal coordinators, facilitating IIDs and taking the lead on specific issues for better alignment of joint work.