

UN Leadership for Sustaining Peace at the country level: Expectations and realities

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Summary Note

The 2020 peacebuilding architecture review (hereafter, the 2020 review) concluded on 21 December 2020 with the adoption of the dual resolutions on Peacebuilding and Sustaining Peace by the United Nations General Assembly (A/RES/75/201) and Security Council (S/RES/2558). The resolutions call on Member States, the UN and other stakeholders to “continue to take action to implement the resolutions on peacebuilding and sustaining peace, and to advance efforts to bring greater coherence to peacebuilding efforts” (S/RES/2558, OP1). In line with this call, the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation (DHF), the Global Network of Women Peacebuilders (GNWP) and the Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict (GPPAC) are continuing a series of roundtable discussions to examine strategies and pathways towards the operationalization of the dual resolutions.

The sixteenth roundtable discussion provided an opportunity for UN staff, Member State delegates and civil society representatives working at the expert level on peacebuilding and sustaining peace to explore in greater depth the linkages between ongoing discussions and leadership processes at the UN, as well as those pertaining to the implementation of the Peacebuilding and Sustaining Peace resolutions. In particular, the roundtable explored the leadership traits and practices that are needed to support countries in preventing and resolving armed conflicts and building sustainable peace, as well as the unique demands and pressures that all levels of UN leadership face in working to advance the Peacebuilding and Sustaining Peace agenda. The meeting concluded with practical recommendations for supporting UN leadership at the country level in fulfilling their mandate for peacebuilding and sustaining peace.

Good Practices in promoting UN Leadership:

UN leadership at the country level, from senior representatives of the Secretary-General (SRSGs) and resident coordinators (RCs) to staff of UN agencies, funds and programs, has a significant influence on setting the direction for operationalizing the Peacebuilding and Sustaining Peace resolutions. Following the call in the Secretary-General’s 2018 report on Peacebuilding and Sustaining Peace “to improve leadership, accountability and capacity across the UN system”, the need for improved and committed leadership on sustaining peace was further echoed in the Independent Eminent Persons’ letter to the Secretary-General¹ and in the 2020 Report of the Secretary-General on Peacebuilding and Sustaining Peace, that

¹ Letter dated 13 April 2020 from the group of independent eminent persons addressed to the Secretary-General A/74/944-S/2020/678.

served as input to the 2020 Review of the UN Peacebuilding Architecture.² The centrality of enhanced leadership and cross-pillar coherence is also emphasized as a priority in the UN Peace and Security Reform. Participants at the roundtable reflected on various efforts to improve UN leadership at the country level.

The implementation of *the new resident coordinator system* has contributed to strengthened leadership at the country level. The 2020 Report of the Secretary-General on Peacebuilding and Sustaining Peace points out that RCs, now vested with greater authority and capacities to fulfil their functions with clear lines of accountability, are more empowered and independent (paras 18, 29)³. This structure enables the integration of the Peacebuilding and Sustaining Peace agenda across all activities of the country team and promotes operational and policy coherence. Participants noted that, as a result of the new mandate, UN country teams (UNCTs) are better positioned to recognize risks and opportunities, promote coherence, and to look across all pillars of the UN's work in identifying entry points for engaging in Sustaining Peace, including in response to the challenges of climate change, COVID-19, and political unrest, among other crises.

The *UNDP-DPPA Joint Programme on Building National Capacities for Conflict Prevention* also contributes to stronger UN leadership at the country level. Peace and Development Advisors (PDAs) provide critical analysis of multi-dimensional risks, connect different parts of the UN system at the regional and country level, and support the RCs in understanding risks and opportunities at the national and sub-national levels.

At the global level, *the Peacebuilding Commission (PBC)* should be recognized as an actor that enhances UN leadership at the country level. By providing a convening space to articulate, generate support for, and address critical issues in a variety of peacebuilding settings, especially in contexts where peace operations are drawing down and there is a transition to a different form of UN country presence, the PBC offers meaningful support to national governments that complements the work of UN field presences.

Assessment of Leadership: What makes a good leader?

Recruiting resident coordinators with the right skill set – including the acumen to manage complex political relationships, and an understanding of the interactions between peace and security, development, human rights and humanitarian programming – is a key determinant for the successful implementation of the Peacebuilding and Sustaining Peace agenda.

The concept of sustaining peace seeks to reclaim peace and distance itself from the affiliation with conflict that has defined peacebuilding over the past four decades.⁴ This means focusing not only on challenges and the ways to overcome them, but also on the sources of resilience and “what is strong.” A leader who takes the time to listen, understand contextual realities and continuously learn and adapt is required to successfully operationalize this approach. Moreover, effective implementation of the Peacebuilding and Sustaining Peace agenda also

² 2020 Report of the Secretary-General on Peacebuilding and Sustaining Peace, S/2020/773.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Youssef Mahmoud and Anupah Makoond, *Sustaining Peace: What Does It Mean in Practice?*, April 2017.

requires the recognition of local capacities for peace and connectors across lines of conflict that need to be strengthened in parallel to efforts to mitigate risks. As such, UN leadership at the country level needs to be committed to and adaptable in supporting national priorities and the interests of the local population in any given context. In Gabon, for example, the RC Office worked with the International Labor Organization (ILO) to create a conducive environment for dialogue between government, labor unions and other stakeholders around labor rights, as a critical factor for development and peace.

Several participants mentioned that in order to be able to create an environment conducive to supporting local efforts to build peace and inspire trust in the UN system a good leader should possess both “hard” and “soft” leadership skills. This requires a solid understanding of the tools available, mandates and expectations of all stakeholders, and capacities within their team. It also calls for the ability to conduct gender analysis and intersectional analysis, and a commitment to prioritizing inclusion of diverse groups in decision-making. In addition, a leader needs to possess humility, good judgement, flexibility, personal resilience, self-reflectiveness, and strong interpersonal skills. These values and attributes, some of which are outlined in *The RC Leadership Profile*⁵, can often be more important than expertise and knowledge of policy frameworks and are useful in coping with political processes and criticism.

In practice, not everything depends on individual leaders themselves. Systemic challenges (and opportunities) can also shape an RC leadership style, with incentives and disincentives affecting their decisions, their modes of engagement and the outcomes of their actions. The recent addition of five core positions to RC offices, as well as some critical capacities such as PDAs and gender advisors, enable RCs to advance comprehensive analysis, policy and programming. Another critical element of leadership is access to sustainable and adequate funding. Participants noted that funding can enable or undermine leadership, notably that of the RC. In this regard, pooled funding and joint programming constitute valuable instruments to empower RCs to fulfil their convening responsibilities.

Equally important for delivering transformational leadership is a conducive environment and political support within the country. For example, in the context of Liberia, one participant noted that the strong track record of women’s meaningful participation in the peace process provided a useful foundation for UN leadership on peacebuilding and sustaining peace. Participants also highlighted the importance of partnerships with regional organizations – such as ECOWAS – for effective and inclusive leadership.

UN leadership should be understood to extend beyond the SRSGs and the RCs. One participant highlighted that because every RC does not have the range of experiences, skills and capacities needed to fulfill their multidimensional role, particularly with regards to facilitating the implementation of complex agendas such as the Peacebuilding and Sustaining Peace agenda, co-leadership or collective leadership is essential. This is particularly pertinent in the context of drawdowns of peacekeeping operations.

⁵ UN Sustainable Development Group. The RC Leadership Profile, 2020: <https://unsdg.un.org/sites/default/files/2020-12/The-Resident-Coordinator-Leadership-Profile.pdf>

Key recommendations:

The following recommendations were shared for enhancing efforts to improve leadership, accountability and capacities across the UN system:

- UN leadership for sustaining peace requires a **broadened understanding of the Peacebuilding and Sustaining Peace agenda**, including its universal relevance and its linkages to other agendas, such as Women, Peace and Security (WPS), the prevention agenda, Youth, Peace and Security (YPS), and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This requires moving outside of systemic silos and broadening partnerships to include other relevant stakeholders in a given context, including civil society and local peacebuilders.
- The UN system should encourage **UN leaders and staff to develop knowledge and capacities across the three pillars of the UN's work**. Developing an understanding of the multiple root causes of conflict requires a leader to consider development, human rights, peacebuilding and other issues. Yet, the UN system does not necessarily value or promote such versatility, nor does it enable staff, especially in leadership positions, to easily transfer across agencies and pillars. Further inquiry is needed to identify ways to better enable such cross-fertilization and mobility, and to counteract the siloed mindset that fosters skepticism and resistance to greater collaboration or integration.
- The UN system should also encourage **UN leaders and staff to develop gender and intersectional analysis skills**, as well as an understanding of the roles and leadership of women, youth and other groups in peacebuilding and sustaining peace.
- Leadership training and capacity development are required at all levels of the UN system in order to **nurture collective leadership** and to **enable future leaders**.
- **Donor funding decisions and the modalities they use can strengthen leadership**, rather than making it more complicated. Further inquiry is required into how engagement at the country level with international financial institutions (IFIs) and funding available through the Multi-Partner Trust Fund Office can enable RCs in their role to facilitate collaboration and coordination at the country level.
- The UN should **strengthen capacities and staff resources at the country level**, including through the presence of senior gender advisors and PDAs in every RC office, with sustained and dedicated funding for these positions.
- UN Resident Coordinators and UN Country Teams should commit to **the meaningful inclusion of civil society, including local women and youth peacebuilders** and women- and youth-led organizations, to better reflect and address the complex impacts of conflicts and amplify the leadership of these actors in peacebuilding and sustaining peace.