Prospects for Improvement in Peacebuilding: The Choice for Cooperation and Coordination

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A B S T R A C T :

In this article, the author argues that there is a systematic tendency of some actors operating in the field of peace and security to resist cooperation and disregard the importance of coordination. Their inability to see the value of interdependence resulting from frailty and short-sightedness leads to unhealthy relationships and unsatisfactory outcomes. Through an analysis of the peacebuilding field, the article reflects on the central role played by cooperation and coordination. Focusing on the case of Libya, the author examines some cooperation and coordination strategies pursued by the United Nations support mission and highlights promising results that have recently been achieved thanks to its dedication and determination. The conclusion is that it is worth investing in cooperation and coordination in the peacebuilding field; however, as it stands today, fundamental changes are needed in the way cooperation is carried out while it remains desirable to reconsider how coordination is pursued.

Introduction

In line with the needs, challenges, and realities of the contemporary world, cooperation and coordination represent necessary choices to ensure international peace and security. Within this context, peacebuilding efforts are powerful processes where just and cost-effective results can be achieved through effective cooperation and coordination efforts.

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This article opens with a reflection on the inevitable reality of interdependence that impacts our world and the choice to pursue coordination and cooperation. The author then considers the rationale behind peacebuilding efforts, comments on the overarching aspiration for more enduring and substantial solutions, and reflects on the case of Libya. In the second part, the author raises the issues of resistance to cooperation and inefficient coordination in the field of peacebuilding, which concretely undermines serious efforts implemented to ensure overarching and enduring outcomes; this is then followed by a conclusion.

This article, which has been produced with only the realm of international peacebuilding in mind, seeks to reflect on whether we can expect satisfying results in the fields of peace and security if we neglect or only partially implement cooperation and coordination. Assuming that our modern society were capable of appreciating the true value of sharing resources and harmoniously organizing systems, do we have any good examples that can show us how coordination and cooperation can make a difference in peacebuilding? And if there are such examples, is it then worth pursuing cooperation and coordination more broadly?

Cooperation and Coordination Understood as Choices Made on a Global Level

The Underlying Ideas of Relationship and Choice

The words 'cooperation' and 'coordination' imply the concept of relationship. That is, they acknowledge the existence of the 'other' while rejecting the idea that anyone can exist or operate in a vacuum. Further, cooperation and coordination convey the idea that the relationship between entities is characterized by interdependence. That is, any entity is necessarily intertwined with others. In an article published in 1987, Martin Wight justifies this idea of interdependence between humans on the basis of two types of needs: material needs and moral needs.[1] Thus, on the one hand, economic necessities, created and amplified by development and industrialization, increasingly bind people together; on the other hand, education, cultural exchange, etc., prompt us to consider and take an interest in others. To these, one could add a third relevant need: the security factor. That is, we seek others to prevent and protect ourselves from threats.[2]

The idea of interdependence as a guiding principle that influences everyone and stems from an array of needs can be applied beyond the sphere of the single individual and referred to the broader dynamics that characterize the modern world. In fact, at all levels, the relationships between states, markets, things, and human beings are increasingly linked by an actual relationship of interdependence. We are suffering from the fragility of outdated systems while at the same time experiencing the growing complexity of the challenges posed to us by a rapidly changing world.[3] Especially in a historical moment such as this, recognizing the value of our interdependence becomes not only a sign of maturity

but is above all a necessity. Thus, to improve our overall well-being and the integrity of the systems we live in, we must acknowledge the interdependent relations to which we are bound.

That said, interdependence exists regardless of cooperation and coordination. In fact, cooperation and coordination are two versatile things, two systems that we can use to improve our relationship with what is external to us and achieve the best results for all (interdependent) parties. However, if we decide not to develop and apply these two tools intelligently and reasonably, our interdependent relationship with the outside world will not cease. Instead of progressing, we simply continue with our physiological development. This consideration is important because it highlights how cooperation and coordination are ultimately a *choice* and how their effectiveness is linked to the level of *commitment* that we are willing to invest in them.

Two Different Arts

Coordination is not synonymous with cooperation. Coordination is a broader concept that can include cooperation, while cooperation is narrower in scope and can merely help the development of a coordination system.

Thus, coordination means arranging a group of elements in a rational, harmonious, and coherent way. The goal is to provide unity and effectiveness to the overall structure. Proper coordination leverages each single element and seeks better (if not the best) results. Due to its broad nature, coordination requires oversight, foresight, and strategic thinking. It needs an entity or a person who is able to see the big picture, can organize and reorganize the structure as needed, and has a clear idea of both the short and long-term perspectives.

In contrast, cooperation means pooling resources and capabilities with others to further interests and achieve objectives that would be beyond the reach of single entities or individuals. The elements of creation and sharing are crucial in cooperation, while the goal pursued by each actor is not necessarily the same. In fact, entities may have very distinct purposes and objectives but ultimately decide to join forces as that is the only or best way to achieve the desired results. Unlike coordination which is steered by a dominant and preeminent figure, all the single entities and individuals involved in cooperation play a key role.

At the International Level, the United Nations

In the field of international relations, cooperation and coordination have significantly grown in importance over the last few decades. This has occurred due to globalizing tendencies combined with the realization that multilateral and multi-layered interventions are more effective and often indispensable to address shared problems and endorse common opportunities. In this regard, the United Nations and what it represents – a forum for multilateralism for a better world order – is one of the most astonishing examples of how cooperation and coordination can be conceived and leveraged on a larger scale.[4]

The idea of cooperation is embedded in the Preamble of the Charter of the United Nations, its constitutive instrument, where it is stated that the signato-

ries of the treaty "have resolved to combine our efforts to accomplish these aims" including "to unite our strength to maintain international peace and security."[5] It is also explicitly recognized throughout several Chapters, for instance in Chapter Five, where the General Assembly is entrusted with considering and making recommendations on the general principles of cooperation in the maintenance of international peace and security, and also to initiate studies and make recommendations to promote international political cooperation and cooperation in a wide range of fields including economic, social, etc.[6]

The wording of the Preamble of the UN Charter also suggests that the UN serves the additional purpose of coordination. Specifically, this international entity is conceived as the center for harmonizing the actions of all signatories to attain the common ends pursued.[7] To fulfil this purpose of coordination, the UN System Chief Executive Board for Coordination was created, which is the longest-standing and highest-level coordination mechanism of the UN system,[8] as well as other specific bodies tasked (among other things) with coordinating within their fields. This includes the United Nations Peacebuilding Commission, which has convening and coordinating powers in relation to the UN peacebuilding efforts.[9]

Coordination and Cooperation in Peacebuilding

The Call for Change

Peacebuilding is based on the idea that the management and advancement of peace and security cannot be limited to interventions once conflicts have already escalated. To promote meaningful changes and achieve lasting solutions, the level of intervention and commitment needs to be deeper and more strategic. The ultimate goal of peacebuilding is not simply to achieve peace and security, but rather to create the necessary conditions that will substantially reduce the risk of conflict by managing the root causes that lead to violent strife and to present alternatives for handling difficult situations.

This reasoning is sophisticated, though nothing new. If we consider the United Nations, for example, the commitment to ensure substantial global peace and security was already conceived in 1945 and incorporated in the Charter of the United Nations.[10] There, the idea that modern society appreciated the lessons of the past and was committed to engage in more sustainable approaches and solutions to ensure a better future for the generations to come was already spelled out in its Preamble.[11] However, elaborating and digesting this reasoning takes time. Thus, the shift in focus from rigorous peacekeeping to peacebuilding and conflict resolution has taken many years to develop and has only been pursued in more recent years. [12]

Furthermore, in 2015 an advisory group of experts designated by the UN Secretary-General prepared and presented a report at the request of the Presidents of the General Assembly and the Security Council where they introduced and called for a "comprehensive approach of sustaining peace" specifically for the United Nations and highlighted how the "evidence strongly suggests that

undue haste and a narrow focus on cessation of hostilities rather than addressing root causes are significant factors in relapse (into violence)."[13] Since then, steps have been taken within and outside the UN system with regard to the thinking on how we pursue peacebuilding and how this field needs to work alongside others such as development and humanitarian in order to succeed. Thus, in 2016 the UN and the World Bank published a report where together they emphasized the "benefit of preventive action" and called for the need for strategies that are inclusive, sustainable, targeted, and collective efforts.[14] Then, most recently, the EU office for the coordination of humanitarian affairs (ECHO) published the 2021 strategic plan where it is clearly recognized how humanitarian action alone is not enough and that to achieve more long-term solutions to crises, it is indispensable to seek and invest in more work with (among others) peace actors.[15]

A Long-term and Comprehensive Approach

The idea of an inclusive approach to peace is becoming predominant among the peacebuilding community. Practitioners, policymakers, and academics are increasingly interested in and responsive to programs that take the value of involving a wider possible array of perspectives, interests, and positions into serious consideration. This has also been confirmed by comparative studies that show how the participation of a broad range of actors in peace processes effectively contributes to the prevention of violence and armed conflicts.[16] Thus, there is the pledge to integrate in a more systematic and sustainable way the perspectives of women and girls into peace and security affairs,[17] alongside the intention to increase the representation of indigenous people, geographical groups, youth, civil societies, etc.[18] Nevertheless, the effectiveness of inclusion and the modalities in which it should be pursued remain strictly dependent on the specifics of each context.[19]

Another interesting and powerful message is that of local ownership. Working on building peace does not automatically imply that long-term results will be achieved. This is especially true in contexts where there are (presumably positive) interferences from actors that are not actual parties to the strife. That is, when a foreign entity – such as the UN, just to name one – gets involved in order to aid the process of peacebuilding, such contribution can be of great value but can also ultimately become disruptive if the results are not perceived as something the locals can claim. Thus, those directly affected by and involved in the conflict need to join the process, and it would not be enough to just make them *feel* like they contributed. Once the idea that each step towards peace results from individual efforts becomes commonplace among the local community, the idea of worthiness is instilled, and that leads to genuine and positive feelings of protectiveness towards the results achieved.[20]

Yet, these values of inclusion and ownership need to be supported by the idea of sustainability. Thus, it is not enough to seek overarching and personal efforts; they need to be translated into real actions capable of upholding the results over time. In other words, it is not enough to stage inclusion and owner-

ship just to satisfy a mere exercise of *ticking boxes.* Rather, all relevant efforts need to be carried out in a sincere way with the goal of making the most positive and enduring impact. Sustainability, thus interpreted, becomes the benchmark to measure effectiveness.

The Case of Libya

An interesting case is the peacebuilding process of Libya which has been drawing attention due to some promising results which have recently been achieved thanks in part to the overarching and determined intervention of the United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL). Specifically, a new interim government voted by the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum following its convening in Switzerland by UNSMIL at the beginning of February 2021 was sworn in in Tobruk in March 2021.[21] This new temporary unified executive authority is now expected to lead the country to the national elections scheduled for December 24, 2021, and to uphold the strategy outlined in the Roadmap for the transitional period.[22] Among some of the key goals is that of withdrawing foreign forces and foreign interference from Libya while investing in reconciliation efforts to ensure security, stability, and peace in the country.

However, this is the latest outcome of a rather sad story that has seen Libya become the stage of protracted strife over the last ten years. In short, a first civil war erupted in the country in 2011, which prompted the UN Security Council to decide through Resolution 2009 (2011) to establish UNSMIL, an integrated special political mission belonging to the UN peacebuilding efforts mandated to support the country's post-conflict efforts.[23] Then, a second civil war erupted in the country in 2014, which lasted until October 2020, when a ceasefire agreement was signed.[24] Over the course of both of these wars, UNSMIL played a pivotal supporting role pursuant to UN Resolution 2323 (2016), by which the Security Council mandated UNSMIL to exercise mediation and good offices in support of the Libyan political agreement's implementation; the consolidation of governance, security and economic arrangements of the Government of National Accord and subsequent phases of the Libyan transition process.[25]

Overall, UNSMIL has played its mediation role in full accordance with the principles of national ownership. This has been recurrently emphasized by the former Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Libya, Stephanie Williams, who has repeatedly recalled how the Libyans have been building "a truly Libyan-owned solution" which the international community intends to "validate and reinforce."[26] Moreover, in reference to the latest achievements mentioned above, Williams has emphasized the commitment of the new executive body to look beyond the usual suspects and instead pursue a "unity government that reflects the richness and diversity of Libya's population, its cultural components (youth, women, etc.) and the geographic diversity."[27]

Prospects for Change

The Fruitful Recent Efforts of Coordination and Cooperation by UNSMIL

UNSMIL has been the channel that has facilitated a route out of a terrible situation in Libya and allowed for the creation of the conditions to move forward into peace talks and greater security prospects for the country. Thus, UNSMIL has embodied the original idea of a UN capable of supporting people and states in their quest for peace, stability, prosperity, and unity, while it has taken the lead in the organization and guidance to foster concrete and positive outcomes. To reach these results, UNSMIL has taken cooperation and coordination efforts into its own hands. For the former, UNSMIL has relentlessly worked to ensure the involvement of all stakeholders in the process – from representatives from different parts of the country to women and young people – and has supported the plan of deploying UN monitoring teams to Libya to assist with the monitoring and verification of the ceasefire.[28] Regarding the latter, UNSMIL has managed the international community, guided regional efforts, relaunched the process by facilitating agreement every time there has been a deadlock, and solicited local and relevant actors in such a way as to make the peace process real and dynamic.[29]

Notably, UNSMIL has carried out all these tasks as a *support* mission, thus attributing all the results exclusively to the Libyan people.[30] The work done by the Mission since at least 2017 when Ghassan Salamé was appointed Special Representative in Libya and then followed in 2020 by his number two Stephanie Williams, has been straightforward with them stepping away from the constant spotlight, generally highly coveted by the international community, to direct the attention toward those directly affected by and involved in the conflict.[31] Further, by listening to everyone, including those who usually play a more marginal role in matters of peace and security, such as women and civil societies, they have shown how the UN and the elites are not the sole and undisputed guardians of peacebuilding processes; rather, promising and satisfactory results can be achieved only through the involvement of a wider and more representative audience. Lastly, their commitment to conceive and pursue a multi-binary approach between the military, political, financial, and international spheres and to fuel relevant conversation in the backstage have been the key elements that prevented the dialogue and possibly the interest of many from dying.[32]

Of course, there have been frustrations and criticisms along the way even for the leaders of UNSMIL,[33] but what important process would be without them. Also, the transition process in Libya is not yet completed, and there is still a lot of work that needs to be done before this chapter can be considered successfully closed. The elections in Libya are still months away, a wide range of opposing interests remain present and in tension with each other, and there is certainly still a chance that feelings of division and resentment resurface as uncontrollable waves across the country. Additionally, there is the arduous task of ensuring that all good results achieved thus far, as well as those to come, endure. Yet, the overall feedback is positive for the moment, and the system con-

ceived by the former Special Representatives of the Secretary-General and Heads of UNSMIL have now set an important precedent in the peacebuilding field. Indeed, the case of Libya has shown the effort required to make a peace-building endeavor worthwhile and has demonstrated how effective coopera-tion and coordination in the peace and security fields are a matter of choice rather than an automatism that is already in place.

Inadequate Coordination and Resistance to Cooperation

The model presented by the UNSMIL led first by Ghassan Salamé and then by Stephanie Williams is not the norm in the field of peacebuilding. On the con-trary, it seems to be more of an exception. Of course, there are incredible actors who work tirelessly and commit to investing in fruitful partnerships and reliable, well-organized, and functioning systems. However, their efforts and the perfor-mance of their strong systems are often overshadowed by examples of un-healthy cooperation and poor coordination, which are generally followed by un-satisfying outcomes.[34]

The challenges to coordination are those of cost, time, and leadership. Due to the very nature of the peacebuilding field, it is unclear how long a process will be needed and whether it can be maintained throughout. This, in turn, leads to difficulties in planning, developing long-term strategies and objectives, and managing the mobilization of resources. As for leadership, the difficulties are universal. In fact, it is generally difficult to find individuals or entities who have the competence, stamina, and foresight to synchronize the efforts of countless units effectively and harmoniously. Also, there is the significant factor of politi-cization which can substantially jeopardize the genuine efforts of peacebuilding leaders who are then unable to move the conversation beyond old narratives and foster synergy among everyone who is involved or has an interest in the matter.

The issues with cooperation in the peacebuilding field is more alarming as it is deeply rooted in the behavior of individual actors. Unfortunately, the reality is that there is a certain level of resistance to outside intervention, especially when different actors view each other as difficult or unpleasant partners or merely as competitors for the same resources. Some are unable to sacrifice their own interests and desire for prestige for the sake of the greater good and categorically reject the inputs of others and choose to work almost exclusively with the most convenient parties.[35] Then there are actors who categorically re-fuse external support because they are firmly convinced to be the only ones who can truly appreciate the challenges brought by war.

The Need for Better Cooperation and the Hope for More Effective Coordina-tion

Ultimately, any sustainable difference in peacebuilding is based on the effort and commitment of each individual actor involved. How each person decides to contribute and how long they are willing to do so makes the difference between a story of success and one of failure.[36] It is unreasonable to think that an actor

or an entity can make a difference on its own by operating in a vacuum or by only engaging within a close circle. Instead, a network of projects must be created that draw in all the necessary parties and create the right conditions to allow for progress in peace and security. Thus, there is an urgent need to initiate proper cooperation in the peacebuilding field. Committing to contribute experience and expertise is not sufficient if that is not combined with the recognition of the value brought in by others. In this sense, the ability to see the value of working with others means enhanced foresight. The peace paradigm offers opportunities for global stability and security, and the cost of conflicts (either direct or indirect and in terms of both human and economic suffering) must urge anyone seriously working in this field to seek collaboration.[37]

With regard to coordination, it is indisputable that the ineffective arrangement of resources is an expensive choice that will have an impact on peacebuilding efforts. Implementing a flexible and harmonious strategy is a sensible choice that can truly improve missions and lead to substantial changes. There are already structures like the United Nations Peacebuilding Commission that can promote improvements in this regard. The real question is then whether there are other individuals or entities who can take the initiative on this matter and how long can we afford to wait until all activities are oriented in one direction. In any case, in the short term, the prospect of more work on the coordination side can be labelled as desirable provided that existing gaps are filled by resources and capabilities pooled together through proper cooperation.

One thing that would be beneficial in building a more holistic and systematic approach and that could contribute to better cooperation and more effective coordination in peacebuilding is comparative knowledge. Currently, we lack the overarching understanding of what works and what not in the pursuit of peace and security efforts,[38] and that is prompting us to repeat similar behaviors and not to invest in better peacebuilding initiatives. There are exemplary cases like UNSMIL, which provide us with evidence-based data that, if collected and studied properly, could help us learn and discriminate between good and bad practices. However, the will and effort for change remain the essential elements that will open us to new strategies for improvement at the global, regional, and local levels. Though promising examples such as that of Libya do not have the immediate power to establish a new and better trend in the management of peacebuilding efforts *per se*, they certainly give us the opportunity to engage in long-term reflections on how we can pursue more collaboration and cooperation in peacebuilding, at least within the UN mission system.

Conclusion

In this article, the author examines the discussion of how adequate cooperation and coordination can contribute to overcoming the stalemates created by conflicts. With a focus on the United Nations Support Mission in Libya, the author examines some of the cooperation and coordination strategies pursued and points out how these have led to promising results. Looking forward, it is possible to foresee prospects of positive and concrete changes in the way we carry

out peacebuilding including through the endorsement of fruitful relationships and healthy systems.

In the author's opinion, investing in cooperation and coordination today is a prerogative for the positive development of the peacebuilding field of the future. Specifically, fundamental changes are needed in the way cooperation is conducted while strengthening coordination systems would be desirable though it can be sustained in the short term. Thus, as a first step, we need to move away from the unhealthy and stubborn tendency of thinking that our actions are carried out in a vacuum and that we can continually ignore the pivotal role played by others. We are all urged to recognize that we live in a complex world where we are all at risk of being outpaced if we do not make the switch toward greater and better cooperation. As soon as this alienating attitude begins to change, we can aspire to build integral and harmonious systems. By then, the author hopes that there will be other factors that can also contribute to the prompt enhancement of coordination, including the proper investment in studying, analyzing, and understanding how peacebuilding mechanisms and strategies are structured and perform.

Ultimately, coordination and cooperation are choices that need to be actively endorsed by those operating in the peacebuilding field. And why wouldn't we do it? Anyone seriously involved in the peace and security fields should feel the urge to see better and more productive outcomes resulting from their own work and that of their entities of affiliation. Any instruments, strategies, and processes that can help us improve the effectiveness of our actions deserves to be taken into consideration, even if these are options that at this moment can only fill the existing gaps.

Acknowledgements

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