

DRAFT, Not for Citation Without the Authors' Permission

A revised version of this paper will appear in Roland Paris and Timothy D. Sisk, *The Dilemmas of Statebuilding: Confronting the Contradictions of Postwar Peace Operations* (London: Routledge, forthcoming).

**Understanding the “Coordination Problem” in
Postwar Statebuilding**

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A common critique of postwar statebuilding operations is that they suffer from a lack of coordination among the myriad international actors involved in these missions. Stories abound of international agencies duplicating efforts or even working at cross-purposes, sometimes with limited knowledge of each other’s activities, and calls for improved coordination have become something of a mantra among scholars and practitioners of statebuilding (including this author).¹ But these oft-repeated calls may conceal as much as they reveal about the dilemmas of statebuilding. Like other mantras, this one offers soothing simplicity in the face of disturbing complexity. Lurking behind the organizational discontinuities of statebuilding are deeper disagreements and uncertainties about the means and ends of this enterprise, many of which are described in the other chapters of this volume. Getting statebuilding agencies to work smoothly together is, of course, a necessary condition for successful international action (however the goals of that action may be defined), but it is too easy to prescribe improved coordination as a remedy for the shortcomings and contradictions of statebuilding, which run much deeper.

¹ For example, Olson and Gregorian 2007; Paris 2004; Smith 2004; Ricigliano 2003; Weinberger 2002; Sommers 2000; and Crocker, Hampson and Aall 1999.

Understanding the nature of the coordination problem – what it reveals, and what it hides – is a first step in this analysis. The second step is to explore the challenges of actually improving coordination among international statebuilders. Calls for greater coordination rarely delve into the details: Who will do the coordinating? How, when, and under what auspices? Just starting to answer these questions reveals the complexities of coordination. While there are compelling reasons to strengthen cooperation among the main international actors involved in statebuilding, there are also many pitfalls to avoid. Rather than conceiving of “more coordination” as an absolute good, this chapter argues that effective coordination requires striking a balance between competing imperatives, which are shaped by the characteristics of the environment and the actors to be coordinated. Indeed, in the environment of statebuilding, there is a real risk that too little, too much, or the wrong type of coordination could do more harm than good. In making this argument, I draw upon organizational theory – in particular, the distinction between markets, hierarchies and networks.²

Put differently, although the coordination problem is real, greater clarity is needed in both its diagnosis and treatment. Too often, unrelated problems are misdiagnosed as coordination failures because they manifest themselves, superficially, as disorderliness or ineffectiveness in the field, whereas in fact they reflect deeper frustrations, tensions and uncertainties in the statebuilding enterprise. And too often, greater coordination is put forward as a remedy without considering the difficulties and risks of the treatment.

Thinking carefully about the coordination problem is timely, given initiatives now underway within the United Nations, including the establishment of a new Peacebuilding Commission that is designed to bring greater coherence to the myriad activities of statebuilding agencies, both inside and outside the UN. In its short existence, the Commission has launched an ambitious and innovative work plan, and hopes are high that it will fill what former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan called a “gaping hole” in the institutional machinery for statebuilding: namely, the absence of a body to coordinate the alphabet soup of international

² For other studies applying organizational theory to the problem of coordination in peace operations, see also Lipson 2007 and Herrhausen 2007.

actors involved in statebuilding missions. As we shall see, however, the design of the Commission makes heroic assumptions about the ability and willingness of independent agencies (whose goals often differ and conflict with each other) to embrace common, overarching strategies. While the Commission's design is well-suited to maintaining the flexibility and creativity of the international statebuilding network – and in this sense is sensitive to the distinctive characteristics and needs of this complex and “networked” policy domain – the Commission may be hobbled by its own lack of authority and leverage over key statebuilding agencies. It is a purely advisory body that has no independent decisionmaking authority, and even its recommendations depend on reaching full consensus among its members – all of which suggests that the Commission will have great difficulty reducing inter-organizational differences of approach and strategy.

Rising Demand for Better Coordination

As the Cold War came to an end, a new brand of international peace operations emerged as the dominant security activity of the United Nations: missions aimed at helping war-torn countries make the transition from a fragile ceasefire to a stable peace, or what became known as post-conflict peacebuilding. Although this form of intervention was not unprecedented – the UN had stumbled into playing a similar role in the Congo during the early 1960s, when a mission designed to oversee the departure of Belgian colonial troops from the newly independent Congo got caught up in a civil war – post-conflict stabilization was a new area of focus for the world body in the period immediately following the Cold War. Between 1989 and 1993, eight peacebuilding operations were deployed to countries just emerging from civil conflicts: Namibia, Nicaragua, Angola, Cambodia, El Salvador, Mozambique, Liberia and Rwanda.

These missions were quite unlike the traditional peacekeeping operations that had been the UN's main security function during the Cold War, and which typically involved monitoring ceasefires or neutral buffer zones between former combatants. Rather, peacebuilding now involved the implementation of multi-faceted peace agreements, which often included political and economic elements, in addition to a ceasefire. As then-Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali put it in 1992, the goal of peacebuilding was “to identify and support structures which will

tend to strengthen and solidify peace in order to avoid a relapse into conflict.”³ This typically included monitoring or even administering post-conflict elections as well as other activities such as the demobilization of former fighters, resettlement of refugees, human rights investigations and economic reform. Furthermore, the UN shared these responsibilities with several other international actors, including major regional organizations, international financial institutions, national and international development agencies, and a host of international non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

With more agencies involved in performing a wider range of tasks than in earlier peace operations, coordination problems soon began to arise. In El Salvador, Mozambique and Cambodia, for example, the UN urged the governments of these countries to increase spending on peacebuilding-related programs, such as the re-integration of former combatants into civilian life, while the International Monetary Fund (IMF) pushed in the opposite direction and demanded fiscal restraint.⁴ Coordination problems also emerged between military and civilian actors, within the family of UN agencies, and between governmental and non-governmental actors, in most missions; and by 1995 the United Nations was recognizing such problems as serious.⁵ The success of UN-led peace operations, wrote Boutros-Ghali in that year, depends on “cooperation and support of other players on the international stage: the Governments that constitute the United Nations membership, regional and non-governmental organizations, and the various funds, programs, offices and agencies of the United Nations system itself. If United Nations efforts are to succeed, the roles of the various players need to be carefully coordinated in an integrated approach to human security.”⁶

³ Boutros-Ghali 1992, p. 11.

⁴ On El Salvador see de Soto and del Castillo 1994; on Mozambique see Willet 1995; on Cambodia see UNRISD 1993.

⁵ For a review of major peacebuilding coordination problems during the 1990s, see Jones 2001.

⁶ Boutros-Ghali 1995, para. 81.

These concerns led to sporadic efforts to improve coordination through devices such as ad hoc “Friends” groups, which brought together key governments to promote common approaches to specific missions, as well as country team thematic groups within the UN, and Special Representatives of the Secretary-General in the field. But the coordination problem actually became more difficult as time went on – for two reasons. First, peacebuilding missions became more complex in their functions and expansive in their aims, due in part to a recognition that a more comprehensive approach to peacebuilding was required in order to address the underlying sources of conflict in societies emerging from civil war. In the early years of the 1990s, peacebuilders tended to rush ahead with post-conflict elections, declare success and depart. This “quick and dirty” approach failed in Angola (where elections were a catalyst for renewed violence), Rwanda (where overly optimistic assumptions about the willingness of the parties to implement their peace settlement were shattered by genocide), and in Cambodia and Liberia (where elections yielded superficial democratization and a quick return to authoritarianism – and, in the case of Liberia, resurgent war).

Learning from the shortcomings of these missions, the UN and other international agencies began to shift their focus towards more far-reaching approaches to peacebuilding. This strategic reorientation was especially visible in the Bosnia operation, created in 1995 with the signing of the Dayton Accord. The post-Dayton mission was originally scheduled to last only one year (until the end of 1996) and in this sense reflected the prevailing “quick and dirty” approach that defined peacebuilding in the first half of the 1990s. But the need for a longer-term deployment in Bosnia quickly became apparent and the termination date was eliminated in order to give time for institution-building and economic reform to progress. By the late 1990s, new missions were being launched with broader mandates and authority: Kosovo, East Timor and Sierra Leone. These operations had more expansive functions, and as a result peacebuilding became an even more complex and multi-faceted enterprise. This, in turn, increased the challenges (and importance) of achieving effective coordination.

The second complicating factor was the growing number and variety of international actors involved in peacebuilding. The 1990s saw a steady rise in regional and sub-regional organizations – as well as NGOs and private military companies – as important players in these

missions.⁷ Bosnia, in this respect, too, was a watershed. The post-Dayton mission was the first operation explicitly dividing core peacebuilding roles among multiple international actors, including the UN, NATO, EU and OSCE. More generally, through the course of the 1990s, there was a movement away from UN-led missions and the greater reliance on lead states, ad hoc coalitions, and regional bodies to lead military and civilian functions, which contributed the multiplication of peacebuilding actors. Simultaneously, a growing number of international agencies and national governments were creating specialized post-conflict and emergency response units, thus diffusing intervention capacity to a broader range of actors.⁸

By the early 2000s, there was a growing sense that an “immense coordination problem” existed within the international machinery for peacebuilding.⁹ Efforts to implement “integrated mission” models in the field, beginning in Kosovo in 1999, were only partly successful.¹⁰ Attempts to construct an institutional locus for peacebuilding within the UN itself also floundered,¹¹ and NGOs were coming under increasing criticism for their inability to coordinate amongst themselves.¹² What is more, the very proliferation of ad hoc coordination mechanisms appeared to be creating some confusion among peacebuilders in the field.¹³

In fact, problems of coordination existed at four inter-related levels: first, at the field level, between the various international actors (including governmental and non-governmental agencies) involved in statebuilding missions and domestic actors within the country itself, including government authorities; second, within the bureaucracies of the major donor

⁷ Jones 2003; Bellamy and Williams 2005.

⁸ Jones 2001.

⁹ Fearon and Laitin 2004, p. 30.

¹⁰ Cutillo 2006.

¹¹ Call 2005.

¹² Cooley and Ron 2002; Patey and Macnamara 2003.

¹³ Duggan 2004, p. 357.

governments, whose different departments and agencies often pursued different goals and activities within the same mission; third, within the UN system, where bureaucratic rivalries and turf-battles are legion; and fourth, at the headquarters-level between all the major international statebuilding actors as well as the major governments supporting these actors.¹⁴ In substantive terms, coordination involved bringing greater coherence to political, security, rule of law, human rights and development activities of statebuilders at all four of these levels.

Perfect – or even near-perfect – coordination of these many statebuilding activities would be impossible. Indeed, I shall argue below that it would be undesirable. But major operational problems arising from a lack of coordination among statebuilding agencies has been well-documented, giving rise to a growing body of reports and studies that have reached the same conclusion: that the hard nut of coordination needs to be cracked. One 2004 study examined 336 peacebuilding projects sponsored by Germany, the Netherlands, Norway and the U.K. and concluded that more than 55 percent of these projects had no link to any broader strategy for the country in which they were implemented, pointing to a “strategic deficit” in the design and conduct of peacebuilding missions.¹⁵ Another report found that “diffuse planning and implementation of peacebuilding...is extremely problematic and produces a greater chance of delay or failure.”¹⁶ In 2004, Cedric de Coning summarized what had emerged as a widely-held view among peacebuilding analysts and practitioners: “the lack of meaningful coordination among the peacebuilding agencies [is] a major cause of unsatisfactory performance.”¹⁷ It was in this context – in early 2005 – that Kofi Annan described the insufficiency of coordination as a “gaping hole” in the UN’s institutional machinery for peacebuilding.

When Annan made these remarks, there was growing support among UN member states to address the coordination issue. Several countries, including the United Kingdom, Canada and

¹⁴ On the multiple levels of coordination in peacebuilding, see de Coning 2007.

¹⁵ Smith 2004; see also Clingendael 2005.

¹⁶ Dahrendorf et al. 2003, p. 20.

¹⁷ De Coning 2004, p. 43.

the United States were already pursuing plans to develop more effective “whole-of-government” approaches to fragile states within their respective governments.¹⁸ The High-Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change had also recently issued its report calling for the creation of a new body – the Peacebuilding Commission (PBC) – “to monitor and pay close attention to countries at risk, ensure concerted action by donors, agencies, programs and financial institutions, and mobilize financial resources for sustainable peace.”¹⁹ Annan himself strongly supported the proposal for the PBC, as did many UN member states. This was, in fact, one of the few agenda items that achieved widespread support at the 2005 World Summit.²⁰

The Peacebuilding Commission – along with its Support Office and a dedicated Peacebuilding Fund – came into existence in 2006. As we shall see, their creation represented one of the most promising opportunities in recent years to improve coordination among statebuilding agencies within and outside the UN system. However, the degree to which a new body could “fix” the coordination problem would depend not only on how that body was designed, but also on the definition of the problem itself.

The Coordination Problem: A Convenient Catch-All?

There are compelling efficiency arguments for addressing the coordination problem among international statebuilders and for creating new mechanisms to foster more cooperation and

¹⁸ Patrick and Brown 2007.

¹⁹ High Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change 2004, para. 225.

²⁰ Other initiatives approved at the 2005 World Summit included an endorsement of the “Responsibility to Protect” principles; a condemnation of terrorism in all its forms; an agreement to establish a new Human Rights Council; and increased funding to humanitarian assistance. The summit, however, was widely viewed as a disappointment because of expectations for greater progress on poverty reduction policy and institutional reform of the UN itself – most notably, the Security Council – for which there was little agreement.

coherence in the field. But there is also something peculiar about the number of operational problems that have been attributed to coordination failures, and the degree to which improved coordination is sometimes portrayed as a means of resolving these problems. In the light of deep uncertainties and disagreements that render postwar statebuilding such a complex (and sometimes controversial) exercise, the emphasis on improving coordination seems strangely anodyne and technocratic.

If we have learned anything in the past decade and a half – and by “we” I am referring primarily to the Western governments, organizations and specialists who support the international statebuilding machinery – it is that we know relatively little about how to transform war-torn countries into stable societies. The results of the missions undertaken to date have been mixed at best.²¹ In some cases, such as Angola, Rwanda, Liberia and East Timor, international efforts did not prevent a resumption of violence, with new conflicts erupting in these countries. In other cases, such as El Salvador and Nicaragua, peace prevails but the underlying socio-economic conditions that drove conflict remain largely unchanged. Elsewhere, including Bosnia, Kosovo and Afghanistan, international deployments have arguably resulted in a seemingly permanent, quasi-imperial presence, which raises concerns about fostering excessive local dependence on international actors. All of these missions reveal the tremendous complexity and difficulty involved in building stable state institutions in war-torn states, particularly when this process is led by outsiders – problems that are further complicated when statebuilding takes place after external conquest, as in the case of Afghanistan and Iraq, and in the face of ongoing insurgencies. Major questions of strategy and legitimacy remain unanswered: What is the best combination of political and economic reforms in a postconflict situation, and in what sequence? How can international actors play a statebuilding role without undermining the perceived legitimacy of the resulting institutions in the eyes of the local populace? Most fundamentally, how can a statebuilding process that took hundreds of years in most well-established liberal democracies be accelerated and achieved within a dramatically shorter time?

²¹ Paris 2004; Doyle and Sambanis 2006.

Indeed, lack of coordination in previous missions has resulted not only from obvious factors, such as the multitude of peacebuilding actors with overlapping or duplicative mandates, the time and money (“transaction costs”) that coordination entails, competition for influence and visibility among some international peacebuilding agencies and their general unwillingness to sacrifice autonomy and independence.²² More fundamentally, such problems also stem from the fact that many of these agencies have different approaches to postwar statebuilding and different philosophies, objectives and conceptions of how to create the conditions for stable and lasting peace in war-torn societies.²³ Such differences have been well-documented in many operations. In the case of Bosnia, for example, Bruce Jones, Elizabeth Cousens and Susan Woodward each observed that lack of success in coordination stemmed from differing, even contradictory, policy goals of the international agencies and major powers involved in Bosnia.²⁴ While most international actors subscribe to the broad goals of transforming war-torn states into liberal market democracies, there is no universal agreement on what is required to achieve this goal, or how to achieve it under different circumstances.²⁵ Significant differences in approach also exist within individual agencies – including in the OSCE, where the democratization branch generally seeks to develop working relationships with local authorities, while the human rights branch is tasked with responding to complaints against local authorities.²⁶ Discrepancies in strategic orientation can also give rise to concerns and disputes over the “politicization of humanitarian relief” in statebuilding missions.²⁷

Discussions aimed at improving coordination have tended to overlook these substantive disagreements and to redefine them in procedural-technocratic terms: namely, as “coordination”

²² Uvin 2002.

²³ Miall 2007, p. 35.

²⁴ Jones 2001; Cousens 2001; and Woodward 2002.

²⁵ Paris 2004.

²⁶ Jeong 2002, p. 9.

²⁷ Dononi 1996, p. vi.

problems. Undoubtedly, there have been genuine coordination problems, where actors share common objectives but fail to cooperate or work at cross-purposes because of insufficient information sharing. But there are also underlying substantive-philosophical differences which lead statebuilding agencies to pursue conflicting or incompatible strategies, and it follows that any response to such problems cannot be a purely procedural one.

Bureaucracies, in particular, have a propensity to deal with situations of complexity, novelty and uncertainty by shifting these discussions into more familiar terrain: the realm of rules and procedures. This is true not just of bureaucracies, but of people in general. Social psychologists have shown that when people are faced with situations of uncertainty, they tend to fall back on habits and routines as a means of economizing on cognitive resources and coping with complexity.²⁸ But bureaucracies, which specialize in disaggregating administrative problems into manageable and repetitive tasks, have a particular tendency to revert to a procedural discourse in the face of uncertainty and ambiguity.²⁹ This is one aspect of what Max Weber first called the process of “rationalization” which is intrinsic to modern bureaucracies³⁰ – and it may help to explain how it was possible to achieve such widespread support for the creation of a Peacebuilding Commission at the 2005 World Summit, where other important agenda items were subject to paralyzing discord. Recasting the strategic disagreements over statebuilding as procedural problems apparently made it possible to reach near-universal agreement on specific measures to “strengthen” statebuilding through organizational reform.³¹

During the discussions that led up to the establishment of the PBC, even traditionally wary countries such as China chimed in with strong support for its creation: “China is favorably disposed toward the proposal for the establishment of a Peacebuilding Commission and believes

²⁸ Becker 2004, pp. 656-658.

²⁹ Beetham 1996, p. 12; March and Olsen 1989, p. 34.

³⁰ Weber 1978.

³¹ On the tendency of organizations including the United Nations to respond to external pressures by promising reform, but not dealing directly with substantive issues, see Lipson 2007b.

that its main responsibility should be to help devise plans for the transition from conflict to post-conflict peacebuilding and to coordinate initiatives of the international community in this respect.”³² But the Chinese delegation pointedly avoided making any references to the more controversial substance of peacebuilding strategy, referring instead to such generalities “devising plans” and “coordinating initiatives.” Even members of the customarily critical NGO community joined the chorus, supporting the establishment of the Commission, again in largely procedural terms, as an “institutional home for peacebuilding” that could “provide much-needed policy coherence and coordination within the UN system.”³³

However, there were potential costs to using the “coordination problem” as a catch-all for deeper disagreements and uncertainties over the strategy and purposes of peacebuilding. First, doing so could raise expectations about the degree to which procedural fixes are capable of reducing the inherent complexity of statebuilding or overcoming organizational conflicts rooted in the incompatible priorities and strategic orientations of statebuilding agencies, not just in their failure to communicate and coordinate. Second, defining the problem in this manner could actually deflect attention away from these deeper issues. Indeed, UN members spent a year wrangling over purely procedural aspects of the new PBC – its membership, structure, and so on – before the body was able to hold its first meeting. Perhaps such discussions were necessary, but they came with an opportunity cost: this time was not spent addressing substantive statebuilding strategies.

³² Statement by Ambassador Zhang Yishan on Cluster II (Freedom from Fear) of the Secretary-General’s Report, “In Larger Freedom: Towards Development, Security and Human Rights for All” at the Informal Thematic Consultations of General Assembly, New York, April 22, 2005, www.china-un.org/eng/xw/t192893.htm (accessed on October 5, 2006).

³³ Statement by the NGO Working Group on Women, Peace and Security at the Informal General Assembly Civil Society Hearings, New York, June 24, 2005.

Interestingly, one of the few official statements that challenged the prevailing procedural discourse in this early period of the Commission's formation came not from a national delegation, but from the head of the UN bureaucracy itself: then-Secretary-General Kofi Annan. At the June 2006 launch of the Commission, Annan drew attention to the inherently political task of postwar reconstruction: "[I]ncreased resources and improved coordination will not, in themselves, be enough to bring about lasting peace... At times, the international community has approached peacebuilding as a largely technical exercise, involving knowledge and resources. The international community must not only understand local power dynamics, but also recognize that it is itself a political actor entering a political environment."³⁴ These comments gently peeled back the procedural veneer of discussions on the Peacebuilding Commission, exposing the highly political – and contentious – core of the statebuilding enterprise that had been partially obscured by the emphasis on coordination.

The Need for a Balanced Approach to Coordination

Just as it is naive to blame coordination failures for a host of more complex problems, it is too easy to call for “stronger coordination” without understanding that not all types of coordination are well-suited to the circumstances and needs of statebuilding. Too much, too little, or the wrong type of coordination could do more harm than good. The challenge is to avoid these pitfalls and to devise coordination methods that are properly calibrated to the particular tasks and task-environments in question.

The starting point for this analysis is to recognize that the international statebuilding machinery is, at present, a loosely structured network of national governments and international governmental and non-governmental agencies. It is a “network” in the sense that statebuilding

³⁴ “Opening First Session of Peacebuilding Commission, Secretary-General Stresses Importance of National Ownership, Building Effective Public Institutions,” UN document SG/SM/10533, PBC/2, June 23, 2006, www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2006/sgsm10533.doc.htm (accessed on October 5, 2006).

actors constitute a system that is neither purely a “market” in which individual actors pursue their individual goals with little sense of sharing common objectives, nor is it purely a “hierarchy” or a system of top-down or command management.

Networks are collections of actors who share common goals and engage in repeated, voluntary interactions in the pursuit of their shared goals. In the words of Walter W. Powell, transactions between networked actors “occur neither through discrete exchanges [as in the market] nor by administrative fiat [as in a hierarchy], but through networks of individuals engaged in reciprocal, preferential, mutually supportive actions.”³⁵ The international statebuilding system is a network because its constituent members share information with each other, discuss common objectives, work together to achieve these objectives both at the headquarters-level and in the field, and use several formal and informal coordination mechanisms (outlined in the first section of this chapter). But it is a *loosely structured* network in that there is little joint planning for missions, patchy information sharing, inconsistent and often non-existent coordination, and no hierarchical command structure for the system as a whole.

When commentators or officials talk about the need for “improved coordination,” they may mean different things. For some, improved coordination means moving towards a more hierarchical arrangement. Anja T. Kaspersen and Ole Jacob Sending, for example, have argued for “functional centralization” and a “fully integrated structure” for peacebuilding within the United Nations, in order to “reduce supply-driven programming and turf battles” and to “make it possible to implement a peacebuilding strategy that would draw effectively on the full spectrum of the tools and expertise of the UN system.”³⁶ For others, such as Robert Ricigliano, improved coordination refers to international actors doing a better job of sharing information and

³⁵ Powell 1990, p. 303.

³⁶ Kaspersen and Sending 2005, p. 19.

subscribing to a broad set of common principles.³⁷ These are quite different visions of how to achieve better coordination. The former involves replacing the existing statebuilding network (at least the UN portion of this network) with a new hierarchy centered in the UN, whereas the latter eschews new hierarchies and seeks to make the network work more efficiently *as a network* through improved information sharing.

Both approaches have their advantages and disadvantages. Those who argue that the international statebuilding system should continue to operate as network, without the addition of new hierarchical elements, assume that better communication alone will yield a more coordinated “self-organizing” network of statebuilding actors. Greater communication is surely needed (not least to prevent the unintentional duplication of efforts) but can information sharing, alone, address strategic gaps and differences in approach to statebuilding? I doubt it. In fact, this is one of the principal scholarly criticisms of the various theories of network organization: they have neglected the role of power as an instigator of cooperation and have placed too high an expectation on consensus.³⁸ Achieving cooperation and coordination through networks cannot be taken for granted, even in networks whose members share a high level of trust and common goals.³⁹ Sometimes it is necessary to institute elements of top-down direction, such as a lead organization (or small group of lead organizations) to devise network-wide strategies and monitor the performance of network members.⁴⁰ Indeed, previous efforts to devise “integrated missions” within the UN were obstructed when “Agencies, Funds and Programs welcomed a greater say in the planning of UN peacekeeping operations but balked at the prospect of taking direction from them.”⁴¹

³⁷ Ricigliano 2003, p. 456. For similar arguments, see also de Coning 2004 and Roberts and Bradley 2005.

³⁸ Klijn and Koppenjan 2000.

³⁹ Tenbenseel 2005, p. 281.

⁴⁰ Alexander 1995, pp. 59-60.

⁴¹ Ahmed, Keating and Solinas 2007, p. 18.

On the other hand, moving toward centralization and hierarchy can also be problematic, for several reasons. First, as students of networks and network theory have pointed out, centralization has the potential reduce policy innovation and experimentation by constraining the freedom of individual agencies and actors. The benefits of experimentation through decentralized organizational structures have long been recognized. Within the context of the American federal structure, Supreme Court Justice Louis D. Brandeis wrote in 1932 that U.S. states serve as policy laboratories to “try novel social and economic experiments” that, if successful, could be replicated by others.⁴² In a similar vein, when President Lyndon Johnson initiated his “War on Poverty” and a planning exercise to identify the most effective and least costly alternatives in achieving social welfare goals, social scientists led by Donald T. Campbell called for an “experimental approach” to policy reform, or “an approach in which we try out new programs designed to cure specific social problems, in which we learn whether or not these programs are effective, and in which we retain, imitate, modify or discard them on the basis of apparent effectiveness.”⁴³ In the circumstances of postwar statebuilding, the problems to be addressed are complex, there is no single obvious solution, and the stakes are very high – in short, there is a strong case for continued experimentation with alternative strategies.

Put slightly differently, centralized coordination has the potential to reduce the flexibility of constituent organizations in responding to shifting circumstances, which can be a serious disadvantage in rapidly changing and uncertain environments. “The rigid character of standardized procedures inherent in formal centralized structures,” writes Donald Chisholm, “precludes adaptive responses to surprise, and the organizational system suffers accordingly.”⁴⁴ Flexibility is most important in domains where surprises are likely and quick adaptation essential. Postwar statebuilding is an exceptionally unpredictable and uncertain enterprise, for three reasons: first, because these missions take place in volatile environments where there is a

⁴² *New State Ice Co. v. Liebmann*, 285 US 262, 311 (1932).

⁴³ Campbell 1969, p. 409.

⁴⁴ Chisholm 1989, p. 10.

relatively high likelihood of violence, relative to conditions in other developing states; second, because these missions are multi-faceted and actions taken in one area – political, social or economic – have the potential to generate unforeseen results in other areas; and third, because international peacebuilding agencies have only limited knowledge of what is required to succeed in the ambitious task of stabilizing a fragile country after war. The ability of these agencies to adapt and react quickly to changing circumstances and surprises – including revising specific strategies that are producing unforeseen and undesirable effects – is a key to preventing small problems from swelling into crises that threaten the peace and the success of the mission. For this reasons, rigid or overly bureaucratic forms of international coordination could reduce the overall effectiveness of statebuilding.

In addition, delegating strategic planning upwards to an international mechanism has the potential to result in de-contextualized “cookie cutter” approaches to statebuilding that do not adequately respond to the unique needs of individual societies emerging from war. Indeed, one of the most common recommendations in studies of peacebuilding – and criticisms of previous missions – is that strategies need to be carefully customized to local conditions, based on a deep analysis of the drivers of conflict within the society. A related criticism is that statebuilding missions have not been adequately accountable to the local populations they are affecting.⁴⁵ The more that peacebuilding strategies and mission plans are developed within an international coordination structure, the less latitude individual agencies may have to define their own policies – and, to the extent that individual agencies have already established accountability mechanisms of their own, these mechanisms may no longer be either adequate or relevant, because more of the key decisions on peacebuilding policy will be made by the *collectivity* of major peacebuilding actors involved in the mission, not by the individual agency. The formalization and centralization of any diffuse organizational system therefore runs the risk of reducing whatever public accountability previously existed within that system.⁴⁶ Reduced accountability is not inevitable – indeed, centralization involves the creation of a new locus of authority, which can itself be designed to operate according to norms and procedures of accountability. But the

⁴⁵ Chandler 2005; Caplan 2005; Beauvais 2001; Chopra 2000.

⁴⁶ Chisholm 1989, p. 200.

rationale for decentralization or delegation of authority normally includes the expectation that policies designed and implemented “closer” to the people affected by the policies will tend to be more responsive to these people’s distinctive needs. This rationale is at the heart of decentralization arguments espoused by the “new public management” movement, which focuses on improving the responsiveness of governments to their “clients” or citizens.⁴⁷ It is also central to the concept of subsidiarity (most often in connection to the European Union’s multi-level governance structure)⁴⁸ and in strategies of aid donors seeking to promote democratic decentralization in recipient developing countries.⁴⁹

These observations suggest two broad conclusions. First, a healthy dose of skepticism is warranted when faced with boilerplate calls for more coordination. In each case it is worth asking: What specific type of coordination is advocated? How this approach will achieve tangible results? And how do so without stumbling into the pitfalls described above? Second, the challenge in statebuilding is not simply to “strengthen” coordination, as many observers suggest; rather, it is to develop coordination methods that are *calibrated* to the distinctive characteristics and requirements of statebuilding. On one hand, there are clear benefits to retaining the largely decentralized structure of the international statebuilding system. On the other hand, the statebuilding network as it is currently constituted has been incapable of effective “self-organizing” and is unlikely to do so merely by increasing the sharing of information or consultation among statebuilding actors. Some additional elements of hierarchy or central direction seem necessary to increase the problems of incoherence and inter-organizational conflict over goals, strategies and “turf” that have undermined previous missions. Adding new elements of top-down direction does not mean transforming the statebuilding network *into* a hierarchy, but rather, adding *elements* of hierarchy in order to address and at least partially resolving substantive disagreements over objectives and strategies without unduly squelching the flexibility and fluidity which remains a key strength of the decentralized statebuilding network.

⁴⁷ Vigoda 2002.

⁴⁸ Føllesdal 1998; Cooper 2006.

⁴⁹ DFID 2002.

A balanced approach to improving coordination in statebuilding would thus entail retaining the predominantly network form of the existing system while (1) greatly increasing information-sharing and consultation, and (2) modestly strengthening the hierarchical features of the network.

As we shall see below, one of the goals of the new Peacebuilding Commission is to encourage international statebuilding agencies and national authorities to work together in planning new operations and devising integrated strategies for countries emerging from, or at risk of slipping into, violent conflict. Joint strategic planning is an excellent idea: it would bring different perspectives and priorities into the open, creating an opportunity to resolve these differences before they disrupt the flow and effectiveness of operations. But whether the Commission has been endowed with sufficient top-down authority or “hierarchy” to accomplish this goal – namely, to resolve key differences, to promote joint planning and (most importantly) to induce turf-conscious statebuilding agencies to work towards shared strategies – remains to be seen.

The Peacebuilding Commission: A Preliminary Assessment

At the time of this writing, any evaluation of the PBC must be preliminary, given that the body has existed for less than two years. However, it is possible to analyze the approach taken in the creation of the Commission, the direction in which the Commission has developed during its first eighteen months of operation, and the degree to which this new body elucidates and embodies the above-mentioned tensions and problems that accompany the “coordination problem” for statebuilding.

Following the September 2005 decision of the World Summit to endorse the creation of a Peacebuilding Commission, the UN General Assembly and the Security Council passed parallel resolutions in December setting out the elements of the Commission and the Peacebuilding Support Office.⁵⁰ According to these resolutions, the three main purposes of the Commission were:

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; and
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.

⁵⁰ Security Council resolution 1645 (20 December 2005); General Assembly resolution 60/180 (30 December 2005).

In pursuit of these goals, the PBC would serve solely as an advisory body to the Security Council and the General Assembly. It would have no independent authority or decision-making power over other bodies. Further, its recommendations and advice would all be on the basis of consensus among the members of the PBC.

Membership of the main “organizational committee” of the Commission would include members of the Security Council, General Assembly, and Economic and Social Council, along with top troop-contributing countries and those providing the most funds to UN budgets, programs and agencies. In addition, the Commission would meet in “country specific” configurations to discuss particular cases. Such meetings will also include representatives of the country under consideration, key states in the region, major troop and financial contributors to the recovery effort, senior UN officials, and regional and international financial institutions “as may be relevant.”

To support the Commission’s work, a 15-person Peacebuilding Support Office would be established within the UN Secretariat. The office would focus on gathering information on financial resources and mission planning, evaluating progress towards meeting mission goals, and identifying best practices with respect to cross-cutting peacebuilding issues.⁵¹

In addition, the General Assembly and Security Council called for the creation of a standing Peacebuilding Fund to ensure “the immediate release of resources needed to launch peacebuilding activities and the availability of appropriate financing for recovery,” to be financed by voluntary contributions from UN member states.⁵²

Much of 2006 was taken up with organizational matters, including the selection and election of members of the Commission’s organizational committee (see Table 1), the

⁵¹ General Assembly document A/60/694 (23 February 2006), paras. 20-21.

⁵² Security Council resolution 1645 (20 December 2005), para. 24; General Assembly resolution 60/180 (30 December 2005), para. 24.

establishment of the Peacebuilding Support Office within the UN Secretariat,⁵³ and arrangements for the Peacebuilding Fund.⁵⁴

[Table 4 about here]

The speeches made at the organizational committee's first formal meeting in June 2006 reflected the procedural discourse that dominated early discussions of the PBC. Most speakers offered vague endorsements of the general principle of improved coordination and then focused on administrative, not substantive, matters. The president of the UN General Assembly, for example, presented six specific recommendations to the members of the Peacebuilding Commission. All of them were procedural: involve local governments in the Commission's work; coordinate between the peacekeeping and post-conflict peacebuilding aspects of operations; recognize the critical role of the UN Economic and Social Council; appreciate the importance of annual debates on peacebuilding in the General Assembly; engage the international financial institutions; and make arrangements for dialogue with civil society.⁵⁵ These were all sensible suggestions, but they were mainly matters of housekeeping. Similarly, Denmark's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Per Stig Møller, noted that "Creating a new body whose main purposes is to bring together all relevant actors and to focus attention on reconstruction and institution-building efforts is an institutional innovation that will strengthen the United Nations and benefit its members."⁵⁶ But beyond celebrating "institutional innovation," it was unclear exactly how the PBC would strengthen either statebuilding or the UN.

⁵³ General Assembly resolution A/60/694 (23 February 2006).

⁵⁴ General Assembly resolution A/60/984 (22 August 2006).

⁵⁵ Statement by the President of the United Nations General Assembly, H.E. Mr. Jan Eliasson, at the Inaugural Meeting of the Peacebuilding Commission, New York, June 23, 2006, www.un.org/ga/president/60/speeches/060623.pdf (accessed on October 5, 2006).

⁵⁶ Statement by the President of the Security Council, H.E. Dr. Per Stig Møller, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Denmark, at the Inaugural Meeting of the Peacebuilding Commission, New

Soon after this seemingly inauspicious start, however, the members of the Commission began to focus more directly on substantive issues – and they did so in innovative ways. Late in 2006, the first two country-specific configurations of the Commission were created to examine peacebuilding challenges in Burundi and Sierra Leone. Each committee met twice: once in October and again in December.⁵⁷ Prior to the October meetings, the Peacebuilding Support Office prepared background papers on each country, identifying existing peacebuilding commitments and major challenges, and putting forward questions for discussion.⁵⁸ At each inaugural session, the Governments of Burundi and Sierra Leone, respectively, were asked to make presentations on what they viewed as the “critical challenges to consolidating peace” in their countries. The meetings resulted in agreement on a few broadly-defined areas of focus for each country (for example, the key challenges identified in Burundi were promoting good governance, strengthening the rule of law and the security sector, and ensuring community recovery). Commissioners then asked both governments to develop plans for addressing these challenges and to report back in December at the next country-specific meetings, which they did. Commissioners also heard from NGO groups and representatives of other intergovernmental organizations including the IMF and World Bank. In addition, the Peacebuilding Fund was launched in October 2006.

In early 2007, members of the PBC began a series of “informal thematic discussions” on priority areas identified in the December meetings. A meeting on justice sector reform in Sierra Leone, for example, took place in February and included representatives from the national

York, June 23, 2006, www.un.org/peace/peacebuilding/scpresident.pdf (accessed on October 5, 2006).

⁵⁷ For summaries of these meetings, see Security Council document S/2006/1050 (26 December 2006).

⁵⁸ Peacebuilding Commission documents PBC/2/BUR/CRP.2 and PBC/2/SIL/CRP.1 (10 October 2006).

government (including the Chief Justice) and officials from other governments and international organizations directly involved in justice sector issues in the country (including the World Bank's country manager, the manager for the justice program in the British development agency, and the chief of the human rights and rule of law section of the UN's mission in Sierra Leone). Guest speakers with expertise on the country were also invited. Also in February 2007, a similar meeting was held on promoting "good governance" in Burundi. The following month, members of the country-specific committee on Sierra Leone visited the country and held meetings there with government officials, political parties, international organizations and civil society representatives.

These informal discussions and country visits allowed a wider array of participants to be involved in the Commission's work than would be possible in the more formal meetings in New York. Ultimately, such discussions were intended to provide the information necessary to draw up "integrated peacebuilding strategies" for both Sierra Leone and Burundi. According to the head of the Peacebuilding Support Office, Carolyn McAskie, the integrated strategies would take the form of an "agreement" between the country in question and the Commission, identifying the specific commitments undertaken by national and international authorities and "provid[ing] guidance to the various actors in how they can meet the broad goals of peacebuilding."⁵⁹ The idea of negotiating such a the framework seemed to be modeled on the "compact" negotiated between international donors and the Afghanistan government in early 2006, which set out objectives and commitments for that country's stabilization and development.

Also in February 2007, the PBC launched a Working Group on Lessons Learned, the goal of which was to draw conclusions on best practices from across peacebuilding missions and to become "the repository for peacebuilding advice within the UN."⁶⁰ Thus, between October 2006

⁵⁹ "Statement by Ms. Carolyn McAskie, Assistant Secretary-General, PBSO," January 31, 2007, <http://www.un.org/peace/peacebuilding/pdf/mcaskie31jan07.pdf>.

⁶⁰ "Statement by Ms. Carolyn McAskie, Assistant Secretary-General, PBSO," January 31, 2007, <http://www.un.org/peace/peacebuilding/pdf/mcaskie31jan07.pdf>.

and February 2007, work was launched on several fronts: operationalizing the Peacebuilding Fund, using formal meetings and informal gatherings to begin identifying priorities for peace consolidation in Sierra Leone and Burundi (the first two countries on the Commission's docket), and initiating a cross-cutting evaluation of good practices for statebuilding based on the experience of preceding years.

The Security Council and General Assembly reviewed for the work of the Peacebuilding Commission for the first time in the early months of 2007. These sessions were revealing for what was said – and for what was not said. In the half-year since the inaugural meeting of the Commission, the discourse had begun to shift from vague statements of support for the new body and toward calls for the Commission to quickly demonstrate “concrete results at the country level.”

This emphasis on achieving results was prompted, in part, by concerns that the Commission had been spending too much time on procedural debates. Canada, Australia and New Zealand, for example, expressed disappointment at the “overemphasis placed on procedural matters by some members of the Commission at the expense of substantive peacebuilding issues.”⁶¹ The Ambassador from India also lamented how much time had been devoted to “housekeeping issues” and suggested that “we cannot continue indefinitely discussing preliminary issues such as reporting responsibilities, participation and operational matters to the detriment of the larger goal of assisting in the consolidation of peace in post-conflict societies,”

⁶¹ Statement by Ms. Kirsty Graham, Deputy Permanent Representative of New Zealand, to the General Assembly on behalf of Canada, Australia and New Zealand, 6 February 2007.

although he then devoted the remainder of his presentation to organizational issues,⁶² as did several other delegations including the members of the Non-Aligned Movement.⁶³

But even among those calling for more substantive progress and less procedural talk, it was not clear that there was common view of what, exactly, “progress” would entail. A recurring theme – arguably the leitmotif of the discussion in the Security Council – was the importance of developing integrated peacebuilding strategies along the lines set out by Carolyn McAskie, in order to provide a detailed “road map” for all actors in the field.⁶⁴ According to this perspective, the PBC could make a contribution by leading the task of identifying priorities and assigning responsibilities among the network of agencies and actors involved in statebuilding.

Indeed, defining priorities was precisely what the PBC was attempting to do. But it was one thing to agree on the importance of setting priorities, and other thing to agree on what the specific priorities should be – and yet another thing to corral the heterogeneous array of peacebuilding agencies to work towards these objectives. As the German ambassador (speaking on behalf of the European Union) pointed out, “Defining priorities necessarily means making a

⁶² Statement by H.E. Mr. Nirupam Sen, Permanent Representative of India, at the General Assembly, 6 February 2007.

⁶³ Statement by H.E. Raymond Wolfe, Permanent Representative for Jamaica, to the General Assembly on behalf of the Non-Aligned Movement. 6 February 2007.

⁶⁴ See, for example, interventions from the President of ECOSOC and from the representatives of Russia, Norway, the Netherlands, Sierra Leone, France, Belgium, Italy, Slovakia, Congo, South Africa, Indonesia, China, Germany (on behalf of the European Union), Japan, Canada, Croatia, Guatemala in the Security Council discussion. In fact, the importance of developing integrated peacebuilding strategies was mentioned no fewer than 48 times during the discussion. Security Council documents S/PV.5627 and S/PV.5627 (Resumption 1), 31 January 2007.

selection among a huge number of possible areas of engagement.”⁶⁵ Choosing priorities (and making them sufficiently precise to be meaningful) would therefore involve identifying some goals as primary, others as secondary, and perhaps ruling out others entirely. In a realm of conflicting visions of peacebuilding, this would be a demanding and contentious task. The German ambassador offered a few guidelines for making such decisions, including a recommendation that the Commission should focus on “areas that have a direct and traceable link to the causes of conflict.”⁶⁶ But identifying root causes of a conflict is notoriously difficult and subject to radically different interpretations, including among major statebuilding actors.

In fact, a close reading of the Security Council and General Assembly debates of early 2007 revealed quite different visions of how to consolidate peace after conflict, which also reflected broader divisions within the network of international statebuilding agencies. For some UN delegations, such as France, the “most urgent challenges” involved institution-building, especially in such areas as “the “rule of law, good governance, and security-sector reform.”⁶⁷ For others, such as Guatemala, “building peace [was] not achieved only by preventing outbreaks of violence, nor by physical rebuilding, nor by establishing the legal basis for a State,” but rather by going “far beyond that and support comprehensive changes that will eliminate practices of social, economic and political exclusion.”⁶⁸ Reading these transcripts, one can imagine the nods of agreement on all sides for both of these statements – indeed, there are good reasons to believe that *both* institution-building and greater inclusiveness are valuable to the consolidation of peace. In the end, however, not all of these goals can be pursued with equal vigor. Establishing priorities requires, as the German representative indicated, “making a selection among a huge number of possible areas of engagement.”

⁶⁵ Statement by H.E. Mr. Thomas Mutussek, Permanent Representative of Germany, to the General Assembly on behalf of the European Union. 6 February 2007.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Security Council document S/PV.5627, p. 14.

⁶⁸ Security Council document S/PV.5627 (Resumption 1), p. 11.

The only overt reference in these debates to the potential for disagreement over the purposes and strategies of peacebuilding came in a brief comment from the Chilean delegation: “We believe it is urgent to avoid *competing visions* that could weaken the work of the Peacebuilding Commission.”⁶⁹ Rather than pursuing this line of analysis, however, the Chilean ambassador immediately reverted to more familiar (and presumably, more comfortable) procedural talk, calling for “action agreed between the General Assembly and the Security Council, as well as proper coordination with the Economic and Social Council.”⁷⁰

Working Towards Integrated Peacebuilding Strategies

For the remainder of 2007, the Commission’s efforts to make a substantive contribution focused primarily on the negotiation and elaboration of integrated peacebuilding strategies (IPBS) for the first two countries on its docket, Burundi and Sierra Leone. The IPBS for Burundi, adopted in July 2007, set out broad objectives and “mutual engagements” between the government of Burundi and the PBC.⁷¹ The government of Burundi’s commitments included a number of vague promises to advance democratic reforms, complete the implementation of the country’s ceasefire agreement, pursue further efforts at disarmament, and improve Burundi’s justice system. For its part, the PBC agreed to encourage “effective coordination” among international donors and peacebuilding agencies involved in the country, and to help with “the mobilization of resources to Burundi in support of its peacebuilding priorities.” Similarly, the IPBS for Sierra Leone, adopted in December 2007, committed the government of that country to addressing the problem of youth unemployment, making the civil service as well as the justice and security sector more efficient and transparent, strengthening local governance institutions and preparing for elections, and developing an energy strategy for the country.⁷² As in Burundi,

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 33, emphasis added.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ UN document PBC1/BDI/4 (July 30, 2007).

⁷² UN document PBC2/SLE/1 (December 3, 2007).

the PBC pledged to promote greater international coordination, to mobilize financial resources, and generally to support the efforts of the Sierra Leone government.

There was also widespread recognition of the need to monitor implementation of these IPBS agreements, including “qualitative and quantitative indicators to assess progress.”⁷³ The first “monitoring and tracking mechanism” was created for the Burundi IPBS in November 2007, setting out a list of benchmarks and indicators that would make it possible to evaluate whether the goals of the IPBS were being accomplished over time.⁷⁴ The mechanism included an innovative, multi-layered process for reporting on progress. Working groups would monitor implementation of both the IPBS and the country’s existing Poverty Reduction Strategy, feeding into higher level joint evaluations conducted by Burundi government officials and the PBC. This institutional design offered the hope of better coordination among international actors and ongoing participation and “ownership” of peacebuilding efforts by the national government.

Once again, however, process may have trumped substance. The review mechanism was institutionally innovative, but the substance of what would be reviewed was vague. The IPBS itself suffered from a lack of clarity and ambition, and the specific “qualitative and quantitative indicators” that would be used to “track progress” were hazy – and in some instances trivial. For example, the Burundi government’s broad commitment in the IPBS of “promoting good governance” which can mean virtually anything, was to be tracked according to a set of benchmarks and indicators that were nearly as broad and vague: namely, the degree to which Burundi’s “political environment” had become “conducive to the peaceful resolution of political conflict through the institutionalization of a culture and practice of dialogue,” among other things.⁷⁵ To determine whether such an “environment” was being created, those responsible for

⁷³ UN document A/62/137-S/2007/458 (July 25, 2007), paras. 32 and 41. See also Mollett, Smith and Street 2007.

⁷⁴ UN document PBC/2/BDI/4 (November 27, 2007). At the time of this writing, the monitoring and tracking mechanism for the Sierra Leone IPBS was still under development.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

monitoring progress would measure the “level of representation” of different societal groups “in the various frameworks for dialogue” as well as “progress toward respect for constitutional provisions related to power sharing arrangements (including gender) by the Government and all political actors.” These indicators were both undemanding and vague – to the point that they verged on emptiness. Even the more substantive indicators listed in the tracking mechanism would depend on the seriousness and rigor of assessments performed, in part, by Burundi government officials who might have a vested interest in softening negative findings. Nor was it clear how the participants in the monitoring mechanism, or the Peacebuilding Commission itself, would produce “effective coordination” among international actors in instances where these actors had differing perspectives or approaches to peacebuilding in Burundi.

Evaluation

The PBC clearly faces high and seemingly mounting expectations from the UN membership, which is calling for tangible progress and the articulation of detailed, integrated strategies. This is a tall order, given the existence of more profound differences on the goals and priorities of statebuilding than many UN members have been willing to directly acknowledge, at least in public. To its credit, the Commission and its small support staff have, in a very short time, developed a full work program – and integrated peacebuilding strategies have been articulated for Burundi and Sierra Leone. Furthermore, in December 2007, the Commission added Guinea-Bissau as the third country on its docket. But the truly difficult work remains to be done: namely, the task of translating vague objectives into substantive commitments and then encouraging a congeries of international actors, inside and outside the UN system, to work towards concrete and meaningful common strategies.

Can the Peacebuilding Commission accomplish this goal? One way of analyzing this question is to ask whether the Commission strikes the right balance as a coordination tool – namely, a balance between an overly rigid hierarchy and an under-organized network. In other words, can the Commission make the international peacebuilding and statebuilding system work more effectively and coherently as a still-decentralized but more “directed” network?

As a consensus-based advisory body, whose membership will include a broad range of peacebuilding actors, the Commission preserves the network form of the international statebuilding system intact, along with the principal virtue of this system: flexibility. In other words, the current plan does not create a rigid new hierarchy. Further, the design is unlikely to constrain experimentation with new and different approaches to peacebuilding; indeed, such experimentation (and cumulative learning) may be improved if the support office is able to perform its assigned task of providing the PBC with high quality analyses of cross-cutting peacebuilding issues and reviewing the best practices of previous operations. On this point, much will depend on the quality of the analysis and analysts in the support office, the resources at their disposal, and the willingness of Commission members to consider alternative approaches to peacebuilding. However, the decision to finance the support office from the existing UN budget, rather than with new money, placed significant constraints on the size and resources of the office – and, by extension, on what the office could accomplish.

Including representatives from the host country (as well as the senior UN official in the field) in the country-specific meetings of the PBC should also help to focus discussions on the unique conditions and needs of particular societies. In the context of a fractured society emerging from war, ensuring a broad representation of domestic interests will be important – not only as a means of “customizing” peacebuilding strategies to local conditions, but also to enhance the accountability of the PBC and the broader peacebuilding system to the inhabitants of the host state. However, the role of civil society organizations – including international NGOs as well as those within the host state itself – remains unclear. The authorizing resolutions “encourage” the Commission to “consult with civil society, non-governmental organizations, including women’s organizations, and the private sector engaged in peacebuilding activities, as appropriate.”⁷⁶ One of the strengths of the Commission’s work to date – in its country-specific configurations – has been to foster discussions with local NGOs in Burundi and Sierra Leone and between these NGOs and their national governments. Ad hoc consultations have also taken

⁷⁶ Ibid., para 21.

place with international NGOs, but the Commission still seems reluctant to institutionalize such consultations as a routine part of its deliberations.⁷⁷

The most critical question, however, is whether the Commission will be able to advance the goal of promoting meaningful and effective strategies for statebuilding. The Commission will offer little “added value” to the statebuilding system if it does not acknowledge and at least partially reconcile conflicting approaches and strategies for statebuilding. As previously noted, perfect coordination is both impossible and undesirable. But it is also undesirable – and a recipe for operational failure – to have different agencies work in opposing directions, as they have often done. If existing coordination problems were due only to communication failures, a better system for sharing information might be enough. But I have argued that the coordination problem is not merely a communications issue. It reflects disagreements and uncertainties about how to “do” statebuilding.

Most states opted not to delve into these disagreements during the lead-up to the Commission’s creation, but they and all Commission members will have to tackle these disagreements now that the body has been established, recognizing that such discussions will be difficult and potentially divisive. While the work on Burundi and Sierra Leone to date has drawn greater international attention to these two countries, the PBC appears to have settled on a relatively vague set of “priorities” for each country – and, as we have seen, the monitoring mechanism to track the implementation of these priorities in Burundi also lacks specificity. Coordination is relatively easy if one avoids making tough choices between competing priorities, since most actors can claim to be contributing to the “common strategy” by continuing to do whatever it is that they are already doing. Devising strategies based on the lowest common denominator is a recipe for inaction and ineffectiveness. Only by tackling directly the difficult tradeoffs and disagreements among the key actors, including the host government, will it be

⁷⁷ In June 2007 the organizational committee of the Peacebuilding Commission issued provisional guidelines for the participation of civil society organizations in meetings of the Commission. See UN document PBC/1/OC/12 (June 4, 2007).

possible to address and reconcile competing perspectives on peacebuilding, which often masquerade as mere “coordination problems.” Doing so is critical to improving the effectiveness of peacebuilding, particularly at a time when some observers are questioning the very legitimacy and viability of such missions.⁷⁸

Unfortunately, much of the early ambition for the Peacebuilding Commission appeared to dissipate after the body came into being. The original idea of coordinating “all relevant actors within and outside the United Nations”⁷⁹ was, it seems, quickly replaced by a more modest vision of the Commission focusing on identifying programmatic gaps in existing operation, or specific issues or areas not receiving sufficient international attention, and marshalling resources to fill these gaps. One possible explanation for these scaled-back expectations may have been that other parts of the UN bureaucracy, including the Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO), had an interest in limiting the scope and influence of the new Peacebuilding Commission. Indeed, DPKO was already involved in its own effort to promote more integrated field operations during the “stabilization” or immediate post-conflict phase of a peacebuilding mission – thus implying that the Peacebuilding Commission should focus on post-conflict countries that had already achieved a substantial level of stability.⁸⁰ In fact, a primary motivation for the creation of the Commission was to focus on the longer-term requirements and coordination of international engagement in countries that might otherwise be suffer from diminishing international attention as time wore on. But the idea that a post-conflict period could be neatly (or even messily) divided up into distinct “phases,” beginning with a “stabilization” phase, was itself misleading because planning for longer-term peacebuilding

⁷⁸ See, for example, Bain 2006; Chandler 2006; and Duffield 2001.

⁷⁹ This language appeared in the authorizing resolutions for the Commission. See Security Council resolution 1645 (20 December 2005) and General Assembly resolution 60/180 (30 December 2005).

⁸⁰ See Department of Peacekeeping Operations, “United Nations Peacekeeping Operations: Principles and Guidelines” (January 2008).

tends to be done during or shortly after the termination of a conflict. It is this moment when effective, coherent peacebuilding strategies are most urgently needed – in addition to the short-term requirements that understandably tend to attract more attention, such as the monitoring or enforcement of a fragile ceasefire. The extent to which bureaucratic jealousies may have constrained the role of the Commission is not clear, but the DPKO’s capstone document for *peacekeeping* (which, by definition, is the DPKO’s bailiwick) offered surprisingly little room for the Peacebuilding Commission to contribute to strategic planning or high-level coordination of international peacebuilding actors, except in countries already deemed to be “stabilized.”

Speculation about bureaucratic rivalries aside, the Commission’s ability to achieve coordination has been profoundly hampered by its own lack of authority. It is only an advisory body, and any advice it offers must be based on a consensus of its members. If there is disagreement, even from a small number of members, the Commission cannot make recommendations. The result, thus far, has been the setting of lowest-common-denominator “priorities” that, as argued above, make few concrete demands of either the host governments or the array of international agencies involved in peacebuilding. Furthermore, even if the Commission were to make more substantive and pointed recommendations, it would have little capacity to ensure that these various agencies bring their activities into line with these recommendations. The Peacebuilding Support Office (PBSO) has similarly limited influence within the UN Secretariat itself. The PBSO has been empowered to “convene” elements of the UN system for strategic discussions of peacebuilding, but no other parts of the Secretariat are required to act on the outcomes of such discussions. When the Secretary-General’s senior-level Policy Committee met in May 2007 to discuss the role of the PBSO, the most it would say was that decisions reached at strategy meetings convened by the PBSO would “normally have implications” for the participants and organizations involved in these discussions.⁸¹ The phrase “normally have implications” was, like some of the benchmarks set out in the Burundi IPBS, so vague and noncommittal as to be almost meaningless.

⁸¹ “Decisions of the Secretary-General – 22 May 2007 Policy Committee Meeting,” United Nations Interoffice Memorandum, Decision No. 2007/28.

In short, the problem of peacebuilding coordination – the “gaping hole” identified by Kofi Annan – remains largely unaddressed. The Commission appears to have little willingness or capacity to grapple directly with the problem of conflicting priorities and approaches to peacebuilding among the myriad international actors involved in these missions. Perhaps it had good reason to steer clear of such discussions, for reasons noted earlier: first, the PBC’s decision rules requiring consensus decisions and, second, the Commission’s purely advisory nature which limits its influence over peacebuilding agencies. Given these limitations, the approach of avoiding controversial matters – which could be paralyzing and pointless – can be viewed as entirely rational. But that is the problem. The PBC is largely a discussion forum with no executive management functions. Without some new measure of hierarchy within the loosely structured network of statebuilders, difficult discussions and difficult decisions are likely to be avoided in order to build and maintain a broad consensus. The result, in the worst case scenario, could be meetings full of reassuring but empty rhetoric – not unlike the discourse surrounding the creation of the Peacebuilding Commission itself.

If the body is to offer more than a venue for information sharing, it will have to articulate positions that are widely, but not necessarily universally, accepted. It will also find ways of inducing statebuilding agencies to pursue shared objectives and implement integrated mission plans. There are no such mechanisms in the Commission as it is currently designed, but perhaps there could be in the future. If the internal politics of the UN preclude moving in this direction, alternative coordinating arrangements should be considered – including, if necessary, a more robust mechanism located outside the United Nations.

Conclusion

Whether through the Commission or some other mechanism, the coordination problem of peacebuilding will need to be addressed. The challenges of rehabilitating societies after war – and of creating functioning states in these societies – are large enough in themselves, and disorganization among the statebuilders unnecessarily multiplies the risk of operational failure. Yet, there is more to the coordination problem than meets the eye. Calls for greater coordination have become something of a mantra among practitioners and observers of statebuilding in recent

years, and this mantra hides as much as it reveals. The record of statebuilding has been mixed, in part, because there is little agreement on what specific measures are required, in what sequence, and based in which priorities, in order to create the conditions for stable peace in war-torn societies. And there is little agreement not only because the myriad actors that comprise the international statebuilding machinery have different approaches and interests, but more fundamentally because the entire enterprise is so uncertain, complex and politically sensitive.

Due in part to this complexity, it would not be desirable to establish a centralized, hierarchical coordination mechanism for peacebuilding – even if doing so were politically possible. But it is equally risky and unrealistic to expect the loose network of peacebuilding actors to remedy its coordination problems simply through information-sharing. The challenge, it seems, is to strike a balance between preserving the flexibility of the existing networked structure of the international peacebuilding system on one hand, and the requirement for some measure of hierarchy on the other. What is needed, in short, is a “directed” network that more effectively combines elements of hierarchy and decentralized autonomy.

The Peacebuilding Commission, as it is currently designed, does not strike that balance. It errs on the side of preserving the self-directed qualities of the existing peacebuilding network without introducing a capacity to make difficult choices between competing approaches and objectives. If anything, the debates surrounding the Commission – and the early work of the Commission itself – reveal a troubling propensity to fall back on procedural talk and other strategies that serve to avoid controversy rather than tackling more substantive problems at the heart of the peacebuilding enterprise.