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(Dis)integration, Incoherence and Complexity in UN Post-conflict Interventions

SUSANNA P. CAMPBELL

The UN has developed a series of internal ‘integration reforms’ that aim to increase its capacity to integrate its post-conflict efforts through a single coherent strategy, and ultimately to support sustainable war-to-peace transitions. This article argues that these reforms could be redesigned to take into account the causes of the (dis)integration, incoherence and complexity of UN post-conflict interventions, to make them more comprehensive and more realistic. While some degree of both strategic coherence and operational integration may be necessary to improve the effectiveness of UN post-conflict interventions, these are inadequate without an increased conflict-sensitivity in each UN entity involved in post-conflict interventions. For the whole to be greater than the sum of the parts, the parts must make a significant contribution to the whole.

In a speech in May 2008, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon echoed a sentiment that many others before him had expressed: ‘We need to make our approach [to peace processes, peacekeeping, peacebuilding and development] less piecemeal and more holistic.’¹ This belief is born out of almost two decades of experience, particularly with post-conflict interventions.² The post-conflict operations of the 1990s suggested that duplication of effort and the absence of clear political leadership could have disastrous consequences, particularly in environments as complex as Somalia and Bosnia and Herzegovina.³ The failed implementation of peace agreements, such as the 1993 Arusha Accord for Rwanda, illustrated the importance of continuity between different intervention phases (before, during, and after conflict) to ensure that the gains from one phase become the assets of the next. Thus, in 1997, Secretary-General Kofi Annan wrote: ‘It is now widely accepted that present-day conflicts have many dimensions that must be addressed comprehensively and require more integrated and coordinated action.’⁴ Subsequently, integration and coherence have been seen as critical for peacebuilding: ‘successful recovery from conflict requires the engagement of a broad range of actors, including national authorities and the local population, in a long-term peacebuilding effort.’⁵

In response to this widely recognized need, the UN established a series of “integrated reforms” intended to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of UN post-conflict interventions by addressing the following problems: ambiguous political leadership; needless duplication of effort, poor continuity between the phases of intervention; and the return of several post-conflict countries to war. Notwithstanding a focus on these problems, it is not clear that integration reforms have made a significant impact, except perhaps in the case of the political

leadership provided by the Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG) (see also Campbell and Kaspersen in this issue). This article argues that addressing these problems also requires a 'bottom-up approach' to coherence, which enables each UN agency, fund, programme, office and department to examine its individual and collective impact on the drivers and causes of peace.

Neither 'integration' nor 'coherence' is clearly defined in UN documents. Integration generally refers to organizational processes that lead to coherence: 'Integration is the guiding principle for the design and implementation of complex UN operations in post-conflict situations and for linking the different dimensions of peacebuilding (political, development, humanitarian, human rights, rule of law, social and security aspects) into a coherent support strategy.'⁶ Coherence generally refers to a unified effort by the UN system around the same overall strategy and set of goals: '[T]he UN system seeks to maximize its contributions towards countries emerging from conflict by engaging its different capabilities in a *coherent* and mutually supportive manner.'⁷ The conceptual understanding of the type of UN intervention (that is, conflict prevention, peacekeeping, peacemaking or peacebuilding) being 'integrated' or made 'coherent' is also vague. To avoid confusion, this article uses the term 'post-conflict intervention' to describe the collective effort of a UN-mandated peace operation, managed primarily by the Departments of Peacekeeping Operations and Field Support (DPKO/DFS), and the United Nations Country Team (UNCT) in the same country, which is composed of the resident heads of the UN Funds, Programmes, and Specialised Agencies. The term 'post-conflict' does not indicate an absolute end to the conflict, as, in most cases, some degree of violent conflict continues after a peace operation has been deployed. The term 'war-to-peace transition' refers to the complex dynamics in a post-conflict country as it attempts to develop the foundations for sustainable peace. By hiding the sources of disagreement, the vague terminology enables most UN actors to agree on their desirability.⁸

This article proposes several new directions for integration reforms. To that end, it first investigates the structural and political reasons for the (dis)integration of the UN system. Then, it examines the potential incoherence in UN post-conflict interventions. Finally, the article briefly outlines the complexity and unpredictability of war-to-peace transitions and discusses the need for selective 'bottom-up' coherence. It concludes with several recommendations and a call to consider the UN's complex network-hierarchy structure as a potential asset in maintaining both flexibility and efficiency.

Challenging Top-Down Integration

In 1997, Secretary-General Kofi Annan declared, 'the very organizational features that are now most demanded by the UN's external context in some respects are in shortest supply: strategic deployment of resources, unity of purpose, coherence of effort, agility and flexibility.'⁹ These organizational challenges result from the complex and largely (dis)integrated structure of the UN. Each of the various 47 UN entities has a specific area of expertise and corresponding organizational systems and culture. While the departments and offices of the Secretariat have

separate reporting lines, which eventually lead to the Secretary-General, the agencies, funds and programmes are overseen by separate governing bodies, each composed of a select group of member states.

The complicated structure of the UN system is particularly evident during post-conflict interventions, when much of the system is present in the same country. Nonetheless, what may appear from a field perspective to be irrational constraints and barriers derives from a larger system that has its own logic and rationality. Systematically altering the country-level behaviour of UN entities requires the alteration of the larger incentive structures that guide this behaviour.

Integration reforms largely ignore this complexity, instead vesting the responsibility for ensuring a coherent system-wide effort in two individuals: the Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG) and the Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary-General/ Resident Coordinator/ Humanitarian Coordinator (DSRSG/RC/HC). Integration reforms give the SRSG the 'overall authority over the activities of the United Nations',¹⁰ and mandate the DSRSG/RC/HC to coordinate all UN development and humanitarian actors, and maintain 'links with governments and other parties, donors, and the broader humanitarian and development communities'.¹¹ Unfortunately, neither of these individuals is provided with the leverage or incentives necessary to enforce, or even encourage, a system-wide effort. While the SRSG's authority is clearly established through the specific integration reform processes, 'the reality is that various parts of the system operate under different rules and regulations'.¹² Not only do the UN agencies, funds and programmes that make up the UNCT operate under different rules and regulations, but they are directly accountable to their governing boards composed of member states, not to the SRSG. Although Security Council mandates are binding to all UN member states, including those sitting on the governing boards of the UN agencies, funds and programmes, this does not translate into direct enforcement or management capacity for the SRSG.¹³

Thus, while the SRSG is charged with ensuring the implementation of the peace operation mandate(s) given by the Security Council, and overseeing the Secretariat departments and offices that implement the mandate (primarily DPKO/DFS), the programmes and budgets of the agencies, funds and programmes that make up the UNCT are developed within each organization, largely independently of the Security Council mandate. While the UNCT is primarily dependent on voluntary contributions from member states, other multilateral organizations and individual donors, the peace operation is funded by assessed contributions allocated by the General Assembly.

UN member states therefore have significant influence over the degree of coherence and integration attained by UN post-conflict interventions. Member states exercise this leverage either through their positions on the Security Council, which mandates peace operations, and/or the General Assembly, which provides their funding. They exercise it through the voluntary contributions that they provide to UN agencies, funds and programmes for post-conflict activities, and through their positions on their governing boards. Member states also exercise important control over the members of the wider UN family and the

UN's partners: in their membership, contributions to, and governance of international financial institutions; their bilateral relationship with and contributions to the host government; their funding of NGOs; and their membership in other intergovernmental organizations. The differing agendas and perspectives of member states play out through the different organizations that they influence. As a result, the (dis)integration of the UN system at the country level partly stems from the political bargaining and competition between UN member states.

The (dis)integration of the UN system at the country level is also a corollary of the incoherence and competition within the home governments of member states. UN entities pursue divergent or uncomplementary goals partly because the member states that approve their budgets, mandates and programmes represent different interests within their own governmental bureaucracies. According to a 2007 study, for example, 'no single donor has formulated an explicit government-wide strategy for fragile states'.¹⁴ The absence of a unified strategy towards 'fragile states' within a member state's own bureaucracy makes it difficult for the same member state to pursue a common approach toward these states (for example, those in which peace operations are deployed) through the various UN governing bodies on which it serves.

International Organizations and Bureaucratic Politics

The complexity and (dis)integration of the UN structure is not unique to the UN, and can be better understood in light of research on international organizations and bureaucracies. The UN comprises two conceptually separate, but operationally interdependent, components. First, it is an international organization that was established to protect the individual and collective interests of its member states. Second, it is a bureaucracy that, according to Michael Barnett and Martha Finnemore, is responsible for promoting 'socially valued goals such as protecting human rights, providing development assistance, and brokering peace agreements', which member states may not be able to pursue alone.¹⁵

While member states have an interest in working through international organizations to produce outcomes that may exceed their individual capacities, they also have an interest in maintaining some control over which outcomes are produced by the organization.¹⁶ The presence of the member states on the governing bodies of UN agencies, funds, programmes, offices and departments, including the Security Council and the General Assembly, ensures that each of the 162 member states has some control over the outcomes of the UN's actions. The (dis)-integrated governance structure that results thus ensures that each member state can influence the outcomes of the UN's actions, although not with equal leverage.

The UN bureaucracy is made up of subunits that were established by member states to serve their collective needs and interests as they existed at the organization's founding and have evolved over subsequent decades.¹⁷ The subunits have legitimacy and authority 'because they represent the collective will of their members'.¹⁸ Their authority is reinforced by often distinct administrative policies, human resource systems, accountability mechanisms, programmatic time frames, and funding mechanisms designed to enable each unit to implement its particular mandate (see also Campbell and Kaspersen in this issue). Consequently, by threatening to subsume

all UN entities in a post-conflict country under the SRSG, and thus DPKO/DFS, integration may appear to endanger the authority, legitimacy and values that member states charged the non-Secretariat based agencies, funds and programmes with protecting and promoting.

The integration of the UN system during peace operations is also difficult because of the nature of bureaucracies, which are deemed to be efficient because they are divided into specialized subunits that systematically execute specialized tasks. Each of these units is managed hierarchically, 'in that each official has a clearly defined sphere of competence within a division of labor and is answerable to superiors'.¹⁹ Incentives within a bureaucracy encourage each subunit to work toward the fulfilment of its own mandate, discouraging collaboration with other parts of the bureaucracy. According to Morton Halperin, each subunit has incentives to maintain its autonomy, organizational morale, organizational essence, roles and missions, and budgets. As a result, 'options which involve cooperation between organizations and which would require an organization to alter its structure or perform extraneous missions are unlikely to be advanced.'²⁰ Instead, 'decisions are not made after a rational decision process but rather through a competitive bargaining process over turf, budgets, and staff that may benefit parts of the organization at the expense of overall goals.'²¹ In sum, a bureaucracy's subunits have incentives to (dis)integrate in order to efficiently implement their specific tasks. Coordination and collaboration between the subunits is supposed to happen 'under a hierarchical command', with each subunit commanded from above.²² Perhaps this explains the Secretary-General's desire to replicate this process at the field level by giving his SRSG the authority to integrate the entire UN system. Nevertheless, because of the UN's (dis)integrated governance structure, coherence of the entire system cannot be enforced through a top-down, Secretariat-driven structure. Rather, it relies to a large degree on the willingness of the member states that govern the relevant UN subunits to create incentives for integration.

Even the Peacebuilding Commission (PBC), which was established to increase member states' roles in integration and coherence, can only advise, propose, recommend and inform the integration and coherence of the UN system.²³ Its enforcement power is derived from the provision of resources and political support by member states. In the words of the 2008 Principles and Guidelines for UN peacekeeping: 'integration among the members of the broader United Nations family cannot simply be imposed by edict from above, and can only be achieved through a constant process of dialogue and negotiation between the actors concerned.'²⁴ It is to the subject of this dialogue that we turn next.

Incoherence, Tensions and Trade-offs in UN Post-conflict Interventions

To maximize the UN's contribution to countries emerging from violent conflict, integration reforms aim to unite the UN system under one coherent strategy that is based on 'a shared understanding of the priorities and types of programme interventions that need to be undertaken at various stages of the recovery process'.²⁵ The integration reforms that seek to help attain this coherence are

the Integrated Mission Planning Process (IMPP) and the positions of the SRSG and DSRSG/RC/HC. In practice, however, the development of full coherence of the UN system through the IMPP and strategic priorities under the leadership of the SRSG may be incompatible.

Strategic plans developed by the entire UN system in the country tend to be driven by the mandates and priorities of each subunit more than by the needs of the country emerging from violent conflict. These supply-driven strategies are characteristic of most post-conflict interventions for several reasons.²⁶ As post-conflict intervention has become increasingly important for the UN, agencies 'have extended their existing mandates and competencies into the postconflict area'.²⁷ The enormous needs of post-conflict states and societies entice each UN entity to identify its mandate as a core priority in the country. Because the UN does not measure the impact of its activities on the conflict dynamics, there is no evidence that one programme or activity may be more important than another. As a result, efforts to develop coherent UN strategies will often result in a 'supply- rather than demand -driven menu of postconflict peacebuilding activities',²⁸ that are difficult to prioritize and are unlikely to meet the particular needs and capacities of the post-conflict country. The IMPP has not even addressed this tendency (see Campbell and Kaspersen in this issue).

In addition, when a coherent strategy is translated into (or derived from) plans developed by each UN entity, it is likely to lose its comprehensive nature. As discussed above, the subunits of the bureaucracy tend to prioritize the execution of their particular programme and activity above collaboration or linkages with potentially complementary activities. Nevertheless, without linkages between complementary activities, a coherent strategy will become incoherent once translated into activities.²⁹ Thus, one of the main purposes of coherent strategies – to aggregate priorities and have complementary (and positive) impacts in the war-to-peace transition – will be unfulfilled if these different activities are not linked together during their implementation. This hints at the importance of selective bottom-up coherence and collaboration directed toward specific problems or opportunities in the post-conflict dynamics, as will be addressed in more detail below.

The expectation of an inclusive, coherent UN strategy at the country level also ignores the potential trade-offs and tensions between different post-conflict aims and activities. The tension that has received the most attention is that between humanitarian and political actors, which has been referred to as the humanitarian dilemma that 'reflects a tension between the partiality involved in supporting a political transition process and the impartiality needed to protect humanitarian space'.³⁰ Antonio Donini paints this as a tension between humanitarian principles – as outlined in the UN Charter, in the Universal Declaration, and in international humanitarian law – and politics.³¹ Significant advocacy work of humanitarian agencies has led to wide recognition of this issue, and general agreement that life-saving activities should not be included in a peace operation's overall political strategy: 'a clear distinction must be made between politically motivated actions to end conflict and move toward national development, and apolitical humanitarian assistance'.³²

In addition to the tension between humanitarian and political imperatives, there are several other tensions within the UN's post-conflict framework. Peace and justice imperatives can be at odds when political efforts aim to secure peace through the appointment of human rights violators to powerful positions. In addition, efforts to strengthen state institutions may be at odds with those that promote democratization and economic liberalization. In the words of Roland Paris: 'Democratization and marketization engender societal competition and conflict, which can pose a danger to the domestic peace of states that are emerging from civil wars.'³³ Strengthening state institutions, on the other hand, may increase stability but weaken the foundation for democracy. In addition, Virginia Page Fortna has found that peacekeeping may be incompatible with democratization because it crowds out local democratic transitions that seem to be important for sustainable democracies.³⁴ These tensions often play out between the DPKO/DFS-run peace operation, which focuses on immediate stabilization and elections, and members of the UNCT that focus on longer-term development, governance and institution-building.

When the UN has addressed these potential tensions and trade-offs, it has done so primarily through the leadership of the SRSG. But, because the SRSG is accountable foremost to the Security Council mandate(s), which tends to prioritize security and political imperatives, the priorities of UN agencies that are mandated by member states to defend humanitarian, human rights or development imperatives risk being sidelined. For Barnett and Finnemore, 'to the extent that hierarchy resolves conflict between the different cultures of subunits by squelching input from some subunits in favor of others, it causes the organization to lose the benefits of a division of labor that it was supposed to provide.'³⁵ If strategic integration under the leadership of the SRSG means that the mandate of DPKO/DFS wins out over the mandates of other UN offices, then there is likely to be resistance to integration both from some of these subunits as well as from the member states who govern them.

In sum, there are tensions between an inclusive UN effort and the development of strategic priorities under the leadership of the SRSG. An inclusive supply-driven strategy may be too vague or too aligned with a standard template to be of significant use in navigating the complex dynamics of a post-conflict country, while strategic priorities are likely to rank some UN entities' mandates over others. More effective coherence may result from a macrolevel strategy that allows for the coexistence of competing imperatives (rather than full agreement on all priorities), to be determined by the needs of the peace process, and selective microlevel coherence that directs and links complementary capacities toward specific problems and opportunities that emerge in the country.

The Complexity and Unpredictability of War-to-Peace Transitions

The ultimate purpose of integration and coherence is to help increase the UN's capacity to prevent post-conflict countries from returning to war. Nonetheless, the UN's emphasis on integration and coherence as the two primary means for improving the effectiveness of post-conflict interventions assumes that the UN

has the right components, but they just need to be assembled. This suggests that the problem is the coherence or integration of the UN effort, not the effectiveness of the programmes and activities implemented. This is not a safe assumption, as 'international peacebuilding agencies have only limited knowledge of what is required to succeed in the ambitious task of stabilizing a fragile country after war.'³⁶

In reality, a country's transition from war to peace is complex, unique and unpredictable.³⁷ Historically in North America and Western Europe, war-to-peace transitions occurred through decades-long, violent institution-building processes, where different actors vied for control of the state and the loyalty of its peoples,³⁸ so that peace 'has never arrived all at once but rather has seen its elements emerge over long periods of time, by fits and starts, and often interspersed with great periods of violence'.³⁹ International post-conflict interventions aim to replicate the end state of this process – a liberal democratic state defined by rule of law, markets and liberal democracy⁴⁰ – over a period of years, through a relatively standard liberal peace template of programmes and strategies. The challenge posed by the complexity and unpredictability of war-to-peace transitions is not widely acknowledged in the UN. Instead, UN post-conflict interventions often 'reflect unexamined assumptions and deeply rooted organizational mandates rather than "best practices" born from empirical analysis'.⁴¹ In reality, a country's actual war-to-peace trajectory is only revealed as the country advances through each stage of its transition. For post-conflict efforts to truly support war-to-peace transitions, they would have to be prepared to 'discover' the stages of each transition as they appeared, possibly as a result of the intervention's influence but heavily dependent on the social and institutional realities of the country and the politics of its new leadership.

Accordingly, the assumption that the duplication of activities is ineffective may not be wholly accurate. Because the trajectory of war-to-peace transitions is unpredictable, and it is difficult to know which activities will lead to the desired impact, some degree of duplication may be necessary. If the same problem is approached from different directions, there is a greater probability that it will be solved. Michael Doyle refers to this as 'risk-spreading multidimensionality': 'The UN should design as many routes to peace – institutional reform, elections, international monitoring, economic rehabilitation – as the parties will tolerate, for some will almost inevitably fail.'⁴²

One reason why the UN does not question its capacity to achieve its desired impact on post-conflict countries is that it does not evaluate the actual impact of its activities on the drivers and causes of peace in each particular country. Consequently, there is no systematic evidence that the UN's activities are or are not having the desired outcome. Without evidence of a mismatch between intention and outcome, there are no incentives for the UN to develop a more demand-driven approach. While some UN entities may evaluate the impact of their work on sector-specific indicators – such as health, education, food security, refugee return or demobilization – they do not regularly make the connection between these efforts and the drivers and causes of peace in the particular country. Although impact evaluation is time-consuming and faces some methodological challenges, it is feasible.

Some UN agencies, funds and programmes are reluctant to measure the impact of their activities on the drivers and causes of peace because they may not acknowledge the political nature of their work. All the same, research has found that any activity in a highly dynamic post-conflict context can act as an incentive or disincentive for peace.⁴³ While DPKO/DFS recognizes the political impact of its work, it does not systematically monitor the impact of its activities on this larger political context. Instead, under the leadership of the SRSG, it reports on the evolving political situation and the fulfilment of the Security Council mandate without often making an explicit connection between its activities and these changing political, economic or social situations. Furthermore, measuring success against the Security Council mandate does not equate with measuring impact because the Security Council mandate results, obviously, from political compromise and often corresponds to a liberal template, not to the specific needs and capacities of the host state and society or the capacities of other international actors, or even the UNCT in the country (see Jennings and Kaspersen in this issue).

Although the drivers and causes of peace that the UN aims to influence must be based on some theory about which types of institutions and behaviours are assumed to create peace, these theories should be aligned with the needs, capacities and perceptions of the host state and society. The drivers and causes of peace should be 'discovered' for each country as the conflict dynamics and the capacity of the host state and society change, revealing new problems and opportunities that post-conflict activities could address through selective coherence. The host state and society's acceptance of the UN's strategy, priorities and activities, in other words local ownership, is particularly important, because the ultimate success of post-conflict intervention is manifested in the willingness and capacity of the host state and society to maintain peace. Achieving 'local ownership' may require the UN to question some of the underlying standards inherent in the liberal peace agenda, and possibly support 'mechanisms, processes, institutions, or authorities' that 'may not always look like those in Western states'.⁴⁴

For the whole UN effort to support war-to-peace transitions, the pieces of that effort should each aim to achieve an incremental impact, and measure this impact, on the stages in this transition. This would require each UN subunit to be sensitive to the conflict dynamics, understand their individual and aggregate impact on these dynamics, and adapt their activities in line with problems and opportunities that arise.⁴⁵ Increased 'conflict sensitivity' would create incentives for the UN to shift from a supply-driven approach to one that responds to the demands of the post-conflict state and society.⁴⁶ In addition, it would help to correct the potential disconnection between the UN's hypotheses about the causes of war-to-peace transitions and the actual drivers and causes of peace in the country concerned. Improving the conflict sensitivity of the UN, nonetheless, would require an unprecedented commitment to organizational adaptation and learning by each UN entity and by the UN as a whole, which would only be possible with significant support of UN member states and the Secretary-General.⁴⁷

In sum, although the political leadership of the SRSG, an overarching UN strategy that is aligned with the priorities of the peace process, and even an inclusive post-conflict plan may be necessary to increase the effectiveness of UN post-conflict interventions, they are all insufficient without significant effort by each UN entity to increase its positive impact on the drivers and causes of peace. For the whole to be greater than the sum of the parts, the parts have to contribute to the whole. In the case of post-conflict interventions, this requires that each participating organization discover and learn how to align its intentions with the outcomes of its actions on the complex and changing post-conflict dynamics.

Conclusion

The UN's integration reforms largely overlooked the most significant challenges to their implementation – the UN's complex governance structure, which was developed to serve the interests of 192 member states; the tensions and trade-offs between different post-conflict programmes; and the complexity and unpredictability of war-to-peace transitions. Integration reforms have aimed for top-down integration and coherence of the entire UN system under the leadership of the SRSG and DSRSR/RC/HC, while ignoring the fact that these individuals do not have the capacity to enforce either integration or coherence. Integration reforms have attempted to develop a common strategic plan and shared understanding of priorities among the UN system at the country level, while largely ignoring the potential tensions and trade-offs between the UN's different post-conflict activities and the absence of incentives for the implementation of common strategic plans. Furthermore, integration reforms have assumed that the primary weakness of UN post-conflict interventions is the absence of strategic coherence and operational integration, ignoring the prospect that a conflict-insensitive, supply-driven approach is unlikely to meet the needs of a country undergoing a complex and unpredictable post-conflict transition.

Based on the analysis of the preceding pages, this article recommends the following:

Develop a Country-Level Strategy Based on Benchmarks and Balancing

A country-level strategy should be aligned with key benchmarks in the peace process, target the needs and capacities of the post-conflict country, and aim to balance potentially contradictory activities that may be equally necessary but do not fit neatly within the same priorities. It should be adjusted and adapted as the dynamics on the ground change, and supported by a decision-making structure that includes the leadership of all UN agencies, funds, programmes and departments in the country, under the overall guidance of the SRSG. This type of coherence does not differ significantly from the recommendations in the IMPP, except that the IMPP tends to develop static plans, rather than focus on benchmarks and balancing of potentially competing, but equally necessary, priorities. The agreement to place OCHA outside the UN mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo is an example of balancing, where potentially contradictory activities are allowed to coexist under the same strategic umbrella. The UN

should examine whether extending this approach to other potential areas of incoherence between activities would increase the effectiveness of particular post-conflict interventions.

Encourage Selective Bottom-up Coherence

UN entities should work together to target their capacities towards specific opportunities and needs in the war-to-peace transition. This requires that each UN entity identify opportunities for collaboration, create linkages between its activities and those of other organizations, and evaluate its contribution to the expected outcomes on the drivers and causes of peace in the country concerned. Many positive examples of coherence in the field result from this bottom-up approach, where two or more organisations identify a common interest in addressing a problem or opportunity and commit their resources to collectively do so. This bottom-up approach to coherence would ideally be supported by an overarching political strategy aligned with the priorities of the peace process. Nonetheless, contrary to the assumptions behind the integration reforms, this macrolevel strategy is not a substitute for efforts by each UN subunit to understand the impact of its activities and to assemble an aggregate impact through selective bottom-up coherence.

Develop Inclusive Country-Based Decision-Making Mechanisms

Mechanisms should be established at the field level that allow high-level officials of each UN entity to address the political implications of their work on the evolving conflict dynamics and war-to-peace transition; to help make difficult decisions between competing imperatives; and to decide how and where to target joint efforts. These mechanisms should adapt the macrolevel benchmark and balancing strategy as the conflict dynamics change, and encourage selective coherence in response to problems and opportunities in the war-to-peace transition. To the degree possible, all decisions relating to strategy and impact should be decentralized to the country level and monitored and supported from headquarters.

Increase the Conflict Sensitivity of Each UN Subunit

Each UN entity should increase its capacity to understand the conflict dynamics and the impact of its activities on these dynamics, and to adapt its activities to achieve its desired outcome.⁴⁸ Impact evaluation is a critical part of this process. For humanitarian organizations that engage only in life-saving assistance, some degree of conflict sensitivity is still important, even if they aim only to avoid a negative impact on the war-to-peace transition.⁴⁹ Increased conflict sensitivity will require increased organizational learning and adaptation, as well as the willingness of UN entities to alter their routines and procedures accordingly.⁵⁰

Alter Administrative, Funding and Accountability Systems to Enable Greater Integration and Coherence

To increase the potential that integration and coherence will take place when deemed effective, the administrative, funding and accountability systems of each UN entity should be adapted, without compromising the entity's core mandate, so as to allow greater resource sharing and collaborative action when desirable.

These suggestions for future reform follow the logic that 'form should follow function'. And yet, in any bureaucracy, especially one as complicated as the UN's, it is difficult for form to follow function. Bureaucracies are generally resistant to change and adaptation. They operate on the basis of routines that allow for the regular and systematic implementation of particular functions.⁵¹ As their mandates change – for example, to focus on post-conflict programming – their routines are likely to remain the same unless significant effort is made to change them.⁵² Bureaucracies also have difficulty in adapting to new or changing circumstances, such as different post-conflict countries or changing dynamics within one country. Rather than adjusting to each new environment, bureaucracies learn from history – applying the lessons learned from their past to new environments, whether appropriate or not.⁵³ For all of these reasons, it is unlikely that integration reforms will change the UN system, or any other large intervening organization, into the ideal structure to support war-to-peace transitions.

Surprisingly, however, the UN's hybrid network-hierarchy structure gives it a potential added advantage in post-conflict interventions. The network aspect (that is, the relationship between each of the UN subunits) allows the organization to be flexible. At the same time, the hierarchical structure of each subunit of the UN supports consistent and efficient delivery of services. Enabling the network structure to be more centralized and the hierarchical structures to be more adaptable could help the UN's complex structure work to its advantage in post-conflict interventions, and possibly overcome some of the inherent challenges of its bureaucratic structure.⁵⁴

At the country level, UN staff have improvised several arrangements in line with these recommendations, at times aided by the integration reforms but often with significant transaction costs. While it is implausible that form will ever systematically follow function in an organization as complex as the UN, an approach to integration reform that is both more comprehensive and less ambitious could help the UN build on its strengths, correct some of the weaknesses, and increase its capacity to support sustainable war-to-peace transitions. Both UN member states and senior leadership have critical roles to play in this project.

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NOTES

1. UN News Service, 'Security Council hears call for more coherent approach to security sector reform', 12 May 2008, accessed at www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=26643&Cr=security&Cr1=sector.
2. Here 'post-conflict' refers to the time at which a peace operation deploys in a country emerging from war.
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