

Institutional Constraints to Effective Peacebuilding in Liberia

Morten Skumsrud Andersen

Summary

Due to institutional constraints, the UN system is not effective in delivering what it promises in terms of speedy, relevant and sustained support for peacebuilding. Using empirical material from Liberia, I show how the very institutional set-up from headquarters down to the country level is top-heavy and reflects the assumption that UN workers are development experts with privileged knowledge of what to do to build peace. Formal rules and procedures on the institutional level, particularly regarding allocation of funds, might put local actors in a position where they are unable to effectively make use of the structures that the international community can provide. I illustrate this through the example of the institutional practices of Direct versus National Execution in the UNDP. Whilst national execution by the local government is considered desirable in principle, the combination of the self-proclaimed authority of the UNDP in development matters, and institutional constraints linked to accountability and fear of corruption, makes direct execution by the internationals the norm in peacebuilding. This hampers efforts to implement local ownership in peacebuilding, an element the UN considers crucial to effective and sustainable peacebuilding.

Introduction

In what is often called “weak states” resulting from protracted violent conflict, the UN and coalitions of countries are engaging in post-conflict reconstruction and peacebuilding all over the world. In Liberia, such a project has been underway since the cessation of armed hostilities in 2003. After relative security has been established by peacekeeping forces and after general elections in 2005, the country is seen as being at a crucial stage of the peacebuilding process. International actors are implementing an array of initiatives and programmes in the country, but the UN is not able to deliver what it promises in terms of speedy, timely, relevant, sustained financial, military and political support.

How this is an effect of individual peacebuilders’ perceptions and self-conceptions has been treated in a previous policy brief (Sending 2009). I will fill out the picture by looking at how the UN institutional structure is not adequately set up to implement effective and sustainable peacebuilding. Peacebuilders choose to act in different ways, corresponding to their perceptions, but they do not do so under conditions of their own choosing. It is important also to look at the enabling and constraining institutional and political parameters – in short, the structural set-up of the UN.

Based on fieldwork and interviews with UN staff engaged in peacebuilding in the rule of law sector in Liberia, I will take a closer look at the work of the Peacebuilding Fund (UNPBF) in Liberia, and illustrate institutional restraints to the effective implementation of peacebuilding in practice. I will first address the UN Headquarters, the UNPBF in New York, and then the country level institutions and national government and how the institutional logics work in practice. As a concrete example of this, I use the practices of

Direct Execution (DEX) versus National Execution (NEX) by the UNDP. Whilst national execution by the local government is considered desirable in principle, the combination of the self-proclaimed authority of the UNDP in development matters, and institutional constraints linked to accountability and fear of corruption, makes direct execution by the internationals the norm in peacebuilding. I conclude that the institutional set-up of the UNPBF in Liberia is detrimental to the implementation of “local ownership”, an element the UN itself considers crucial to effective and sustainable peacebuilding.

I do not claim that the analysis provides an adequate account of the state of peacebuilding in Liberia as such. Rather, the aim is to grasp the structured logic of governing in the interface between external and internal actors.

UN Headquarters: The Peacebuilding Commission

The establishment of the UN Peacebuilding Commission (UNPBC) was motivated by a concern to address a “strategic gap” in the institutional set-up of the UN to address post-conflict reconstruction. The UNPBC is supposed to bring together different actors and marshal resources, but also to be involved in providing strategic guidance to specific peacebuilding efforts in different countries.

The Peacebuilding Support Office (PBSO) functions as the secretariat for the UNPBC, and is central to this overarching peacebuilding strategy. Missions from the PBSO are often dispatched to countries on the UNPBC agenda, and PBSO teams were brought in to assist in preparing for the establishment of UNPBF mechanism in Liberia. The PBSO is the authority on peacebuilding, on how funds are to be allocated, and what rules and regulations apply for accessing funds from the UNPBF.

The UNPBF, in turn, is one of many multi-donor trust funds within the UN. It is supposed to be a “risk taking and catalytic instrument for peacebuilding support” (UN 2008), focusing on short-term projects to quickly and flexibly fill strategic gaps in selected countries’ peacebuilding strategies and implementation. All projects under the UNPBF at the country levels must be of a duration of maximum 18 months. It is managed by the PBSO under the Secretary-General’s authority, but the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) is the “administrative agent”, assuming responsibility for financial aspects and accounting (see below). Thus, projects funded by the Peacebuilding Fund at the country level have a set-up where – according to UNDP rules – UN agencies must be the recipient agency. This puts UN agencies in a powerful position vis-à-vis national authorities and other actors at the country level.

Implementers and the National Government

Whilst the recipient agency must be a UN organization, there are in principle no limitations to who might be the so-called “implementing partners”. These must, however, apply to the UNPBF Joint Steering Committee, which then decides, according to its Priority Plan, the Terms of Reference and Rules of Procedure (coming from HQ in New York), and a report from its “technical advisory panel”, whether to give support. The basis for applications is “concept notes”, which are called for as well. Some are written exclusively by the UN agencies, others are developed in partnership between the recipient agencies and potential implementing partners.

The UNPBF steering committee in Liberia is co-chaired by the UN DSRSG/resident coordinator and the Liberian Minister of Internal Affairs, and includes 15 more representatives, amongst them of USAID, the Swedish and U.S. Ambassadors, representatives of international NGOs and civil society, and the business community.

A “Peacebuilding Secretariat” supports the Fund. It is located in the Ministry of Internal Affairs and, curiously enough, is itself a UNPBF-funded project. The secretariat answers directly to the government of Liberia, but is at the same time accountable to UNDP regarding the project management, and is of course directly answerable to the steering committee as its secretariat. The secretariat is there also to ensure that the projects report through them to the MDTF. The requirement for the implementers is to pick one recipient UN agency to collaborate with in order to get funding.

The relationship between the recipient agency and the implementing partner does not always run smoothly, due to differences in operational procedures, rules and regulations, institutional culture, procurement policies, but also the view that the UN agencies might try to shoehorn themselves into the projects.² During interviews with both the recipient agencies and the implementers, there were also contradictory stories about how the project came into being, in terms of who took the initiative, who convinced who, how much the one or the other is contributing to the project, and how well it corresponds to the different mandates.

DEX and NEX as Modes of Operation

According to the Terms of Reference of the Liberian peacebuilding fund, UN organizations are to function as “recipient organizations” of the Multi-Donor Trust Fund, where the money for the Liberian Peacebuilding Fund comes. The projects are not to be implemented mainly by UN organizations, as the projects should

1 Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary-General.

2 Interview with staff from one implementing partner, Monrovia, 29/09/09.



build local capacity, secure ownership etc., and the Joint Steering Committee selects the projects. The administrative agent is the UNDP. When asked directly about the extent to which UNDP in fact did take a hands-on approach in managing and being substantially involved in the PBF-funded projects, an UNDP official responded, “Well of course we are. We’re development professionals. That’s what we do.”

This is in part explained by the fact that in Liberia, as is the case for most post-conflict countries, UN agencies are in so-called DEX mode – Direct Execution. The reasoning behind this is that in order to have full control over the use of UN funds, to avoid corruption and to minimize fiduciary risks, UN agencies do not transfer funds to national authorities and then let them distribute money according to their priorities. As said by one UNDP employee, “the UN doesn’t want money to pass through the ministries – except to the ministry of finance, where people from PricewaterhouseCoopers are advisors”.³

Even if ownership is accepted as a principle, one of the most commonly referred to qualifying factors is the fear of corruption. Despite an idealized vision of cooperation and ownership, there is a lack of trust in the government, and no money is going through it.⁴ DEX mode, then, is motivated by fiduciary concerns and only when the UN trusts national authorities to spend and use funds in accordance with established rules and regulations do they shift towards NEX mode – National Execution. Relating to the issue of ownership in particular, it is interesting to see how the relationship between the national government and the external changes depending on two “modes of operation”.

Awareness of the tension this implies between the principle and practice of ownership does not seem to be present amongst any of the senior international staff consulted during the fieldwork. That money to UNPBF funded projects is channelled through UN agencies exclusively is taken for granted. It is a non-issue. There are, however, different views on why this is so and how it (does not) relate to the issue of ownership.

A *political* argument in favour of the fact that UN agencies have control over the funds and what they go to is made in some cases. This is justified by referring to the *expertise* the UN (and especially the UNDP) has in developing and managing development projects. Related to the expertise argument, it was in one case emphasised that all the projects had to go through a top UN official’s desk in order to be approved.⁵ Ownership was in the same context defined as a balance of power

between the national government and the UN agency, both politically and financially. However, it was *also* noted that the ownership issue was defined by where the power for designing overall strategies lie, and not as a financial issue. Correspondingly, the accountability argument is most strongly advocated in terms of managing finances.

There are some differences in the justification for money being channelled exclusively through UN agencies. Some emphasize the purely practical aspects of it, that there are already accountability mechanisms in place in the UN organizations. Building new accountability mechanisms in order to execute NEX would then be a waste of resources.⁶ Most would however argue, as alluded to above, that this practice is self-evident. It is UN money, and they should thus be managed and distributed by the UN.⁷ When asked why these funds were distributed through UN agencies, one respondent said: “Of course it goes through UN agencies. It’s UN money.”⁸

Generally, the choice of execution mode is a big issue in UN circles. However, Liberia is in DEX mode, despite often being seen as a shining example of the success of coordinated peacebuilding efforts. As one official explained to us on the centrality of the issue, and from a rather different perspective from that of the above guidelines, “the more desperate the government is to have their hands on things, the more nervous the UNDP gets”. It was pointed out that this is not the case with the Liberian government. Still, Liberia is in “DEX mode”. And how could it be otherwise, “how can it be DEX if it is in a NEX environment?”⁹ This is but one expression of some of the “infrastructural” constraints on efforts to establish national ownership.

Accountability as Local Ownership

There exists what could be called a “double accountability problem”: All funds have to go through UN recipient agents, so there is no or little accountability to the “population”. In addition, the UN agencies themselves are controlling and monitoring projects, which imply limited accountability to donors. Nevertheless, the picture is not one-sided. Government agencies often *do* have considerable power in peacebuilding operations, especially concerning the allocation of funds. As seen, accountability is considered the responsibility of the UN agencies, and thus poses a paradox. On the one side, government ownership can be said to be restricted because funds are processed through UN agencies solely, as they do not trust the ministries. On the other hand, by government interventions, changes are frequently made to the budgets *after* the

3 Interview with UNPBF staff, Monrovia, 02/05/09.

4 Interview with UNPBF staff, Monrovia, 02/05/09.

5 Interview with UNDP official, Monrovia, October 2009.

6 Interview with UNHCR officials, Monrovia, 02/10/09.

7 Interview with UN-HABITAT staff, Monrovia, October 2009; Interview with UNMIL official, Monrovia, 02/10/09.

8 Interview with UNDP official, Monrovia, October 2009.

9 Interview with UNDP official, Monrovia, October 2009.

final approval.¹⁰ This, then, happens outside of established accountability mechanisms, and points to the paradoxes in the practice of (mainly financial) ownership.

NEX is seen as in principle desirable, because it corresponds with the principle of state sovereignty and national ownership. However, the norm in peacebuilding is Direct Execution by the UNDP. The reason is that the UNDP operates with certain criteria for when the organization can allow money to be managed by the national authorities. These criteria include revision and accounting standards and routines that must be fulfilled to avoid corruption. The use of DEX on the country level as an institutional interface between the UN and Liberia has direct consequences for the position and role of the peacebuilders on the country level. UNDP exercises a role as gatekeeper, guide, and examiner to Liberian actors. This institutional structure of DEX is one of the premises for the workings of the Peacebuilding Fund, and contributes in practice to weaken the implementation of local ownership.

Policy recommendations

– There is little “dialogical accountability” – that is, the opportunity to publicly contest and discuss. The present system is focussing mainly on “internal accountability”, but there should be fora in which external actors – both donors and local actors – can discuss and contest. There should be dialogue on the very core structural features of the organization, often taken for granted as just the technical “conveyor belt” when it in fact has political consequences.

- The government is often prioritized as the “ownership partner”. There should be more focus on popular ownership, not only in specific projects “on the ground”, but also on the institutional level.
- Formal and structural rules, such as in the cases of NEX/DEX and transfer of funds, might put local actors in a position of structural dependence. Furthermore, institutional rules might put local actors in a position where they are unable to effectively make use of the structures that the international community can provide. Fiduciary concerns are important, but the basic structural set-up should be assessed with the aim to reduce and simplify administrative procedures and institutionalize the principle of local ownership.
- The relationship between external and internal actors should be gradually and continuously renegotiated to make it more equal and not determined based on strict rules for e.g. what is a technically assessable NEX or DEX “environment”.

References

- Sending, Ole Jacob (2009). Why Peacebuilders are “Blind” and “Arrogant” and What to do About it. NUPI Policy Brief No. 3/09. Oslo: Norwegian Institute of International Affairs. Available on <<http://www.nupi.no/content/download/10619/106293/file/PB-03-09-Sending.pdf>> [08.06.2010]
- UN (2008) Report of the Secretary-General, “The PBF”, A/63/218, August 4th. Available on <<http://www.undemocracy.com/A-63-218.pdf>> [08.06.2010]

Thanks go to Ole Jacob Sending with whom I collaborated in the project “Learning to Build Sustainable Peace”. This Policy Brief is based on the project study, and most interviews referred to were conducted jointly.

¹⁰ Interview with head of major international NGO, Monrovia, 02/10/09.

About the Author

Morten Skumsrud Andersen is MSc in International Relations from the London School of Economics and Social Science, and research fellow at the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI). He is working on peacebuilding practices with special reference to Liberia, accountability in the UN, and on issues related to global governance.