Peacebuilding Commission -Working Group on Lessons Learned

Implementing Local Governance and Decentralization Efforts in Post-conflict Contexts
Thursday, 13 December 2007 - Conference Room 6

Chair's Summary

1. In order to enrich the understanding of the members of the Peacebuilding Commission on the challenges of peacebuilding, the Working Group on Lessons Learned convened a meeting on implementing local governance and decentralization efforts in post-conflict settings. The meeting was chaired by the Ambassador of El Salvador, H.E. Carmen María Gallardo Hernández, and included presentations by expert panelists, Dr. John-Mary Kauzya, Chief of the Governance and Public Administration Branch of the Department of Social and Economic Affairs and Mr. Siphosami Malunga, Governance, Conflict and Peace-Building Advisor of the UN Development Programme's Olso Governance Centre. Robertson Work, director of the Hillside Institute and formerly UNDP's Principal Policy Advisor in Decentralized Governance, was unable to participate due to illness.

2. Key ideas and broader lessons on local governance and decentralization that emerged from the discussion were:

   a. **Local governance is about networks, relationships, partnerships with local leaders and people.** It should not be viewed simply as an issue of the structural arrangements of the government but rather as involving and empowering local people, including women and the poor. As such, it is not only a local issue; within the context of globalization, responsibility for the success or failure of local governance efforts is shared by all local, national and international actors involved in governance.

   b. **Political will is critical to the success of decentralization efforts.** Governments must decide that they want to decentralize; donors cannot force a government to decentralize but they can advocate for and engineer the will to decentralize. However, in addition to political will, bureaucratic will and social will are also necessary. Government officials must be willing to share responsibility, and the local public must be ready and able to take up authority instead of viewing decentralization as an evasion of responsibility by the central government. Methodologies exist, including consultations and workshops, that can help determine whether a national consensus for decentralization exists.

   c. **A strong central government is required to support decentralization.** The distribution of authority is not a zero-sum game; a weak center will be unable to sustain interactions with local actors and unable to hold the local governments together in the service of a unitary state. A strong central government can also help to prevent tensions and conflict from arising between central and strong local government. Characteristics of a strong central government include having legitimacy and authority (*de facto* and *de jure*), financial resources (but lack of funds should not be an excuse for not undertaking efforts), a monopoly of control over the use of force (military, law enforcement, and judicial systems), and the capacity to deliver services or regulate the delivery of services.

d. **The stated objective of decentralization should be to strengthen the platform for development, not to institute power sharing.** Donors often emphasize power-sharing as an objective of decentralization, but this undermines those efforts since having power-sharing as a goal leads to a competition for power as an end in itself. Instead, decentralization should be viewed as an arrangement within which actors at all levels can effectively contribute to development. Power-sharing should not be explicit mentioned in policy documents as a goal.

e. **Nonetheless, decentralization is not a politically neutral technical exercise since it deals with the allocation of authority and power.** Elite capture of power is a real concern but that fear should not cripple the donor community's commitment to decentralization since elites are vital to implementing political and economic reforms. However, the possibility that leaders and elites may use decentralization primarily to increase their power should be taken into account.

f. **The contribution of decentralization to sustainable peace depends on the specific situation.** Decentralization should not be viewed as a panacea for governance challenges in post-conflict settings. In each situation, an analysis should be made to determine what structural arrangements are needed for peace in that country. However, when there is political will and when efforts are managed effectively, decentralization can lead to effective democratic governance and can be a tool for reducing poverty and increasing cultural diversity, participation, and inclusion.

g. **Budget support from donors is very important,** to enable the country to absorb the resources and build its capacity. Donors often cite the lack of capacity as a reason for not providing support and funds. However, development is the same as capacity development, and it has to start by strengthening existing capacities.

3. Some of the challenges of implementing local governance and decentralization efforts in post-conflict settings that were identified were:

   a. **Inappropriate or ambiguous legal frameworks** that do not provide guidance on the role of the local authority vis-à-vis the central government, the services it should deliver, and how it can raise and distribute revenue.

   b. **Weak institutional frameworks** for implementing the existing legal frameworks.

   c. **Political and social dynamics** that, if not taken into account, can result in failure, since decentralization is not only a technical issue. Post-conflict recovery must also repair social cohesion and social fabric, not only formal political institutions.

   d. **Identifying legitimate authorities to deal with** since it is often unclear in post-conflict situations who holds the power at the local levels. Even when it is known, donors may not want to work with those leaders. In some cases, preexisting networks and leaders who had authority before the conflict should be leveraged in implementing efforts in post-conflict since they may still be viewed as the *de facto* authority. Elections can legitimize *de facto* power; however, having elections does not necessarily ensure peace. In some cases, elections can actually fuel conflict.

   e. **The need to intervene rapidly at the community level versus ensuring appropriate participation,** especially since quick impact efforts solidify power and legitimacy. Consideration should be paid to which actors are being bolstered through support for local governance. Speed and participation are not necessarily mutually exclusive and can work together if planned well.

f.   **Quick results versus sustainable action,** since all short term efforts have long term effect, particularly in the immediate post-war phase. Turbulence in post-conflict can lead to hasty decision-making, undue focus on high visibility areas at the expense of other places, and lack of coordination among implementing agencies.

g.   **Deciding whether to reform or rebuild** local governance structures, taking into account the specific situation and whether the old system was a major contributor to the conflict.

h.   **Capacity of local governance structures to deliver aid** and the tendency of donors to outsource these services to NGOs rather than strengthening local capacity from the outset. Local structures sometimes have a narrow purview, and limited control and capacity over local service delivery and may not be able to sustain an infusion of resource. However, this means that their capacity must be built and strengthened.

i.   **The effects of short term cash infusions** and how it can create tensions among local actors. These and **other unintended consequences** should be considered carefully and planned for, by thinking through all possible trajectories related to interventions.

j.   **The length of the conflict and its relation to the challenges faced,** because long conflicts affect social cohesion, result in sustained collapse of institutions, and require greater efforts to create basic conditions for capacity development.

4.   The members of the Working Group on Lessons Learned concluded that this issue has significant practical relevance to the issues before the PBC and asked that the knowledge gained be applied specifically to the PBC's current work. As such, it was decided that the Chair would consult with the Chair of the PBC and the Organizational Committee to see how the lessons could be integrated into the work of the Country-Specific Meetings on Burundi, Sierra Leone, and other countries as appropriate. The Chair further indicated her desire to see that these lessons be incorporated into guidelines, and asked that the members provide specific suggestions on how to integrate systematically the insights into the work on the countries on the PBC's agenda. Furthermore, she indicated that a work programme for the Working Group for the period of January to March/April 2008 would be circulated shortly and asked for suggestions for topics and panelists.