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**Perspectives on the Role of the United Nations in
Humanitarian Assistance, Peace-building and
Development**

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* This paper does not necessarily represent the views of
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Perspectives on the Role of the United Nations in Humanitarian Assistance, Peace-building and Development

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Summary

The United Nations is necessarily very complex, as it deals with an enormous range of human and global concerns. It is also very difficult to manage. It reflects many competing interests and perspectives within a family of multilateral entities. And beyond these of course are the very weighty interests, perspectives and conflicts of the nations of the world. It is in this setting that we must consider the question of "conflicting or complementary agendas". Briefly put, the UN's work in the areas of humanitarian assistance, peace-building and development are logically interrelated, but not necessarily so in practice. Momentum has been gathering in the past few years to foster greater coherence. This is currently a subject of particular attention in the Organization.

Background

United Nations involvement in humanitarian assistance, peace-building, and development has its origin in the very establishment of the Organization. Immediately after the devastation of World War II, the UN was set up, by international agreement at the highest levels, to fulfill several purposes of fundamental importance. As given in the first words of the UN Charter, these are: to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war; to reaffirm faith in human rights; to establish conditions for justice; and to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom. The principal organs of the UN, including the Security Council, the General Assembly, the Economic and Social Council, the Trusteeship Council, the International Court of Justice and the Secretariat, were created to accomplish these purposes. In the succeeding years three dozen specialized agencies and UN funds and programmes were created and brought into the UN system. A relationship with the IMF and the World Bank (the so-called "Bretton Woods institutions") was also established. Among these entities some, like the UN Development Programme (UNDP) and the UN Population Fund (UNFPA), were set up primarily to deal with development issues. Others, like UNICEF (originally the UN International Children's Emergency Fund), and the World Food Programme, were designed from the first to address both relief and development. Within the UN Secretariat are many Departments. Among those most relevant to our subject are the Department of Political Affairs (DPA), the Department of Peace-keeping Operations (DPKO), the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), and the Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA).

All the agencies and programmes mentioned above have their own governing bodies, composed of representatives of the Member States. Within the UN Secretariat, the various departments also tend to be associated with distinct intergovernmental bodies or different committees of the General Assembly.

At the field level, many UN entities have representatives. In addition, with system-wide concurrence, UNDP resident representatives normally function as UN resident coordinators. Where needed, the resident coordinators may also serve as humanitarian coordinators. In this function they report to OCHA. Moreover in UN peace operations, the Secretary-General may engage special representatives (SRSG) or other such officials who have overall authority on the ground, and whose reporting lines are through DPA or DPKO. As part of the UN reform efforts guided by the Secretary-general in the past three years, UN departments and UN funds and programmes have been grouped into four "executive committees", with interlocking memberships, under the

headings of peace and security, humanitarian affairs, economic and social affairs, and development. Finally, at the level of inter-agency bodies, are the Inter-Agency Standing Committee on Humanitarian Assistance (IASC), the Consultative Committee on Programme and Operational Questions (which is mostly focused on development issues), and the Administrative Committee for Coordination (ACC). The ACC, which includes participation from the World Bank and the IMF, meets at the level of agency executive heads, and is chaired by the Secretary-General.

It is worth recalling all this diversity. The UN is necessarily very complex, as it deals with an enormous range of human and global concerns. It is also very difficult to manage. It reflects many competing interests and perspectives within a family of multilateral entities. And beyond these of course are the very weighty interests, perspectives and conflicts of the nations of the world. It is in this setting that we must consider the question of "conflicting or complementary agendas". Briefly put, the UN's work in the areas of humanitarian assistance, peace-building and development are logically interrelated, but not necessarily so in practice. Momentum has been gathering in the past few years to foster greater coherence. This is currently a subject of particular attention in the UN Secretariat, and in the General Assembly and the Security Council, most recently in light of a report issued in September by a panel on UN peace operations (the Brahimi report) and a just-published report of the Secretary-General on plans for implementation of that panel's recommendations.

The present paper focuses on efforts to harmonize the relevant agendas within the UN family. Recognized, but not treated, are a number of separate questions that are currently being debated in the media and in the UN.

Recent Trends

In recent years, the UN has had to respond to numerous situations of natural disaster and what are called "complex emergencies", notably those deriving from civil strife and armed conflict. Such strife has afflicted as many as three dozen countries on four continents. To cope, entities of the UN system have been devising new capabilities and new forms of collaboration. Their efforts are geared to responding to needs for humanitarian assistance, rehabilitation and development support in a more coherent way, and becoming more cohesive and effective in post-conflict peace-building.

In 1998 the General Assembly included a key element on this subject in its policy review of development cooperation efforts by the UN system. In the resolution it adopted (53/192), the Assembly urged a "comprehensive approach" to countries in crisis, including a "strategic framework" where appropriate. In 1999 the Economic and Social Council undertook a review of issues in the transition from relief to rehabilitation, reconstruction and development as part of the coordination of emergency humanitarian assistance of the UN. It likewise emphasized the need for greater coherence between assistance and the political and human rights aspects of UN responses.

In September 2000, at the Millennium Summit of the UN General Assembly, the heads of state and government of all 189 member countries adopted a declaration. This addressed eight themes, including basic values and principles; peace, security and disarmament; development and poverty eradication; environment; human rights, democracy and good governance; protecting the vulnerable; meeting the special needs of Africa; and strengthening the UN. As part of making the UN more effective in maintaining peace and security, the members resolved to give it the resources and tools needed for conflict prevention, peaceful resolution of disputes, peacekeeping, post-conflict peace building and reconstruction.

For years many of those involved with the UN system, governments and agencies alike, have regarded development and humanitarian assistance efforts as distinct - "ordinary" and "extraordinary" if you will – though the substantive skills and the agencies involved have often overlapped. Thus, for example, FAO has battled plagues and calamities, and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has dealt with water, sanitation, and other such needs for those in "temporary" quarters.

More extreme has been the separation between relief and development activities on the one hand and political and peacekeeping activities on the other. In part this is a legacy of the Cold War, including a limited ability to fulfill Charter functions involving the Security Council. It also reflects political sensitivities of developing countries, as well as their concern to maximize resources for development.

This separation also reflects the traditional role of UN peace-keepers as lightly-armed troops monitoring peace agreements between recognized national authorities. A strong evolution has been taking place in recent years, however, as several UN interventions have been mandated for engagement in conflicts within countries, and where civilians have been especially targeted. Humanitarian crises have been a major factor in precipitating such interventions. Crises of development, or rather of poverty or impoverishment, have been obvious precursors of conflict, and require attention to avoid complete disaster and to foster recovery. Nevertheless it is largely true, as stated in the Brahimi report, that UN development activities "strive to remain apart from politics while nonetheless targeting assistance at the sources of conflict".

Thus it was rather an innovation, in 1998, that a major report by the Secretary-General on the causes of conflict and the promotion of peace and development in Africa was submitted both to the Security Council and to the General Assembly. In November 1998, and again in November 1999, the Security Council held open debates on peace-building and on conflict prevention, respectively. Also in 1998, in relation to efforts to assist Haiti, the Security Council invoked for the first time Article 65 of the Charter, which states: "The Economic and Social Council may furnish information to the Security Council and shall assist the Security Council upon its request".

Even the term "post-conflict peace-building" is of recent vintage in the UN, and is a concept that is still taking shape. As described in the Brahimi report, peace-building largely refers to efforts carried out under political mandates to help strengthen fledgling institutions in the context of peace agreements, including in helping to organize elections, supporting civilian police and human rights monitors, and supporting the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration of former combatants. The panel recommended measures to clarify the divisions of labour so as to promote more effective UN support. In his response to that report, The Secretary-General has taken a broader view, declaring that virtually every part of the UN system, including the Bretton Woods institutions, is currently engaged in one form of peace-building or another, because peace-building embraces activities including political, military, diplomatic, development, human rights, child protection, gender issues, humanitarian and many others. He further stated that an in-house plan for addressing these issues should be formulated by March 2001.

Stepping outside for a view of the broad world context, the latest tally from the International Institute of Strategic Studies (IISS) includes 27 internal conflicts and nine international conflicts for the year 2000. According to that body, at least 100,000 deaths world-wide have been directly caused by armed conflict over the past year, with 60 percent of them in Sub-Saharan Africa. Commenting on UN peace-keeping efforts, the IISS cites the "Brahimi report" as pointing to "well-known weaknesses" in the UN machinery for mounting and sustaining field operations. Thus: "It remains the case that the UN continues to overreach, approving ambitious mandates and deploying inadequately supported forces in volatile situations." IISS further states that the persistence of considerable internal and international conflict "has intensified the international

debate on the right conditions for military intervention and the proper methods for conflict prevention, peacekeeping and peace-building."

Current Situation

UNDP currently identifies over 50 countries in what it calls "special development situations", of which two dozen are covered by the consolidated appeals process for humanitarian assistance, which is led by OCHA. Currently 20 UN resident coordinators also serve as humanitarian coordinators. OCHA has staff assigned to about two dozen countries, as does the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. The World Food Programme (WFP) and UNHCR are broadly represented. With financing for reconstruction a major question despite uncertain conditions on the ground, the World Bank and IMF have representatives in many crisis countries. Special representatives, personal representatives or special envoys of the Secretary-General are currently engaged in relation to 34 countries or regions. In a few instances, the UN resident coordinators also serve as deputy special representatives.

Entities of the United Nations system have done much in the past year to alleviate crisis and post-conflict situations. This includes widely disparate steps: helping to start building a new nation in East Timor; flood relief in Mozambique; the start of reconstruction in Kosovo; support amidst conflict in Angola; and continued peace-building in Guatemala, to name but a few. This vital but perilous work has also cost the lives of UN staff in several war-torn countries.

The interlocking memberships among United Nations departments, funds and programmes have enabled the Executive Committees created under the Secretary-General's United Nations reform programme to take up issues in a more integrated manner. Moreover, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee for Humanitarian Assistance (IASC), led by OCHA, takes up issues of importance to a broad range of actors, including several of the major international non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

As a step to enable the UN better to respond to various "gaps" in reintegration efforts, a UNDP-led reference group of IASC members and other entities has undertaken several field-based studies and has prepared guidelines for future action. This group has recently produced a report on five key areas, with recommendations suitable for adoption by UN country teams, UN headquarters, and external donors and national authorities. The focus is on: (a) convergence among the UN country team agencies on a common vision and strategy for the reintegration process; (b) convergence between the UN and national actors on a common vision and strategy; (c) national capacity-building as a means to sustainability; (d) measures to instill confidence among donors and national actors; and (e) coordination of IASC members on national strategies and responses. Another mechanism is the Inter-Departmental Framework for Coordination on Prevention. This promotes consultations in relation to potential complex emergencies. It was begun in 1995 among the Department of Political Affairs, the Department of Peacekeeping Operations and the former Department of Humanitarian Affairs, and it has since expanded to a dozen members. This aims to support preventive action and develop improved mechanisms for contingency planning and preparedness in relation to specific countries.

Another initiative, led by DPA, is the establishment of UN peace-building support offices in a few countries, under mandates of the General Assembly and Security Council. These follow upon successful peacekeeping operations and the first rounds of national elections, and aim to contribute to field coordination. Activities of such an office typically include: (a) support to the government for consolidation of peace, promotion of national reconciliation, and strengthening of democratic institutions; (b) providing a framework for harmonization of the relevant United Nations efforts; (c) assistance in destruction of weapons; and (d) facilitation of communication between the government, the neighbouring states and regional organizations.

UNDP is currently seeking to redefine its role in crisis, post-conflict and recovery situations. The UNDP Executive Board considered an issues paper on this at its session in April 2000. There was general agreement that UNDP's work in this area was important and that, as the Administrator put it, UNDP had a role "before, during and after" crises, with a related leadership and leverage responsibility through the resident coordinator and humanitarian coordinator functions. A revised paper is to be considered at the Board session in January 2001.

Strategic Framework Approach

At the level of ACC, the UN system has developed a strategic framework approach, to help it to "speak with one voice" and to link necessary perspectives and actions in selected crisis countries. This responds to endorsements made by the General Assembly and the Economic and Social Council. Guidelines were adopted and circulated by the Deputy Secretary-General in 1999. The guidelines define principles, policies and institutional arrangements, and are intended as a common conceptual tool to help with key issues and objectives. The main elements of the strategic framework approach are: (a) the reduction of the "disconnects" between political actions and assistance efforts; (b) a principled approach covering the international community's political, human rights, humanitarian and development activities; (c) an effective division of labour between all international partners, including the United Nations system, the Bretton Woods institutions, regional organizations, NGOs and the aid community at large; and (d) ensuring participation in the process by local stakeholders

The strategic framework approach is currently being applied in Afghanistan. Details are on the Internet at www.pcpafg.org. A second test case is Sierra Leone. The extensive UN involvement in East Timor and in Kosovo may be seen in this context as well. Also a "Framework for UN engagement" has recently been devised in relation to the UN's work in Somalia. In each case the prime concern is to elaborate and link the political, peacekeeping, humanitarian, human rights and development efforts. The concept, and specific elements of this approach may be applicable in other countries as well. The very difficulty of work in these environments reinforces the importance of such a comprehensive approach.

A New Proposal

The Brahimi report, and the Secretary-General's report on implementation of its recommendations, focus on a proposed new mechanism for improving system-wide integration on matters of conflict prevention and peace-building. Typical of the UN, it has a long name and an acronym: "The Executive Committee on Peace and Security Information and Strategic Analysis Secretariat (EISAS)".

The Brahimi report urged that the Secretary-General should establish EISAS to support the information and analysis needs of members of the Executive Committee on Peace and Security, and that, for management purposes, it should be administered by and report jointly to the heads of DPA and DPKO. It should supercede the Framework for Coordination mechanism mentioned above.

The Secretary-General, upon consultation within the departments, funds and programmes of the UN, and with agencies of the UN system, has proposed an enlargement of this idea, including consolidation of existing related resources from a number of departments, plus the loaning of posts from UN agencies, funds and programmes. The primary objectives of this new body would be:

(a) to provide substantive services for the Executive Committee, and for interdepartmental/agency work in relation to conflict prevention;

(b) to serve as a catalyst and focal point for the formulation of strategies that require a multidisciplinary approach, blending the political, military, development, socio-economic, humanitarian, human rights and gender perspectives into a coherent whole;

(c) to serve as an in-house centre of knowledge and research for mission planners and desk officers, especially aimed at better understanding of the root causes of particular conflicts, which requires a multidisciplinary approach; and

(d) to serve as the focal point for applying modern information systems and technology to the work of all parts of the UN system that are engaged in peace and security activities.

In addition the Executive Committee, with the Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs as its chair, would be assigned the role of coordinating the formulation of system-wide peace-building strategies.

The matter is currently before the General Assembly. If the idea and the budgetary implications are approved, the plan is to create EISAS effective January 2001.

Conclusions

Traditional thinking has emphasized two ideas: first, that relief programmes could simply be phased out and replaced with a return to "normal development programmes" in post-conflict countries, and second, that assistance could be seen in a "relief to development continuum". These ideas are now giving way to a more sophisticated understanding of the relations among types of programmes and assistance providers. Humanitarian agencies are now increasingly focused on ensuring that emergency assistance can be supportive of recovery and development, taking into account the coping mechanisms of affected communities. Similarly, development assistance providers are increasingly recognizing that their early involvement in rehabilitation efforts is important to minimize disruption, to initiate sustainable recovery, and to create conditions conducive to the return and reintegration of displaced people.

Post-conflict peace-building, by its character and importance, is a subject that draws the attention of many entities. It is increasingly recognized that what is needed in such situations is partnerships where each entity or group can apply its capacities to parts of the problem in a consistent and coordinated manner.

Recent events and documentation show that the "comprehensive approach" is proving its worth. Indeed, in the light of experience, it is increasingly possible to consider that "relief" and "development" may be a false dichotomy. It is becoming ever clearer that situations, organizations, requirements and funding are not easily categorized, and it may be counterproductive to do so.

More important may be to consider "basic" and "downstream" needs and actions; to move beyond the idea of "hand-over"; to emphasize flexible combinations of participation and leadership; to realize that there are many types of "gaps" to fill; to recognize the interlocking importance of many United Nations mandates and responsibilities; to focus on sustainability of rehabilitation; and to encourage national capacity-building to help avert the re-emergence of conflict.

It seems that the different actors in the UN system are becoming increasingly able to meet the challenges. Much more is needed however, including further intergovernmental support and guidance, as the role of the UN is to embody the will of the community of nations.

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* Chapter or item prepared by David Stillman.