HPG Research Briefing

The changing role of the UN in protracted crises

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Since the early 1990s, UN responses to protracted crises have evolved from a focus on 'transitions', to parallel humanitarian and development activity, to 'strategic frameworks' and 'integration'. The response agenda was driven by the interaction of concepts such as human development and human security, as well as the interest-based politics of member states and the bureaucratic politics of the UN. Only occasionally have policy concepts been translated into operational tools. Today, there is growing interest in expanding the UN's role in protracted crises and post-conflict operations. However, the UN faces challenges which need to be resolved, including maintaining political independence from powerful member states, ensuring staff security and advancing shared policies for implementation.

Whether in the humanitarian, political or peacekeeping realms, responses to protracted crises defined much of what mattered at the UN between the Gulf War of 1991 and 9/11. Over the decade, there was a progressive expansion in the number of protracted crises in which the UN engaged politically, and in the scope of action and authority given to UN political actors to help resolve them. There was also a considerable evolution in approach, from a focus on 'transitions' to efforts to run humanitarian and development programmes in parallel, to 'strategic frameworks' and 'integrated missions'. These innovations in operational models were not, however, matched by the development of an explicit policy framework, nor did the UN devise an adequate response to the core policy problem of protracted crises – the challenge of financing and operationalising development strategies in situations of contested authority.

Amid the US-led war on terrorism, the challenges of deeper UN development and political engagement in protracted crises are likely to grow, rather than recede. On the one hand, there is renewed interest in expanding the UN's role in post-conflict operations, and improving its capacity to engage. On the other, the basic framework of inter-state consensus on which the experiments of the 1990s rested has eroded. The interaction between these two trends is certain to exert an important – but unpredictable – influence on the UN's policy and operational evolution vis-à-vis humanitarian, conflict-management and post-conflict operations.

The evolution of UN policy and practice in 'transitions' and protracted crises

The first effort to establish a UN policy framework for post-conflict operations was Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali's *Agenda for Peace*, of 1992. Reflecting the UN's positive early experiences in ending long-running crises in countries such as Namibia, Mozambique, Cambodia, El Salvador and Guatemala, *Agenda for Peace* laid out different, inter-related *phases* of conflict and response, from pre-conflict through conflict and post-conflict periods. The post-conflict phase was the entry-point into protracted crises for the UN's political and developmental actors. Because, in these early cases, the movement from war/crisis to peace/development was comparatively smooth, the concept of the relief-to-development 'transition' took hold.

Agenda for Peace embodied an optimism about UN conflict management that was also reflected in the other major UN intellectual and political document of the period, *Agenda for Development*. Informed by the concept of sustainable development, the UN sought to place greater emphasis on *human* or social development.

The optimism of *Agenda for Peace* and *Agenda for Development* was soon curtailed by failures in Somalia, Angola, Rwanda, Bosnia and Zaire, which highlighted critical weaknesses in the UN's capacity to respond to crises. These experiences also raised important questions: about the relationship between humanitarian and military action in conflict management; about the potentially negative impact humanitarian interventions could have on conflicts; about the political distortion of humanitarian aid delivery; and about the challenge of 'strategic coordination' between the multiple arms of the UN involved in conflict management. By the mid-1990s, the UN was reeling from the collective impact of these multiple failures, and opportunities for new political or peacekeeping engagements in protracted crises, notably in Burundi and Eastern Zaire, were passed over.

Despite these setbacks, the UN continued to experiment with political engagement in crises. Even where such engagement was not possible, the UN's humanitarian agencies were frequently extensively involved in responses. Amid these large-scale relief operations, some of which ran for many years, the UN's development actors began to perceive that there would be periods of relative calm or pockets of relative stability, in which more traditional social or community development could take place. This evolution within the UN occurred against a backdrop of further shifts in development thinking, particularly the growing attention paid to such concepts as 'human security', which attempted to synthesise human development approaches, with their focus on institutions and social capital, with conflict resolution approaches, which stressed the role of under-development in causing conflict.

This thinking encouraged the UN's development community, led by the UN Development Group Office (UNDGO), to increase its engagement in protracted crises. In contrast to traditional development policy at the UN, which was all about governments, this new focus was on community development and support for local institutions and civil society. Since several of the UN's development agencies also had humanitarian programmes, agencies such as UNICEF and the World Food Programme needed no new institutional presence to engage in limited development work in these contexts. What was needed were new programmes and funding streams.

Out of this emerged a brief experiment in managing humanitarian programmes in tandem with limited development programmes: from a focus on 'transitions', the UN was moving towards a framework of simultaneous, parallel activity. In Burundi, for example, UNDP and the Department of Political Affairs (DPA) began to develop a programme to reorient UN development and relief assistance towards community development, social rehabilitation, reconciliation and dialogue.

This push towards greater development involvement in protracted crises was, however, constrained by political opposition within the UN. The elaboration of human security concepts, twinned with the lessons being learnt from Bosnia and Rwanda, contributed at the UN to a debate around Secretary-General Kofi Annan's concept of humanitarian intervention. Annan's initiative in favour of intervention in the internal affairs of states met with considerable opposition from within the General Assembly. This debate also affected the UN's political and developmental evolution. In 1999, UNDP presented to its governing board a policy paper outlining a more significant role for the agency in conflict and post-conflict environments. The governing board's majority Southern members viewed the proposal as a further challenge to state sovereignty, and the paper was rejected.

> ### Box 1
> ### Protracted crisis: a separate category?
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> It is possible to delineate the set of conflicts that should fall under the rubric 'protracted crisis'. These are countries where political instability, interspersed by military conflict of greater or lesser frequency and intensity, is combined with socio-economic conditions that imperil the lives and livelihoods of a significant portion of the population – and where all these conditions are sustained over long periods of time, at least several years. There is no value in debating precisely how many years a conflict must run to qualify for protracted status, nor what percentage of the population must be threatened for a situation to be considered a crisis – it is enough to recognise that the category encompasses cases of differing intensity and duration.

The coordination debate

By the late 1990s, a more deliberate effort to shape UN responses to protracted crises had begun to take shape. This centred around the question of coordination. The lack of coherence between the UN's political, peacekeeping and humanitarian actors had been identified as one of the major causes of failure in protracted crises.

Development–humanitarian coordination

Efforts to tackle the issue of coordination initially took the form of what was called the 'framework for coordination', a process designed to generate more routine interaction between the UN's political, peacekeeping and humanitarian players. 'Cabinet committees' were set up, responsible for developing policy, ensuring coordination and more effective links between the components of the UN, and steering country-specific strategy, including with respect to crises. These committees covered:

- peace and security (the ECPS, chaired by the DPA and encompassing the Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO), the Department of Disarmament Affairs and a few others);
- humanitarian affairs (the ECHA, chaired by the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and encompassing DPA, DPKO, UNDP and most of the UN's humanitarian agencies); and
- development (the UNDG, chaired by UNDP's Administrator, and encompassing most of the UN's development agencies).

More specific reforms focused on building links between the planning/fundraising frameworks for humanitarian and development assistance – the UN Consolidated Appeals Process (CAP) and the UN Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF). There was a movement towards the merging of the functions and offices of the Resident Coordinator (the lead in-country development actor) and the Humanitarian Coordinator.

The experiment with CAP–UNDAF linkages (and Extended CAPs, Trust Funds and several other hybrid financial and planning mechanisms) failed to overcome two core difficulties. First, there was a gap in donor funding mechanisms between the humanitarian requirement for rapid disbursement and use, and the long clearance and programming cycles for development funds. Second, UN development agencies were facing eroding donor confidence in the quality of their personnel in the field; in their willingness to participate wholeheartedly in coordinated responses; and in the coherence of the intellectual argument they were making for development action in crises.

Strategic coordination: political–humanitarian–development linkages

These experiments in humanitarian–development coordination were also shaped by a broader debate around the links between the UN's humanitarian and development actors and its political arm.

In 1996–97, the UN established the UN Special Mission in Afghanistan (UNSMA), creating an on-the-ground political mission at a time when there were no official peace talks, and no negotiations. It also created what was known as the 'Strategic Framework for Afghanistan', an effort to link the strategies and activities of the UN's political, humanitarian and development actors in the country into a single, coherent strategy incorporating conflict resolution and aid. This was developed into 'Generic Guidelines' to steer in-country coordination wherever the UN had a multiple presence on the ground.

In parallel, the DPKO was experimenting with the use of so-called multi-dimensional peacekeeping – peacekeeping missions that incorporated civilian tasks such as human rights monitoring, election planning and justice functions. When a peace agreement was reached in Sierra Leone in 1999, this multi-dimensional model was used in an attempt to consolidate the agreement. The UN Resident Coordinator was made deputy to the Special Representative of the Secretary-General (the head of the mission and the lead political actor), thereby establishing an 'integrated mission'.

Developments since 9/11: crisis mitigation in a unipolar world

Responses to civil wars and protracted crises dominated the period between the late 1980s and 9/11. Much has changed since 9/11, largely because the nature of US engagement in international security has changed.

The events of 9/11 produced three important shifts in US foreign policy. America's role in international security management was reasserted; the international security agenda was reframed in terms of what Washington describes as the 'Global War on Terrorism' (GWOT); and protracted crises and failed states attracted increased

> ### Box 2
> ### New roles, new actors: strategic coordination with the World Bank
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> A further dimension of strategic coordination involved the relationship between the UN and the World Bank, which itself was engaging in major reforms that brought it into conflict operations for the first time. Efforts to link the Bank's work to the UN's occurred in two very different ways. Within the political departments of the UN, and particularly in DPKO, an effort was made to link to the Bank as a strategic *partner* – for example in the Kosovo mission, in the Middle East, and in the early stages of the East Timor mission. The UN's development agencies experimented with ways of linking to the Bank as a *funder* – specifically of UN developmental activity in the transition process.

attention, both in policy (in the US National Security Strategy of 2002), and in practice. In a wide range of conflicts, an essential truth of UN action – that American policy and action hugely influence the available options – was powerfully reinforced. Conflicts such as that in Colombia, which had been treated within the UN as civil wars or insurgency wars, were now framed by the US as counter-terrorism operations. The designation of some Palestinian groups as global terrorist organisations altered the terms of engagement for all concerned, including the UN. In Sudan, the US has engaged anew, creating the possibility of a sustainable peace agreement in the south for the first time in almost four decades.

The relationship between the US and the UN has been most directly affected by the war in Iraq. The conflict there strained the basic framework of cooperation at the UN; its aftermath highlighted how difficult post-conflict operations can be. These difficulties have led many in the US administration to voice concerns about the limitations of unilateral (or quasi-unilateral) American actions in this realm, and to calls for greater UN involvement both for the legitimacy the institution provides, and for its greater experience in post-conflict transitions. In the European Union (EU) too there is a clear recognition of the UN's role in post-conflict reconstruction. The question of rejuvenated international support for a robust UN role in conflict management, particularly in post-conflict operations, and renewed attention to 'nation-building', stand alongside other challenges, such as the question of staff security in these highly contested environments, and the relative independence of the UN's humanitarian actors from the organisation's broader political and development functions.

Even before Iraq, the UN's operational agencies were seeking to develop further their capacity for managing 'transitions'. The UNDP relaunched its efforts to win the Board's support for an expanded role in countries in crisis, and sought to enhance its capacity in this area. The focus has not been on local engagement within protracted crises, but on integrating conflict prevention into regular development programming, and on early post-conflict recovery. This shift in emphasis was solidified by the work of the UNDG/ECHA Working Group on Transitions, whose final report, released in late 2003, emphasised engagement in the immediate post-conflict environment. This was identified both as an area of considerable need, and as an important niche for the UN's development actors. There are also ongoing efforts within the UN to expand the capacity of the organisation's political and peacekeeping actors to manage civilian and economic aspects of post-conflict transitions. In Liberia in late 2003, the Security Council experimented with broadening the funding of peacekeeping operations to incorporate some money for key transitional activities, such as reintegrating demobilised fighters. DPKO has established a focal point for the management of civilian aspects of peacekeeping. At the inter-governmental level, Kofi Annan has suggested revitalising the Trusteeship Council to take on key roles in post-conflict transition.

Conclusion

Looking back on the 1990s, a number of themes in the UN's approach to protracted crises emerge. First, the response agenda has been driven by the complex interaction between evolving concepts (human development, human security), the interest-based politics of member states, and the bureaucratic politics of UN departments and agencies. Often, process has triumphed over content, and only rarely have broad policy concepts been coherently or systematically translated into operational tools or approaches. Second, the proliferation of coordination mechanisms has not overcome the limitations of an architecture not designed either for conflict response, or for managing divisions between components of the system over objectives and strategy. Third, a significant degree of innovation during the decade went into operational models for post-conflict environments, and despite the inefficiencies of the UN's approaches some important successes were recorded. Fourth, as the World Bank has increasingly eclipsed the UN in development and reconstruction, the UN has begun to identify the immediate post-conflict phase as an important niche, but has only just started to develop (or spur the development of) effective coordination and financial instruments for operations in this phase.

By 2003–2004, there was a growing international momentum to expand the UN's role in post-conflict operations, and perhaps also to improve its capacity through a variety of reforms. However, there is reason to believe that growing international support for a UN role in transitions, including in Iraq, is not being matched by the institution's own appetite for these roles. Rather, concerns around such issues as staff security and the political independence of the UN from US power were encouraging a more conservative attitude towards nation-building, reminiscent of US hesitation after the debacle in Somalia. Whether these tensions will be resolved remains to be seen.