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FROM INFORMATION OVERLOAD TO INFORMED DECISION: DESIGNING AN INFORMATION SYSTEM TO SUPPORT PEACEBUILDING

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Introduction

In the complex, politically charged environment of peacebuilding in which multiple actors and interests operate, the power of information technology (IT) is rarely harnessed. Institutional bureaucracy and disparities among actors at the local, regional and international levels present major obstacles to effective information flows and optimised policy making. The establishment of the United Nations Peacebuilding Commission (PBC) offers an opportunity to demonstrate the importance of information sharing between a diversity of sources to enhance the quality of the debates on peacebuilding strategies, both within and outside the UN. The main goal of the Peacebuilding Initiative in this context is to enhance the work of practitioners and policy makers by developing robust information technology tools to support informed action within the peacebuilding community.[1]

Peacebuilding and Information Technology

Over the past decade, international interventions have increased in scope and frequency, spanning humanitarian aid, conflict resolution, peacekeeping and economic and social development. With this expanding depth of interventions in conflict and post-conflict situations, the attention of the international community has gradually shifted to peacebuilding as a means to ensure the sustainability of international efforts. International peace and stability are no longer best addressed through the traditional paradigm of security interventions and political brokering dominated by states and regional groupings. Effective responses to global issues – whether peacebuilding or promotion of global health and environmental protection – require multi-stakeholder efforts to which states, international organisations, civil society and business and science communities contribute. Managing and exploiting the multiplicity of actors and perspectives require new modes of operation in information exchange. While diplomatic and institutional mechanisms were sufficient to gather and share information effectively among states, the ever-expanding circles of actors engaged in peacebuilding require new patterns of information management, where technology is called upon to play a major role.

The importance of coherent and responsive information systems able to manage a growing flow of information and analysis on the various dynamics and actors at play is particularly evident in the work of the PBC, established in June 2006. The success of the PBC will be enabled by learning from and drawing on the vast institutional knowledge and experience of peace-building. However, the amount of information on peacebuilding seems to dwarf the capacity of the information system of international agencies to properly inform and guide operations. These systems are often overloaded with detailed operational accounts, consuming vital time and energy of the individuals who set policy and make decisions, while leaving

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them poorly informed on critical trends of strategic relevance.

The morass of information is in part due to the lack of conceptual clarity as to the boundaries and modalities of peacebuilding. As debates in the Security Council and General Assembly have indicated, there are competing ideas about the scope and range of activities encompassed in peacebuilding within the United Nations; these divergent understandings are mirrored in the broader peacebuilding community. Consolidation and prioritisation of information is needed to address the converging calls for further information and complaints of information overload.

Preliminary conversations with member states and supporting players confirm that those engaged in planning often do not have the resources necessary to sift through information from news sources, academic centres and international organisations to determine key issues and texts. The result is ad hoc research practices that are inconsistent in both quality and scope. Smaller missions struggle to inform and participate in policy-making discussions, and suffer tremendously under the weight of information overload.

Difficulties in information management are further exacerbated by the political sensitivity of some of these issues, which limits the ability or willingness of international agencies to gather critical data on peacebuilding dynamics. Despite the diversity of actors involved in peace-building and the range of information offered by these myriad sources, the political nature of projects often means partnerships are restricted to those previously established. This is exacerbated by institutional mechanisms, which often support entrenched political alliances rather than flexible collaboration based on effective knowledge sharing and timely responses to needs.

These obstacles to information sharing belie some of the inherent difficulties with information management. Despite their

significant potential, information networks are frequently clogged with overly detailed operational accounts, databases remain difficult to navigate and distinct levels of access limit the free movement of information in and among organisations. Moreover, as the amount of information grows, time to deal with this information becomes scarce. In view of the complexity of peacebuilding activities, the creation of proper information environments to deal adequately with peacebuilding activities may well represent a defining moment of international efforts in this area.

A Different Kind of Reform

Information management tools – discussion forums, social networking, online databases and e-learning, for instance – build communities by connecting institutional networks with informal communities from around the world, and in the process promote constructive exchanges among diverse perspectives. Within and across individual institutions, information management systems facilitate information sharing, critical for the elaboration of common strategies and the implementation of coordinated approaches.

Examples of successful information manage-ment within the UN system demonstrate the power of such tools. Reliefweb has proven an effective communication tool on humanitarian crises. The Information Management System for Mine Action (IMSMA) has contributed substantively to the increased impact of mine action and positive trends in the implementation of the Ottawa Convention. Advanced Distributive Learning (ADL) uses distance-learning technologies to support and enhance the training of national peacekeeping contingents for international missions.

Independent projects and other portal technologies have been used effectively several times as policy platforms. These sites facilitate access to knowledge and build community-wide professional

networks. Through such exchanges, these sites move beyond the passive supply of information to engage user demands in a way that effectively supports policy-making processes.

The strengths of these tools point to the potential for a new approach to reform at the UN that complements institutional change with the promotion of information management tools. Moving beyond limited state-driven inputs, technology tools facilitate multi-stakeholder dialogue by building alliances with governments and civil society groups around key issues. Such mechanisms of informal interaction serve as a conduit for exchange and knowledge creation without relying on often ineffective and slow-moving institutional reform. As a result, reform in information management can serve as a catalyst for institutional change by demonstrating the effectiveness of new modes of interaction.

Meeting the Challenge: The Peacebuilding Initiative

The Peacebuilding Initiative was founded on the premise that this new approach to reform would strengthen the peacebuilding community by promoting a shift in thinking from conceptualising the work of international organisations in terms of their mandates, legal status, structures and buildings, to focusing on the common needs and demands of multi-stakeholder networks where linking information to action becomes the crucial challenge.

The Initiative was developed by the International Association for Humanitarian Policy and Conflict Research (HPCR International) in cooperation with the Program on Humanitarian Policy and Conflict Research at Harvard University and in partnership with the UN Peacebuilding Support Office (PBSO).

Through the development of robust information platforms, or portals, the Initiative seeks to enhance the work of policy makers and practitioners engaged in peacebuilding activities by clustering and transmitting information, facilitating dialogue on key challenges, and providing timely policy materials. The exploitation of knowledge and experience not only serves to further peacebuilding in policy and practice, but also ensures that countries are subject to informed, strategic decision making rather than experimentation.

A pilot case study: Sierra Leone

In 2007, the Initiative sought to test the potential for information management to facilitate and inform policy making through the development of an information platform on Sierra Leone, one of the first countries on the PBC agenda. To ensure the elaboration of a comprehensive, relevant portal, HPCR International undertook a series of activities to assess demand both at the country level and at headquarters. Key informant interviews with the range of constituencies engaged in peacebuilding provided insights into current policymaking processes and resources. Literature and organisation mapping served to identify the actors involved and resources in existence, and formed the foundation of a research database for the portal. An assessment mission to Sierra Leone ensured an understanding of the perspectives and needs of practitioners within the country, and of existing flows of information.

Incorporating a variety of communication tools, the portal offers extended functionality to meet the needs of diverse user groups. For government and inter-governmental organisations, the portal serves as a rich online resource, prioritising and analysing key documents and texts. For the practitioners and civil society organisations, the portal provides a common platform for engagement and exchange on conflict management, peacebuilding and strategic planning. For the research community, the portal consolidates scientific and operational materials on peacebuilding.

To facilitate access to relevant information, the portal clusters resources around the priority areas agreed upon by the Sierra Leonean government and the PBC: youth employment and empowerment; governance; justice sector and security sector reform; and capacity building, complemented by country-specific documentation. Users browse academic articles, policy papers, news reports and listings of websites either through identified priority areas or through the searchable e-library. Users also submit documents, resources, and feedback to support the continued evolution of this community-driven tool.

Early analysis of the Sierra Leone portal confirmed the demand for and value of information technology tools. From its launch in July to the end of 2007, over 3,000 visitors from 99 different countries used the site. In a survey of these users conducted by HPCR International, 90% of respondents stated that the portal had helped them in their work, highlighting that they were more easily able to access expertise and were made aware of new topics and recent research. Respondents commented that the country research would be enhanced by providing further background on key concepts related to peacebuilding, a suggestion that guided the evolution of the project in 2008.

A thematic portal: Evolution toward a common understanding of peacebuilding

In response to the user demand, enthusiasm and support that were demonstrated in 2007, the Peacebuilding Initiative is developing a thematic portal on peacebuilding as well as a discussion forum for the peacebuilding community, and piloting a series of online training courses. The portal will contain three separate sections: an introduction to peacebuilding; five thematic areas – democracy and good governance, economic recovery, justice and rule of law, psycho-social recovery, and security and public order – and five cross-cutting challenges.

Each thematic area will provide an overview of the current state of research and practice, discussion of different definitions, components, debates and case studies, as well as additional resources for further study. The online training will introduce the debates addressed in the content and serve to spark interaction on the discussion forum. Together, these tools aim to provide a common understanding of peacebuilding, illuminate areas needing reconceptualisa-tion and further research, and provoke discussion toward further knowledge and practice. Proper clustering of information about existing frameworks, trends and definitions, as well as unpacking key ideas common to the rhetoric of peacebuilding – such as local ownership, national account-ability and context assessment – will help to define a normative framework for peacebuilding.

The successful elaboration of this platform will assist to:

- Define the boundaries and conceptual challenges of peacebuilding;

- Study peacebuilding from the perspective of international and local actors;

- Identify gaps in knowledge resources or communication;

- Facilitate information sharing and professional networking; and

- Promote critical discussion on the roles of different actors, best practices and evaluation tools with a view to enhancing the impact of peacebuilding efforts.

The achievement of these objectives is predicated on substantive, high-quality operational delivery and political engagement by key actors. To date, the user demand for the Sierra Leone platform and the initial positive feedback on the thematic portal indicate success at the operational level. The quality of the portals in operational terms demonstrated the tremendous potential of information and

knowledge-sharing tools, sparking high-level political buy-in. In March 2008, this political support culminated in the launch by the UN Peacebuilding Support Office (PBSO) of a fourth 'virtual' pillar for peacebuilding, complementing the three pillars of the UN peacebuilding architecture – the PBC, the Peacebuilding Fund (PBF) and the PBSO.[2]

The virtual pillar, consisting of the PBC and PBF websites, a UN peacebuilding community of practice, and the Peacebuilding Initiative portal, serves as a knowledge base for information, lessons learned and best practices. As with the PBC itself, the virtual pillar aims to bring together all relevant actors. Though such reform will be a significant feat in institutional terms, the virtual arena has provided fertile ground from which the PBC may take root, and the peacebuilding community at large may benefit.

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Endnotes

[1] For more information on the Peacebuilding Initiative, see www.peacebuildinginitiative.org

[2] The UN Virtual Pillar of the Peacebuilding Architecture includes the websites of the Peacebuilding Commission (www.un.org/peace/peacebuilding), the Peacebuilding Fund (www.unpbf.org), the UN Community of Practice, and HPCR International's Peacebuilding Initiative.