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PLATFORM 2009 FORUM

Saving lives or building peace? Roles and Responsibilities of Humanitarian and Peacebuilding Actors in Conflict Settings

11 December 2009, 09h00-16h00
Auditorium Jacques Freymond, IHEID

2009 Annual Forum: Background and Objective

Established as a platform for public and stakeholder discussions, as well as a sounding board for the provision of expert advice, the Geneva Peacebuilding Platform (GPP) is working towards developing its mandate to the fullest, aiming to engender a more strategic outlook amongst peacebuilding actors and to encourage self-critical evaluation.

It is this primary objective that informed the 2009 Annual Forum agenda, with the meeting focusing on the humanitarian/peacebuilding nexus and providing a neutral space meant to sensitize the two communities to the nuances of each other's work. Panellists considered the multifaceted impact of emergency aid on peace and conflict dynamics, referring to processes, paradigms and mandates, pointing to lessons in this direction, articulating ways forward, and wrestling to reconcile the need for pragmatism with the quest for neutrality.

The GPP Annual Forum is designed as an annual meeting between representatives of the PBSO/PBC, Geneva peacebuilding experts and stakeholders, field-based practitioners, and representatives of post-conflict societies. The 2009 Forum was organized primarily around a series of three panels. The first panel gathered observations from external actors and detailed on their peacebuilding and humanitarian approaches. The second panel explored testimonies from the field and contextualized good practices as well as failed expectations. The third and final panel highlighted fallacies common to such discussions and introduced some concrete options to reconcile them in the interest of local populations. The debate placed an emphasis on the dynamic interaction between panellists and participants, thereby enabling a reality-check of organisational strategies and personal experiences alike.

Significantly, the 2009 GPP Forum provided the first

Key Issues Considered

❖ The dichotomy between peacebuilding and humanitarian action is a rather 'incestuous' topic rarely discussed outside of an isolated and somewhat self-selective community – local actors hardly refer to this debate and know little about it.

❖ Both communities share an interest in ensuring the sustainability of aid and peace dividends, and in mitigating their footprint on internal social and political dynamics.

❖ The relevance of the humanitarian/peacebuilding divide is further undermined by the ever-increasing fluidity of conflicts, the new faces of human vulnerability, and more complex forms global governance and humanism.

❖ Paying greater attention to local perceptions, expectations and capacities is key to downplaying dilemmas, which mostly stem from a disproportionate focus on the international agenda.

❖ Practically, overcoming mandate and organizational divides could be achieved with a greater focus on early warning systems for the escalation of violent conflict; innovative funding and operational tools; and local capacity development. It also requires going beyond conventional actors and considering new partners such as companies, local scientists, and regional entities.

opportunity for Ms Judy Cheng-Hopkins, Assistant Secretary-General for Peacebuilding Support, to publicly address the Geneva community. The hope is that such experience-sharing will contribute to a sustained dialogue between New York and Geneva, aiding the PBC in its task to enhance the coherence of international peacebuilding response.

Introducing Dilemmas, Framing the Debate

Although capturing some real dilemmas and challenges, the dichotomy between peacebuilding and humanitarian action is in itself a rather "incestuous" topic rarely discussed outside of an isolated somewhat self-selective community. Born within and built in the early recovery enterprise, the dichotomy is more reflective of distinct organizational cultures, turfs and principles, than of opposing objectives driven by the actual needs of local communities. Yet, the contradictions that arise on account of the peacebuilding-humanitarian nexus deeply affect localized operation and their impact. On the humanitarian side, the view is that peacebuilders will sacrifice human rights principles in the interest of

J. Cheng Hopkins addressing the GPP Annual Forum

relationship building, political deals, and nascent state institutions. Conversely, on the peacebuilding side, the perception is that humanitarians pay scarce attention to the political context of their engagement, often undermining political strategy, national ownership and participation. Differences also run along the breadth and nature of their actions – humanitarians perceive themselves as part of a broad partnership arrangement, highly inclusive of NGOs, closely associated with host communities and thereby trusted by them. Meanwhile, peacebuilders see their work grounded in strong partnerships with financial institutions and regional organizations, conducive to a healthy local balance of power, and bringing to bear important security assets.

While these paradoxes are seldom understood by individuals in host societies, they are well know to the parties in conflict, who have become astute at playing external actors against one another. Humanitarian actors have become the pawns and humanitarian aid the booty that is sought off in the larger conflict. In addition, the dichotomies between peacebuilders and humanitarians are not without real life impact as they do limit the ability of external actors to pursue coherent strategies.

To mitigate these risks, a focus on the common ground between humanitarians and peacebuilders is needed. Essentially both sets of actors aim to help people better cope with fragile conditions. Whilst humanitarians take action to alleviate human suffering during natural or man-made disasters, peacebuilders take "risks for peace" by helping countries to avoid lapsing or relapsing into conflict. In doing so, humanitarians and peacebuilders alike enable people to rebuild their lives and means of livelihoods. Furthermore, both sets of actors are often called upon to undertake or contribute to institution-building efforts and basic service provision in fragile contexts with sustainability as a core concern. Last but not least, the delivery of both relief and peace dividends depends on the ability to work creatively, in a non-threatening way, aware of the context and attentive to the unintended consequences of external assistance. Ultimately however, while commonalities clearly transpire peacebuilding and humanitarian work, there are still various takes on the issue, and the most practical way forward might simply consist of "*DDR – disarm prejudices, debunk theories, and perform a reality check of what truly matters on the ground*".

This approach is all the more relevant in light of future, plausible transformations of the global system. Although the difficulties in reconciling peacebuilding and humanitarian action reflect past and present issues, the future need not challenge us in a similar way. Changes in global governance, a growing centrality of vulnerability, the emergence of tactical humanitarianism, and parallel on-line systems are all likely to bring a departure from conventional approaches and assumptions of building peace and assisting the vulnerable. First off, global governance will limit opportunities to engage in peacebuilding and humanitarian assistance by virtue of its emerging, fluid multi-polar structure. Different groupings of actors such as Brazil, China, the EU, Japan and the US will align themselves less on sustained common interests and more on opportunistic situational interests, rendering the access of international peacebuilders and humanitarians less predictable and consistent than it is today. This will further be compounded by the growing rise of suzerains who will form protective shields over states and territories, turning them into tributaries that refuse to seek conventional humanitarian assistance. Slum conurbations as well as transnational ethnic and ideological groupings will further factor in, creating multiple authorities and deconstructing the most basic framework for peacebuilding, state- and institution-building.

Secondly, vulnerability will become increasingly central to governments and governance, as crises of the future are bound to interact, to have compound effects, and to occur simultaneously. Issues of vital concern relating to water, food security and livelihoods will be at the heart of governance, increasingly politicized and no longer readily relinquished to international actors.

Thirdly, as one looks to the future, even the weapon of "universal humanitarian principles" may not go unchallenged. In a world where different power structures will emerge, with their concomitant local/regional perspectives and values, humanism must be prepared to negotiate across borders unaccompanied by any non-negotiable universals – in other words, to become tactical. Fourth and final, in light of the growing importance of information communities and crowdsourcing that empower fragmented groups and bring new problem-solving dimensions, one could well foresee a time when governance structures will have more to do with loose networks of on-line and ad hoc intervention than with the 20th century heavy machinery of physical presence.

External Actors: Observations and Perspectives

In a context of increased willingness to intervene in politically complex conflict situations, peacebuilders and humanitarians alike have had to deeply reflect upon their involvement and the extent to which this renders them complicit in driving the local political agenda. The integrity of such interventions has been further called into question owing to a blurring of the identities of those involved. Thus, incidents such as the bombing of the United Nations Mission in Iraq after the 2003 US invasion have brought to the fore issues of political independence. Furthermore, the '24 hour news cycle' has intensified the expectation of immediate and effective action even amidst fragile and interconnected conflict situations.

Integrated missions lie at the core of these matters, occasioning both approval and concern. On the one hand, integrated missions enable civilian and military actors to work collaboratively, thereby increasing the access to affected populations by meeting their security and human needs simultaneously, as opposed to consecutively. The integrated mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) serves as an example in this direction. Humanitarian actors engaged in the DRC recognized that their number one concern was the protection of the civilian population and that in this particular conflict, without military assistance, this could have not been guaranteed. In fact, half of all peacekeeping deployments within the active conflict area

of North Kivu were carried out at the request of humanitarian actors. Moreover, requests for security assistance were not only motivated by a desire to safeguard the local population but also by the need to protect humanitarian actors increasingly targeted by criminal attacks.

On the other hand, integrated missions rely on politically mandated military forces which may tie humanitarian actors to questionable acts, ill discipline, and even atrocities. The case of DRC is once more indicative of such risks: mandated to support the armed forces under the government, the United Nations peacekeeping mission in the DRC has been publicly connected to their actions. When domestic governmental forces commit abuses against the civilian population in active conflict zones, non-adherence to international humanitarian law becomes associated with the actors of the hosted integrated mission. Adherence to normative standards is therefore of vital importance to the entire spectrum of actors involved in an integrated mission as "*one cannot build a state on dead bodies*".

However, conflict fluidity renders areas of operation so ill-defined, that it is not just about concurring with or contending the utility of integrated missions, about deciding to save lives or to take sides. Rather than mere black and white, issues on the ground often range across a broad spectrum. Hence, anecdotal evidence from Afghanistan suggests a perception of "*red, blue, black and white*", meaning that the local population often distinguishes between *three United Nations:* the 'good, red UN' referring to the International Community of the Red Cross; the 'questionable, blue UN', comprising humanitarian actors and most United Nations agencies; and a 'bad, black and white UN' (referring to the white vehicles with black UN stickers) applying to UN political missions.

Furthermore, the Afghani context is reflective of an international community caught off balance, operating in an active conflict zone but under a peace time mandate and collaborating with a state whose legitimacy is increasingly questioned. Yet, commitment to integrated missions requires a careful consideration of the interplay between conflict dynamics and the perceptions of the actors involved. Failure to engage this way has led to all actors but the ICRC, the *good UN*, being labelled as legitimate targets by the Taliban. In this context, it is continuity and observance of fundamental principles rather than change and flexibility which have allowed actors such as ICRC to maintain an effective presence even in the most complex of conflicts. The preservation of an apolitical position and the adherence to values of impartiality, neutrality and confidentiality have thus ensured relationships of trust even with the most unpredictable of belligerents. Conversely, the increasing occurrence of military and private sector involvement in humanitarian assistance raises serious questions with regard to the effectiveness of the new wave of politically aligned humanitarian actors.

Internal actors: Good Practices vs. Failing Expectations

While external actors attempt to reconcile their rationales and mandates, local communities perceive a disproportionate focus on the international enterprise and therefore lose their trust in the peacebuilding process.

Very often, initial perceptions and prejudices among external actors hinder their capacity to establish relations with local institutions and lead them to indirectly undermine those institutions on the ground. In Sudan, for example, there was much talk about the international NGOs that were expelled and the consequent famine which would soon follow. Little to no attention has been paid to the national NGOs that continued to support affected communities and to rehabilitate the country. Testimonies from South Darfur, further associate the delivery of emergency aid primarily with a perceived Western agenda and denounce realities in refugee camps as leading to aid dependency, disruptive social behaviour, and politicization of local communities in favour of rebel movements.

Paying insufficient attention to internal actors and local culture comes at a high price: it hinders the creation of positive relationships with the local population and it precludes meaningful results in the attainment of peace and security. Even if the field staff of UN agencies and NGOs is overwhelmingly comprised of local actors, the power to define the crisis, to include and exclude partners, and to decide on the appropriate course of action remains in the hands of the international counterparts. Depending on issues of turf and mandate, the latter seek acceptance by adherence to principles or by virtue of peacebuilding objectives, foregoing oftentimes one essential aspect: that from the ground up, legitimacy is actually based on justice.

Panelists debating during the Annual Forum

A case in point is the DRC, where the perception is that the international community has done a lot to re-establish peace, stability and national unity but that it has remained silent over the mass killings and looting, creating expectations through its reports but not following up with indictments. Disconcerting is also the resolve of the international community to separate itself into humanitarians and peacebuilders. For people on the ground there is no tension between saving lives and building peace – the two activities are linked and complementary.

Regardless of the labels – humanitarians or peacebuilders –, what ultimately matters for the local population is that international efforts work towards reuniting communities, fighting abuses and creating a space where marginalized peoples can feel humane again. Humanitarian activities, such as 'food for work' programs can play a crucial role in restoring national social cohesion and supporting national reconciliation.

Advancing the Debate: Common Misperceptions vs. Concrete Options

Aware that competing agendas pose real dilemmas for practitioners and academics alike, relevant literature does underline several common fallacies which arise from the ensuing debates. One such fallacy is the idea that peace agreements ensure the end of conflict and guarantee conditions enabling humanitarian action or peacebuilding. As Pakistan, Iraq, Uganda, or Sri Lanka show, there is no starting point but rather many continuities to acute humanitarian and peacebuilding crises. Similarly, the idea that there are particular phases which allow movement from peacemaking into early recovery, peacebuilding, and statebuilding is misleading. Concerned with alleviating suffering and mitigating violence, peacebuilding and humanitarian activities merely offer different entry points into the same conflict. Furthermore, the biggest challenge confronting peacebuilders and humanitarians is not recurrence of conflict, but the escalation of new types of violence – political, organized, and interpersonal crime. One final misconception refers to the belief that humanitarian response undermines local authority and statebuilding. While the international community does not have a great record in this respect, nonetheless, to suggest that fragile states can single-handedly tackle the broad spectrum of issues that undermine human security is unreasonable. Stripped of these fallacies, the debate thus substantiates a few practical implications – both communities need to revisit early warnings of escalation of violent conflict with an eye to contingency and scenario planning. Secondly, they ought to work towards ensuring that short term intervention leads to capacity development. Finally, they could attempt to reconcile the dilemmas and challenges of coordination through institutional channels such as the peacebuilding commission.

On the practitioners' side, one of the main views is that crises, transition, and development make for a continuum in space and time – humanitarian work may be carried out in one area and, at

the same time, recovery opportunities could be capitalized on next door. What provides for an effective interface between such activities is the reliance on peace dividends, which offer tangible proof that the (re-)enactment of a peaceful social contract between population and government does ensure the provision of basic services. Peace dividends consist of concrete actions which aid in re-establishing livelihoods, kick-starting local economies, and building the foundations for peace and stability. Small-scale but practical projects dealing with infrastructural rehabilitation, mine clearance, access to markets, or back-to-school campaigns can quickly produce such dividends and further aid to connect people, bring hope and change mentalities. They create a balance between longer-term development programs and short-term peace dividends. Still, while such projects answer some of the needs on the demand side of peacebuilding projects, more is needed on the supply side. Technical management support, improvement of existing operational capacity, continuity of funding, and consistency in efforts could all help ensure higher effectiveness and sustainable success rather than the current 'SWAT team' approach.

In the long run, the ultimate barometer of success is the degree to which the various actors have contributed to the creation of mindsets, institutions and processes that will enable a society to manage conflicts peacefully in the future. Peacebuilding is essentially about relationships between internal actors, so the larger process of strengthening the capacity of countries to manage conflicts through non-violent methods relies on political mediation, military peacekeeping and humanitarian operations alike. These operations need not pursue the same goal but they have to be grounded in a solid understanding of what happened during the conflict and how succeeding actions will affect the rehabilitation of the country.

Yet, awareness about the side effects of mandates and the way in which they jeopardize development and peacebuilding cannot be taken to mean a disregard for mandates altogether. Planning paradigms are still needed and, at the end of the day, the victimized populations assisted by the international community are different people, with divergent needs. While the international community as a whole may share the same motivation in post-settlement situations, namely the good of the people, on the ground there are a lot of critical issues that matter, and these may simply translate into distinct objectives. Similarly, while conventional wisdom calls for increased coherence, there are no such clear successes on record – only highly complex situations and instances of duplication suggesting that, at times, differing actions may result in more than just the sum of their parts.

Final Thoughts: Articulating Ways Forward

While it is important that actors engaged in peace processes and emergency assistance acknowledge and reflect on the implications of their actions, the community essentially remains deeply self-referential. The debate on saving lives and building peace does not go beyond the conventional group so as to reach a multitude of host nation actors such as local scientists, regional contacts, companies and corporations. Nor does it seem to fully capture the changing reality, as exemplified by countries like Norway and Denmark who have began to move away from apolitical humanitarianism. Lastly, the debate fixates on whose principles are at fault rather than whom such efforts are supposed to serve. This defies the very purpose of integrated missions, the belief that form ought to follow function. An integrated mission can be the single most important means for communication in a conflict, specifying who possesses accurate information and how this information is coming together, as well as

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monitoring if the country is slipping back into conflict. Debates over mandates are in their turn futile so long as the donor dynamics are disregarded. Adding to that, innovation does not carry enough weight – few can say that they actively seek the innovative tools that are out there and that can help address real problems in peacebuilding work.

All things considered, what is constructive is the honesty injected into discussions about humanitarian and peacebuilding work: it reminds actors involved in the debate that of primary concern is the suffering of populations affected by conflict; it further feeds into the review of the peacebuilding commission itself; and it highlights the need to provide a meeting point for the two communities and beyond. Forums such as the GPP should continue to support outreach to the field and analysis of lessons learned, channelling information, and linking Geneva to New York.