



Delivering the UN ‘sustaining peace’ agenda

Four areas for action by Member States

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Key messages

- Preventing conflict and achieving lasting peace as enshrined in the UN Charter is a fundamental responsibility of the UN's Member States.
- The UN system's agencies, funds and programmes and Secretariat can play a catalytic role in sustaining peace but they need greater political, financial and operational support from Member States.
- Member States should support the UN to deliver the sustaining peace agenda in four critical areas:
 - Ensuring stronger mutual accountability for the implementation of the sustaining peace agenda.
 - Enabling appropriate operational autonomy for the UN system to deliver its activities and programmes aimed at sustaining peace.
 - Ensuring that UN capacities and resources are adequate to the task of sustaining peace.
 - Affording the UN system the political support and ‘space’ that it needs in order to act effectively.
- The UN system must push through with its proposed reforms of cultures, structures and processes in order to give Member States the confidence to make smarter investments.
- Above all, Member States must take the necessary diplomatic action to stop crises from escalating, bring parties back from the brink of violence and set them on the path to peace.

Armed conflict and violence are increasingly complex, dynamic and protracted. Conflict is fuelled by an array of overlapping factors, including violent extremism; weak governance, compounded by the politicisation of security actors and intolerance of political opposition; the political and economic dominance of ethnic or religious elites and the suppression or exclusion of others; socio-economic inequalities and imbalances in economic opportunities; environmental degradation and competition over resources; and the proliferation of arms (UN, 2015a; OECD, 2016). The impacts on civilians are devastating, with millions killed and injured. Over 65 million people were forcibly displaced in 2016 alone (UNHCR, 2017). Many conflicts have endured for decades; others have repercussions well beyond their immediate area. Meanwhile, for millions of men, women and children around the world, the safety and security, economic and political opportunity and equality, and just and lasting ‘peace’ that they so desperately need remain as elusive as ever.

The failure of UN Member States to bring an end to some of the world’s most devastating and protracted armed conflicts has brought renewed focus on the need for a UN system that can better serve its Member States in their efforts to prevent armed conflict and sustain peace. Reviews in 2015 highlighted key internal and external challenges to the ability of the UN system – the UN Secretariat’s departments and offices, as well as UN agencies, funds and programmes (AFPs) – to support Member States in achieving the UN Charter’s goal of international peace and security (UN, 2015a; UN, 2015b; UN Women, 2015).

In responding to these challenges, the Advisory Group of Experts (AGE), which authored the 2015 review of the UN’s peace-building architecture, set out a new framework of ‘sustaining peace’ (UN, 2015a). This concept was subsequently adopted by Member States in the UN General Assembly (UNGA) and UN Security Council (UNSC), in Resolutions A/RES/70/262 and S/RES/2282 (2016). The concept of ‘sustaining peace’ marks a renewal of the UN’s commitment to the goal of preventing and resolving armed conflicts. It also represents a shift in current practice and envisages new ways of achieving collective and cumulative impact. As defined by the UNSC and UNGA, the concept espouses a whole-of-system approach that incorporates peace-building, peacekeeping and political mediation alongside sustainable development, human rights and humanitarian activities. In doing so, it goes beyond the narrow, project-oriented approach that peace-building had in many cases become, and calls for a more holistic, long-term, multi-dimensional framework for preventing armed conflict, mitigating its impact when it does occur and supporting governments and their citizens in achieving lasting peace.

As thus defined, sustaining peace is essentially the responsibility of Member States, as they themselves have outlined in countless UNGA and UNSC resolutions. It is a goal and a process that must be owned and led by the governments and people of conflict-affected countries, with the support of third-party states and other international partners. The UN system should support Member States in this endeavour, but it must be given the operational, financial and political resources to deliver this support effectively. Drawing on recent ODI research commissioned by the UN system on the capacities of AFPs to sustain peace and on UN system-wide capacities for preventing armed conflict and crises (both forthcoming), this briefing note sets out proposals for Member States to consider to ensure that the UN system is fit for the purpose of sustaining peace.

Four areas for action by Member States

In the UNGA and UNSC resolutions, Member States asserted that sustaining peace ‘should flow through all three pillars [peace and security, human rights and development] of the United Nations’ engagement’ in armed conflicts, and that it ‘must involve the entire United Nations system’. They tasked the UN system with ensuring ‘close strategic and operational partnerships’ with national and other international actors, undertaking ‘joint analysis and effective strategic planning across the United Nations system’, and stressed the importance of ‘effective and responsive leadership in United Nations country operations’. They also pointed to the need for ‘more coordinated, coherent and integrated peacebuilding efforts’.

Delivering on these tasks is a major challenge for the relevant UN entities – the Secretariat departments and offices and AFPs. Experience in countries such as Burundi, Cambodia, East Timor and Liberia suggests that the UN system can play a catalytic role, supporting national and local actors in preventing armed conflict and achieving peace and sustainable development. But the 2015 reviews also highlight the long-standing internal and external challenges that undermine the UN system’s ability to fulfil its responsibilities in this regard. A tendency to work in silos, with too little coherence and complementarity and inconsistent leadership, has meant that the UN system is not always able to deliver where it matters most – at national and local levels. Member States need to ensure that the UN system is given the operational, political and financial support it needs. Outlined below are four areas for action by Member States.

Action 1: Ensure stronger mutual accountability for the implementation of the sustaining peace agenda

The relationship between Member States and the UN system is complex, and trust is fragile on both sides. There is too little political and financial support from Member States for the UN's work on the ground, and too little accountability for funds spent and outcomes achieved by UN entities. Member States have delegated a multitude of competing, unprioritised tasks to the UN system, and provide inconsistent direction in AFP governing bodies and through the UNGA and UNSC. Implementing the sustaining peace agenda will require much greater mutual trust than currently exists, and a more strategic partnership between Member States and the UN system. Member States have affirmed that sustaining peace and achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are indivisible, and that one cannot be achieved without the other (ECOSOC and PBC, 2016). But as yet there is no clear guidance on how to integrate the two agendas and move towards achieving their common goals. Key actions for Member States in this respect could include:

- Ensuring greater coherence of policy, tasking and prioritisation between Member States' representatives on AFP governing bodies and those on the core inter-governmental bodies (e.g. the UNSC, UNGA, ECOSOC, the Human Rights Council).
- Ensuring that the candidates Member States nominate to senior positions within the UN system are put forward based on merit, and have the leadership, management and professional skills for the job. Appointments should be fixed-term and renewable upon satisfactory performance, without political pressure from Member States. Leaders must be accountable to all Member States, through the Secretary-General, for delivering on this agenda.
- Reinvigorating the Peacebuilding Commission (PBC), with responsibility for overseeing and guiding the UN system's approach to sustaining peace, providing the necessary policy leadership and prioritisation of action, and ensuring that adequate resources are available for the system's work on this agenda. The PBC could also help strengthen substantive links between the UN system and the core UN inter-governmental bodies, including the UNSC and UNGA, helping to build a consensus on what sustaining peace means in practice, and how it can be integrated with efforts to attain the SDGs.

Action 2: Enable appropriate operational autonomy for the UN system to deliver its activities and programmes aimed at sustaining peace

Member States direct the UN system to act, but efforts to enable its components to deliver on assigned tasks have been inconsistent and ineffective. Impediments range from the micro-management of budgets and spending to the placing of political, practical or financial obstacles in the way of mandated actions on the ground and a failure to hold UN entities to account for outcomes and results. Sustaining peace is a long-term endeavour that involves deepening political settlements, building resilient institutions, securing economic transformation and addressing inequalities and grievances that may have simmered for decades. These processes take on average between 20 and 40 years (World Bank, 2011). The UN system is rarely given the time and space to pursue such long-term strategies, and Member States' markers of 'success' are invariably short-term and unrealistic. Moreover, while the sustaining peace resolutions clearly articulate the importance of inclusive national processes, this is often an area where the UN system faces significant difficulties in states where host governments are averse to efforts to support a more active national civil society. Overcoming the challenges of sustaining peace will also require more ambitious strategies and programmes from the UN system, but Member States are generally reluctant to accept the financial, reputational and operational risks involved in innovation. Actions from Member States that would afford the UN system the operational space it needs to get on with its job include:

- Recognising that achieving and sustaining peace is a decades-long process that requires ambitious strategies and investments over the long term.
- Demonstrating greater trust in the UN system to develop and deliver country-based strategies, in conjunction with national and local actors, based on its technical expertise and assessment of needs on the ground, rather than domestic or geopolitical considerations.
- Encouraging UN entities to work in closer partnership with national and local actors, and accepting the increased financial, reputational and operational risks involved.
- Promoting and respecting greater engagement of the UN system with civil society actors, to ensure that they, in turn, can actively participate in political and development processes.
- Stimulating innovation through supporting pilot projects, accepting the risks if they fail and enabling them to rapidly expand if they are successful.

Action 3: Ensure that UN capacities and resources are adequate to the task of sustaining peace

The effectiveness of the UN system in sustaining peace, like all other agendas, is contingent on appropriate funding. Current funding of the UN's AFPs – the entities on the frontline of 'sustaining peace' – is substantial, at around \$28 billion in 2015. But the vast majority of these funds are short-term, fragmented, unpredictable and earmarked. This has contributed to the fragmentation of the UN system and encouraged a high level of competition among UN entities. Funding modalities are time-consuming and generate large numbers of small projects that are seldom capable of achieving scale, and are difficult to sequence and coordinate. Bilateral donor assessments, evaluations and audits of UN entities are often duplicative and create an unnecessary administrative burden for the entities concerned (Achamkulangare and Bartsiotas, 2017). What gets done depends more on what donors want to finance than on an analysis of what is most likely to reduce the likelihood or impact of armed conflict. Examples from the field indicate that well-designed and -managed pooled funds can improve the UN system's support for sustaining peace: they provide a platform for strategic coordination within the UN system and between UN actors, donors and governments, incur lower transaction costs than bilateral project funding, promote country ownership and the alignment of funding with strategy and encourage greater accountability and sharing of risk between donors and recipients (Coppin et al., 2011). Hearing the call for greater cost-efficiencies and taking note of the current aid financing climate, the UN system needs smarter money, not necessarily more money. Key actions that Member States could consider include:

- Expanding the use of pooled or common funds at country and global level (including enlarging the Peacebuilding Fund), under strengthened governance arrangements, to encourage more collaborative, coherent and cost-efficient approaches.
- Increasing the percentage or proportion of multi-year unearmarked funding for sustaining peace, to facilitate longer-term strategies and programmes while also ensuring the flexibility to respond to dynamic situations of armed conflict and instability.
- Increasing financial accountability through streamlined reporting mechanisms that allow closer scrutiny of outcomes and produce better evidence of value for money.
- Reducing duplicative demands for bilateral assessments, evaluations and audits of UN entities, and moving swiftly towards a standard template for donor agreements.
- Encouraging technical exchanges between the UN system and other partners (e.g. academics, specialist NGOs) to enhance capacities for sustaining peace programming and activities.
- Increasing targeted funding for priority programmes or activities, in particular to augment the UN's good offices and political mediation capacities.

Action 4: Afford the UN system the political support and 'space' that it needs in order to act effectively

The failure of Member States to resolve, at a political level, major crises and armed conflicts is one of the most significant factors constraining the UN system's peace support work. The lack of political coherence and collective action among Member States means that crisis management by the UN system has over the decades effectively become a substitute for political action by Member States. This lack of action from Member States has also been conflated with a lack of ambition, moral authority and capacity within the UN system. This undermines its legitimacy and means that its unique capacity for political mediation is too rarely called upon or supported. When coupled with host governments' reluctance to allow the UN system adequate autonomy of action, the task of achieving and sustaining peace is rendered almost impossible for the UN system. Providing the necessary political space for the UN system to act requires:

- Investing in the UN's good offices and mediation capacities, ensuring that they are recognised and used as a key tool for political mediation and dialogue aimed at preventing the escalation of violence and bringing about lasting peace.
- Providing the political backing for more constructive engagement by the UN system with host governments and other national and local actors.

Conclusion

Despite repeated emphasis on the importance of protecting 'succeeding generations from the scourge of war' as outlined in the UN Charter, and despite the significant work that has been done in responding to armed conflict, Member States and the UN system collectively are failing to deliver on the Charter's core peace and security goal. Recognising the urgent need for a transformed UN system, momentum for major reforms is building internally across the UN, spearheaded by the Secretary-General. These include streamlining fragmented and inefficient administrative systems; shifting inward-looking working cultures towards more collaborative and complementary approaches to harness the diversity of UN capacities and instituting system-wide approaches to the prevention of armed conflict; increasing investment in back-office processes and systems to enable easier pooling and sharing of technical knowledge and expertise across UN entities; and working more constructively with national and local partners. These reforms of culture, structures and processes are essential to give Member States the confidence to make the necessary smarter investments in the UN system. Having created this convoluted and confusing system, Member States – as donors, recipients or third parties – must now get behind the Secretary-General and his vision of reform, providing the support required to consolidate these efforts and giving the

UN system the political, financial and operational backing it needs to fulfil its mandate.

The momentum building around the sustaining peace agenda – inside the UN system and among Member States as they meet at this year’s UNGA – gives hope that a shift is emerging in how armed conflict and violence are tackled. Enabling the UN system to meet its responsibilities for sustaining peace requires all the actions outlined here. Above

all, it means Member States taking the necessary diplomatic steps to stop crises from escalating into armed conflict, bring parties back from the brink of violence and set them on the path to peace. In doing so, Member States will provide the political space for the UN system to deliver the peace, security, development and human rights its mandate requires.

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