Learning to Learn? UN Peacebuilding and the Challenges of Building a Learning Organization

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While comprehensive studies on UN peacebuilding assert that 'learning has not . . . been one of the strengths of the United Nations' (Chesterman 2004, p.256), research so far has largely ignored the UN's institutional infrastructure for learning. This essay seeks to contribute to closing this gap by surveying the evolution of the UN's learning infrastructure from the early 1990s to the present. Despite some progress in recent years, the lack of resources, coordination and political will means that turning the UN bureaucracy into a learning organization is unfinished business at best. Rather than focusing all attention on the new Peacebuilding Commission, policymakers and researchers alike should invest additional resources in analysing and strengthening the learning capacity of the UN peacebuilding apparatus.

Keywords   organizational learning; United Nations; statebuilding; peacebuilding

Introduction

> The United Nations has entered a domain of military activity – a vaguely defined no-man's land lying somewhere between traditional peacekeeping and enforcement – for which it lacks any traditional guiding operational concept. (Ruggie 1993, p. 26)

Writing in 1993, John Ruggie warned of the UN's 'doctrinal void' as it was embarking on an enormous expansion of its multidimensional peacebuilding activities. More than a decade later, it has become common practice for the UN to establish multidimensional peacebuilding operations in contexts as varied as Afghanistan and Kosovo, Sierra Leone and East Timor, Liberia and the DR Congo or Sudan. As the name suggests, however, multidimensional peacebuilding is much more than just a new 'domain of military activity'. It goes well beyond the military elements and involves tasks in all three areas of security, governance and welfare (economic reconstruction). In many ways, multidimensional peacebuilding is equivalent to statebuilding – a term that is politically much less accepted among many UN member states.[1]

The evolution of UN doctrine and guidance has hardly kept up with the tremendous growth both in the number and depth of UN peacebuilding missions. This expansion has multiplied the challenges to doctrine and practice in areas as diverse as elections assistance, military, police and judicial reform, disarmament, economic reconstruction and coordination of a vastly disparate set of actors internationally as well as on the ground.

Part and parcel of the diagnosis of a 'doctrinal void' is the question to what extent the UN has institutional mechanisms to learn from past experience and mainstream these lessons into future missions. One of the most comprehensive studies of UN peacebuilding operations to date asserts that 'learning has not … been one of the strengths of the United Nations' (Chesterman 2004, p.256). Another key comparative study emphasizes that '"best practices" and "lessons learned" can and should be better distilled from past experiences, and efforts made to disseminate this knowledge within relevant organizations' (Caplan 2005, p.178). At the same time, we still lack in-depth studies on how the UN's institutional infrastructure for organizational learning has evolved. This essay seeks to contribute to filling this gap by providing an account of the development of the infrastructure of learning from the early 1990s to 2005.

We define organizational learning as 'a process of cognitive change through the questioning of the means and/or ends of addressing problems. The process manifests itself in the development and implementation of new rules and routines guiding the organization's actions' (Benner, Binder and Rotmann 2007, p.41).[2] In short, a learning organization revises doctrine and guidelines based on experience and new knowledge. Our analysis in this essay focuses on the 'infrastructure of learning', not on concrete learning processes.

The infrastructure of learning comprises functional units and institutional mechanisms within the peacebuilding bureaucracy tasked to promote learning, e.g. the collection of lessons and best practices and their mainstreaming into future operations. A comprehensive analysis of the infrastructure of learning needs to take into account factors such as leadership, incentive structures and skill sets of staff members as well as the knowledge management practices and tools available.[3] The peacebuilding bureaucracy refers to the parts of the Secretariat that are regularly and officially tasked with managing peacebuilding operations.

This essay concentrates on the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO) and only makes cursory references to the UN Department of Political Affairs (DPA). Further research needs to shed light on the learning infrastructure in the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), the UN Development Programme (UNDP), the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the World Bank, among others. Further research is also called for with regard to inter-agency learning efforts as well as the work of external consultants and studies by external organizations close to the UN peacebuilding apparatus.

The following account is based on public UN documents and a series of interviews with UN officials and close observers, conducted in April 2006 as part

of a larger study on organizational learning in the UN peacebuilding apparatus (Benner, Binder and Rotmann 2007). The essay proceeds in five steps: taking the initial appearance of the term 'post-conflict peacebuilding' in UN Secretary-General Boutros-Ghali's *Agenda for Peace* (1992) as a starting point, the first section recounts the development of the Secretariat's capacity for organizational learning in the first half of the 1990s. After the late recognition of a need for organizational learning, a very small 'Lessons Learned Unit' was established at the Department of Peacekeeping Operations in 1995. Despite a number of additional initiatives during the following years, detailed in the second section, real progress was only made after the Brahimi Report (United Nations 2000). The third section summarizes its recommendations on learning and their subsequent (non-) implementation. A fourth section discusses the most recent developments, following the 2005 World Summit. The concluding section offers an outlook on the unfinished business of turning the UN into a learning organization.

The Early 1990s: The Slow Recognition of the UN's Learning Needs

When Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali submitted his *Agenda for Peace* to heads of state in June 1992, his prime concern was with policy, not management. He forcefully advocated a larger role for the United Nations in conflict prevention, peace-making, and 'post-conflict peacebuilding'. However, with the exception of the need for additional early warning and preventive diplomacy capabilities, Boutros-Ghali did not spell out any consequences of such an expanded role for the UN bureaucracy. Member states agreed to provide the requested resources for early warning diplomacy and therefore established the Department of Political Affairs (DPA). Having created the Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO) just four months earlier, with the British diplomat Marrack Goulding as its first head, the Secretary-General did not seek any further changes in this area. 'The established principles and practices of peacekeeping', he wrote confidently, 'have responded flexibly to new demands of recent years' (Boutros-Ghali 1992, para.50).

That belief in adaptation by 'muddling through' proved unsuccessful. Less than a year later, in early 1993, the outgoing Under-Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations, Marrack Goulding, voiced concerns that 'the departments concerned . . . need to be strengthened if they are to have the planning and command and control capability to support operations on the scale currently deployed' (1993, p.470). When Kofi Annan took over from Goulding as head of DPKO in March 1993, the explosion of demand for peacekeeping had begun to take a toll on the Secretariat. In the previous year alone, there had been a fivefold increase in troops and a twofold increase in missions. Eventually, this led Secretary-General Boutros-Ghali to give more attention to pressing management issues. In his June 1993 implementation report on the *Agenda for Peace* Boutros-Ghali called for an in-depth investigation of the start-up phase of peacekeeping operations. The subsequent independent investigation became the driving force

for establishing the first embryonic elements of a learning infrastructure within DPKO. The internal report from the Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) provided a wake-up call by stating that 'the United Nations did not have in place, as of the end of 1993, proper arrangements for institutional memory [or] to learn from recent experience in peacekeeping' (UN Secretary-General 1995, para.16).

In March 1994, the Mission Planning Service in DPKO began to test a new 'lessons learned mechanism' aimed at the systematic collection of end-of-mission assessments by senior mission staff (UN Secretary-General 1995, para.17).[4] The Secretariat stepped up its call for more resources over the course of the year. In doing so, it took advantage of the explicit show of support for the investigation's progress report from both the General Assembly (1994) and the Special Committee on Peacekeeping Operations (1994, para.73). The latter, in particular, strongly supported better analysis and planning capabilities within DPKO. In a November 1994 report on the command and control of peacekeeping operations to the Special Committee, Boutros-Ghali (1994, para.15–16) pushed for budget increases to fund a broad range of planning and analysis tasks at DPKO, including a Lessons Learned Unit.

In 1995, as the final report of the independent evaluation mandated in 1993 was issued, additional resources were finally forthcoming (Boutros-Ghali 1995, UN Secretary-General 1995). In April 1995, DPKO's Lessons Learned Unit was established as part of the Planning Division, Office of Planning and Support, with only two positions: a head of unit and one research assistant. Although small and understaffed, the unit was the first of its kind in the UN's peacebuilding bureaucracy.

The establishment of the unit was too late to prevent a number of failures in the planning and implementation of peace operations in the mid-1990s. The difficulties with the implementation of the International Police Task Force (IPTF) at the heart of the UN Mission to Bosnia and Herzegovina (UNMIBH) are key examples of the management problems found in many UN peace operations during this period. When, in autumn of 1995, the parties to the Dayton peace negotiations accorded the United Nations the portfolio of monitoring and assisting the Bosnian police forces, there were plenty of lessons from earlier civilian police missions to consider. Rather than modelling the IPTF's strategy on the successful legacy of Namibia (UNTAG, 1989–90) or learning from the mistakes made in Cambodia (UNTAC, 1992–93), the UN largely repeated the latter mission's poor planning, slow deployment, recruitment of under-qualified staff during the initial phase, lack of resources and poor coordination (Chappell and Evans 1999, pp.193–6, Dziedzic and Bair 1998).

The UN's pre-deployment assessment mission to Bosnia did not include a single police officer who could have supplied the professional experience necessary for a thorough needs assessment. The force structure planned at headquarters resulted from a simple mirroring of Bosnian police deployment at a rule-of-thumb ratio of one monitor per 30 police, to be distributed proportionally throughout the country – only to be instantly revised by the incoming first police commissioner (Dziedzic and Bair 1998, p.9). Similarly, the planning process

suggests further negligence in applying lessons from the regularly encountered 'deployment gap' from previous missions. For example, in ensuring a handover of existing equipment from the civilian police component of the outgoing UN Protection Force (UNPROFOR) to the new mission, it took UNMIBH and the IPTF over six months of time-consuming procedures on the ground to get even basic logistical requirements in order. Not only had all essential equipment such as radios and vehicles been given to NATO's Implementation Force (IFOR), but also no arrangements for the medical care of UNMIBH personnel had been made beyond emergency medical evacuation. For several months, IPTF had to secure medical treatment for its staff through negotiations with individual IFOR contingents (Dziedzic and Bair 1998, pp.8–11, 24).

   While many field missions in the 1990s were confronted with genuinely new tasks for which there were no precedents, this was not the case with policing. The same problems that plagued the Bosnia mission had been encountered by the previous civilian police missions to Namibia and Cambodia. Not surprisingly, the brand-new Lessons Learned Unit at DPKO did not have a discernible impact on learning in this case. Having been officially established only six months before mission planning for Bosnia began and consisting of just two core staff, the unit had rather been struggling to become operational at all. In fact, it was only through substantive voluntary contributions by the Ford Foundation and the governments of Canada, Germany, Norway and Sweden that the Lessons Learned Unit was able to produce some output. It issued a single report in 1995 (evaluating the recently completed UNOSOM II operation in Somalia) and a total of four others in 1996: two end-of-mission evaluations on UNAMIR in Rwanda and UNMIH in Haiti, one general study of 'multidisciplinary peacekeeping', and one on the implementation of lessons learned.

The Late 1990s: Stalemate in the Battle for Resources

Following the high-profile failures of the UN in Somalia, Rwanda and Srebrenica, demand for UN operations began to fall and prompted a period of self-doubt and soul-searching. Developing countries pushed through a decision to send home all military personnel that (for the most part Western) governments had provided to DPKO free of charge to offset staffing shortages. In this context, there was not much progress to be made for the learning infrastructure.

   From its inception in 1995 until about 2001, the department's Lessons Learned Unit was for the most part sustained by voluntary contributions from charitable foundations and individual member state governments. Up to 1997, for example, a trust fund provided up to four additional posts as well as other resources to the unit. As Kofi Annan took office as Secretary-General in 1997, donors indicated they would not foot the bill indefinitely for what the Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) had, in 1995, called a core task of the strategic management of peace operations. As part of a larger package of funding requests, the Secretary-General asked for the replacement of the four donor-funded posts with three

posts from the peacekeeping budget. In July 1997, despite Annan's (1997, para.118) explicit call to fund DPKO at a level 'that reflects the Department's real personnel requirements', member states denied most of his requests but encouraged resubmission of a budget proposal specifically for the Lessons Learned Unit. The Secretary-General did just that, only to get permission to redeploy up to three existing staff to the unit but not to create any new posts.

By March 1998, two of the three authorized posts for the Lessons Learned Unit had been redeployed within DPKO from the Mission Planning Service, leaving the unit with a total of four regular staff, plus changing resources from external donors. In trying to elevate their standing, both the Lessons Learned and the equally under-funded Policy and Analysis Unit were reassigned from the Office of Mission Support to the Office of the Under-Secretary-General. Subsequently, the two units were merged to form the Policy Analysis and Lessons Learned Unit. By 1999, most of the unit's 17 posts continued to be funded by donors and many of them were not actually filled.

Not surprisingly, given the low level of support, the unit continued struggling to fulfil its mission. Based on official UN records, a maximum of two full lessons-learned studies or reports of the Secretary-General on peacekeeping issues were completed each year between 1997 and 2000. In addition, the unit became increasingly drawn into the day-to-day business of servicing the intergovern-mental committees. Yet its failure to live up to its real mandate did not go unnoticed. Throughout 1999 and 2000, the Special Committee on Peacekeeping Operations (2000, para.42) and external observers alike criticized DPKO for its failure to better incorporate past 'experiences . . . into peacekeeping policy and planning than has been the case to date'. The committee observed that the unit had failed to 'develop guidelines and standard operating procedures, as well as [to promote] the sharing of best practices among missions' (ibid., para.43).

While the efforts to build up a learning infrastructure at DPKO stalled in the late 1990s, the Department of Political Affairs also made very slow progress on this front despite the growth in responsibilities attributed to it by Annan's 1997 programme of reform. Alongside a push for better funding of its conflict prevention functions, DPA undertook a number of efforts to strengthen strategic planning and coordination. In 1998, under the tenure of Kieran Prendergast, the DPA established a Policy Planning Unit along with a Conflict Prevention Team, both of which were to provide policy guidance on preventive action (UN Secretary-General 2001a, para.73). Until today however, it has not been able to set up a lessons learned capacity even for its core business, let alone for broader issues of peacebuilding.[5]

Also in 1998, DPA made plans for a small Peacebuilding Unit tasked to 'assist mission planning and support for peacekeeping operations, peacebuilding support offices, special political missions and peacemaking/diplomatic activities. It would also build and maintain a peacebuilding information system and establish contacts for the department with academic institutions and research centers' (Durch *et al*. 2003, p.57). The unit, which was guided by the definition of peacebuilding as preventive diplomacy prevalent at the time, suffered much the

same fate as DPKO's Lessons Learned Unit: after being denied regular funding in 1999, the idea remained dormant until the Brahimi Report reanimated the project in 2000. To improve coordination at the inter-departmental level, Kofi Annan's reforms introduced an Executive Committee for Peace and Security (ECPS) including all Under-Secretaries-General and some of the Assistant-Secretaries-General working on issues of peace and security, chaired by the head of DPA. Without any stable funding for even a small secretariat and hamstrung by inter-departmental feuding, the Secretary-General (2001b, para.298) found the ECPS, four years later, still 'not living up to its full potential'.

Just how limited interdepartmental collaboration on peacebuilding was despite these efforts is amply illustrated by the parallel start-up of two DPKO-run multidimensional operations in 1999, the ones in Sierra Leone (United Nations Assistance Mission to Sierra Leone, UNAMSIL) and East Timor (United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor, UNTAET). Both were following an earlier political presence of UN personnel on the ground, led by the Department of Political Affairs (DPA), but due to interdepartmental feuding between DPKO and DPA failed to capitalize on the experience and local knowledge accumulated.

The mission to Sierra Leone entered the UN's institutional memory as a mission that started with one of the organization's major humiliations – the disarmament and capture of over 500 military personnel as hostages by the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) in May 2000. In its early phase, the mission 'nearly imploded under fire as a result of poor planning, under-equipped and ill-trained military personnel, inadequate communication, weak command and control . . . and determined local spoilers' (Malone and Thakur 2001, p.11). As a reaction, the secretariat dispatched an internal fact-finding and evaluation mission led by the Assistant-Secretary-General for Mission Support, Manfred Eisele, to assess UNAMSIL's organizational structure and effectiveness. The Eisele Mission revealed that, mirroring the departmental divisions at headquarters, adequate information flow even within the mission was – inter alia – inhibited by a lack of internal coordination and cooperation, in particular between the security and humanitarian components.

The transitional administration mission to East Timor also demonstrated how bureaucratic infighting can hinder inter-mission learning between successive UN operations. The clash over whether DPA or DPKO had the lead on East Timor had serious consequences for the mission's learning record and effectiveness. DPA had been the lead agency for UNTAET's predecessor, the United Nations Mission in East Timor (UNAMET), which was tasked with conducting a popular consultation in August 1999 in order to determine whether the people of East Timor would accept independence from Indonesia. Over the course of UNAMET, according to a number of outside observers, DPA developed remarkable local expertise. That turned DPA into the 'the custodian of the Secretariat's knowledge about East Timor, both at headquarters and in the field' (Suhrke 2001, p.6). Consequently, DPA assumed that it would also head the successor mission, UNTAET. Its claim to leadership, based on local expertise, clashed with DPKO's counterclaim, based

on its functional expertise with the security angle of peacebuilding. As the situation deteriorated into full-scale violence, the military component assumed greater importance. The Secretary General settled the dispute by giving DPKO the lead but determined that the planning team should draw personnel from both departments. In practice, DPKO's unwillingness to cooperate with DPA aggravated the knowledge deficit that is otherwise common to all peacebuilding operations (Harland 2005, p.3).[6]

> The Brahimi Report and Beyond: Learning at the Centre of Management Reforms in Peacebuilding
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> The work of DPKO's existing Lessons Learned Unit does not seem to have had a great deal of impact on peace operations practice, and the compilation of lessons learned seems to occur mostly after a mission has ended. (United Nations 2000, para.229)
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> Under the current practices there is no process for elevating certain practices to 'best practices' and subsequently incorporating them both in the field and at headquarters. (Dahrendorf 2003, para.viii)

Following years of stagnation in the number of peacebuilding operations and decline in field personnel and DPKO support staff alike, a new and rapid surge in demand for UN peace operations began in June 1999. Quite unexpectedly, member states called for some of the largest and most ambitious missions to be deployed to Kosovo, East Timor, Sierra Leone and the Democratic Republic of the Congo – missions that were much more complex and intrusive than most of what the UN had been engaged in before. To avert a renewed overstretch of DPKO's support capacities and avoid repetition of the UN's mistakes in handling the situations in Rwanda 1994 and Srebrenica 1995, the Secretary-General convened a high-level panel to suggest improvements to the management of UN peace operations. The panel produced what became known as the 'Brahimi Report', named after the panel's chairman, former Algerian foreign minister and UN Under-Secretary-General Lakhdar Brahimi.

On a conceptual level, the report officially broadened the notion of peacebuilding to bring it closer to the realities of post-conflict statebuilding: 'to reassemble the foundations of peace and provide the tools for building on those foundations something that is more than just the absence of war' (United Nations 2000, para.13). The subsequent list of tasks is both comprehensive and intrusive, from electoral assistance and human rights education up to the 'training and restructuring of local police, and judicial and penal reform' (United Nations 2000, para.13). Among the operational suggestions in the Brahimi Report were three initiatives to improve the learning infrastructure in the peacebuilding bureaucracy. These were:

1. a new 'strategic analysis' capacity at DPA for the assessment and evaluation of peacebuilding activities,

2. the introduction of 'Integrated Mission Task Forces' to oversee field operations, and
3. revitalizing DPKO's Policy Analysis and Lessons Learned Unit.

These three proposals encountered a similar fate as the panel's overall recommendations. They were only partly met with support from the member states. The eminence of the panellists and the strong support of the Secretary-General provided the necessary momentum to secure much-needed funding to implement at least key elements of the recommendations, including the creation of 191 new posts for DPKO (Durch *et al*. 2003. pp.3–5). But for the most part, its implementation history demonstrated 'that the doctrinal lessons of the Brahimi Report will only be learnt when reinforced by realities on the ground' (Johnstone, Tortolani and Gowan 2006, p.66). The three recommendations relating to the infrastructure of learning are a case in point: the first recommendation failed, the second was implemented with mixed success, and only the third has, after some time, led to considerable activity to promote organizational learning at DPKO.

The first relevant proposal, to build a new strategic analysis capacity, failed due to a mix of overreaching and bad communication. '[T]o strengthen the permanent capacity of the UN to develop peacebuilding strategies and to implement programs in support of those strategies', the Brahimi Report advocated that an ECPS Information and Strategic Analysis Secretariat (EISAS) be established to support the Executive Committee for Peace and Security (ECPS). The new body was to pull together a number of disparate policy and analysis units scattered throughout the secretariat, including the policy analysis part of DPKO's recently merged Policy Analysis and Lessons Learned Unit, its Situation Centre, and DPA's Policy Planning Unit. The plans for EISAS also included the creation of a new Peacebuilding Unit (PBU), a resurrection of the earlier attempt that had failed in 1998.

Facing instant opposition from member states who felt that too strong an early warning and 'intelligence' capacity of the United Nations might compromise their sovereignty (Chesterman 2006, p.154, UN ACABQ 2000, para.21), the Secretary-General pulled back and requested a much smaller version of EISAS and a separate Peacebuilding Unit to be established as part of DPA. In May 2002, the request was finally denied. According to well-placed observers, the PBU's failure is a collateral damage from the political storm that had broken out over the EISAS concept (Durch *et al*. 2003, pp.87–8).

As a second proposal relevant to the learning infrastructure, the Brahimi panel also proposed the establishment of Integrated Mission Task Forces (IMTFs) as a management tool to bring all actors relevant for the recently introduced 'integrated missions' together at the headquarters level. An IMTF would be assembled for every specific multidimensional peace operation to coordinate its planning and management at a relatively high level of seniority. Starting well ahead of a formal mandate of the Security Council and operating throughout the life cycle of its mission, the group would play the role of a crucial hub through

which all information and decisions would flow. Its breadth and decision-making authority would go a long way to improve the implementation of past lessons learned. Ideally, the IMTFs would also help to coordinate the collection of lessons learned during and at the end of missions.

After five years, the result is mixed at best. According to one recent study by Alberto Cutillo, IMTFs 'have been established on only a limited number of missions and they performed below expectations' (2006, p.20). In more detail, according to another assessment, they 'succeeded in resolving technical issues of day-to-day coordination and policy differences' but, 'there was still an overall incoherence in the international response mechanism' (Eide *et al*. 2005, p.12). In particular, observers point to a persistent lack of cohesiveness among the UN agencies, between the UN agencies and a number of regional organizations, and between these entities and some of the major powers involved in the process.

As an example, it is worth looking closely at the 'laboratory case' of the United Nations Assistance Mission to Afghanistan (UNAMA). Despite being confronted with its fair share of political difficulties on the ground, the mission faced a rather favourable context compared to other peace operations. Not only was there ample time for planning and preparation, but the mission attracted very well-qualified and experienced staff – starting with Lahkdar Brahimi himself at its helm – and resources from the key donors were readily available. Despite Brahimi's personal involvement and dedication to the reform agenda that bore his name and the high level of political support from the Security Council and donors, the actual record of implementing the lessons identified in the panel report can only be considered a mixed success.

The IMTF for Afghanistan, while starting early and with an inclusive number of units represented, had failed to live up to its designated role because it lacked substantial input into the political decisions made by senior mission leadership and rather became more of a legitimizing institution, contributing to improved acceptance of plans but not shaping them. Moreover, despite its deliberately inclusive composition at headquarters, frictions arose between central planning by the IMTF and the SRSG's office on the one hand and field leadership of the UN Country Team (UNCT) on the other (Dahrendorf *et al*. 2003).

Mirroring the planning and management feuds at headquarters, the funda-mental lesson on the longstanding problem of coordination in the field – how to deal with multiple reporting chains – was again not acted upon. In trying to bring together independent agency heads in the field without having formal power over their budgets, UNAMA's new approach of 'directive coordination' by the Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG) could not deliver the desired solution. No matter how circumscribed with diplomatic language, the goal of 'directive coordination' was to create a hierarchic relationship between the SRSG and the heads of agencies on the ground – a principle that had already been set forth in Kofi Annan's 1997 proposals for reform (Annan 1997, para.119). Unsurprisingly, in the absence of formal budgetary and disciplinary powers for the SRSG, the new concept was effectively obstructed by the agencies.

While the IMTF and coordination doctrines have been revised, refined and adapted for each new mission since UNAMA, a fundamental tension persists: while representatives from the political, humanitarian and development agencies on the ground feel that DPKO planners fail to adequately take their local experience and perspectives into account, DPKO staff complain that UN country teams often 'are unwilling to adapt to the new realities' (Eide *et al*. 2005, p.19). In proof of the lack of effective integration with processes of learning, a UN-commissioned study found that even in 2005 mission design in the cases of Liberia and Sudan reflected 'the inclinations and predilections of senior mission management, with little if any substantive reference to best practices, concepts of integration or modern management practices' (loc. cit.). They conclude that the IMTF process has been undermined by a lack of clear reporting lines and decision-making leverage, that it has not been sufficiently country focused, and that it had only provided a very loose form of integration (Durch *et al*. 2003, pp.47–50, Eide *et al*. 2005, p.23).

The third and most successful proposal of reform was the strengthening of the learning capacity within DPKO. This is partly due to the leadership demonstrated by DPKO head Jean-Marie Guéhenno. Following his appointment on 1 October 2000, Guéhenno quickly demonstrated his determination to 'professionalize' DPKO's organizational culture and made 'change management' one of his personal priorities (Guéhenno 2002).[7] Instead of following the Brahimi Panel's recommendation to move the Policy Analysis and Lessons Learned Unit into the Office of Operations – internally considered the most change-resistant part of DPKO[8] – he kept the unit as part of his immediate office. As member states finally provided new resources for the department in 2001, the unit was strengthened and renamed the Peacekeeping Best Practices Unit (PBPU).

However, despite the additional staff and funding, it took more than two years and several changes in personnel to improve the standing of the unit. In 2003, while one external study still complained about the lack of an effective learning capacity at the department (Dahrendorf 2003, para.viii), the appointment of David Harland as head of PBPU led to a turnaround. A career UN official who in 1999 had drafted the organization's damning report on the Srebrenica massacre, Harland could build on a broad range of previous assignments in various departments and in the Bosnia and East Timor operations (Porter 1999).

In 2004–06, in addition to the constant demands of servicing intergovernmental bodies on peacekeeping issues, the number and analytical depth of studies produced by the unit increased significantly. Projects that had been in the making since the late 1990s, like a review of the Mine Action Service, were finally completed in this period. On top of the regular end-of-mission assessments, an increasing number of studies looked into larger challenges such as coordination within and beyond the UN or specific tasks such as security sector reform. External consultants were commissioned for a significant part of these more general studies, feeding additional expertise into the peacebuilding bureaucracy. In 2006, a record number of 11 official reports were published by the, once-again, renamed Peacebuilding Best Practices *Section* (PBPS).

More significantly, Harland and Guéhenno came up with a comprehensive reform plan entitled Peace Operations 2010 that would finally put Guéhenno's agenda of professionalization back on track. Along with initatives to improve training and career incentives, organization, resources and partnerships with other organizations in the peacebuilding field, the systematic development of doctrine and knowledge management systems for peacekeeping became one of the cornerstones of this program. As part of its implementation, a full review of existing guidance on peace operations has been completed and first steps toward doctrine development have been taken in selected fields such as policing. Likewise, a plan to systematically collect end-of-assignment reports and other lessons learned was finally put into practice (Durch *et al*. 2003, p.41, Johnstone 2006, p.11).[9]

The 2005 World Summit, the Peacebuilding Commission and the Peacebuilding Support Office

In 2005, the High-Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change took up the need for an institutional home for the cross-cutting task of peacebuilding. The issue had featured prominently in the recommendations of two critical reviews of the UN's record in peacebuilding (Dahrendorf 2003, para.vi, Durch *et al*. 2003, p.102). Together with the proposal of an intergovernmental Peacebuilding Commission to coordinate sustained peacebuilding activities by the UN, a Peacebuilding Support Office (PBSO) became part of the Secretary-General's subsequent report 'In Larger Freedom' (Annan 2005). After the endorsement of heads of state at the 2005 World Summit, both bodies were mandated in December 2005.

According to its mandate, among the 'main purposes' of the Peacebuilding Commission are to 'advise on and propose integrated strategies for post-conflict peacebuilding and recovery' as well as to 'develop best practices' (UN Security Council 2005, para.2c). Without further elaboration of how this function is to be implemented, it will fall on the Support Office to 'gather and analyze information relating to … best practices with respect to cross-cutting peacebuilding issues' (ibid., para.23). After significant budgetary wrangling, the office was established in mid-2006 with 15 posts, most of which needed to be generated from existing resources, i.e. by transferring staff from elsewhere in the Secretariat. It remains to be seen how its learning role will fare in relation to its coordination and support tasks vis-à-vis the Peacebuilding Commission. During the first year of its existence, the PBSO did not manage to develop a profile related to 'lessons learned'.

The first Assistant-Secretary-General to head the PBSO, Carolyn MacAskie of Canada, was a senior choice for the position. While she brings experience from within headquarters, as well as from running the field operation in Burundi to the job (United Nations 2006), some hold that the head of the PBSO should rather have more experience with knowledge management. The fact that the current head of the PBSO has an inclination to get involved in current operational issues instead of focusing on knowledge work has only emboldened sceptics working to

sideline the PBSO. Ideally, the PBSO, with its institutional position as part of the Executive Office of the Secretary-General and not beholden to the internal logic of any one department involved in peacebuilding activities, is well suited to play a coordinating role in knowledge management.[10] Even as an intergovernmental working group chaired by the ambassador of El Salvador has taken up this challenge, it remains to be seen whether the Peacebuilding Commission and Support Office can fulfill this crucial role.

Despite the addition of a short note on learning to the eventual resolutions mandating the Peacebuilding Commission and PBSO, the matter of learning was neglected by the High-Level Panel and In Larger Freedom reports. Even worse, the state of DPKO's support infrastructure for peacebuilding operations was not mentioned either. Given the renewed surge in demand for new operations this is a crucial omission. The strain of ever increasing deployments has prompted questions whether the infrastructure and procedures available at DPKO are up to the number and size of operations requested by member states (Turner 2006).

The excitement and interest in the research and policy community sparked by the creation of the Peacebuilding Commission and the Peacebuilding Support Office should not lead us to turn attention away from the established players in UN peacebuilding. Much more so than the PBC and the PBSO, the development of a learning capacity in DPKO and associated departments will determine whether the UN peacebuilding apparatus will turn into a true learning organization.

One issue worth highlighting in this context is the relationship between headquarters and the field. In the field, the capacity for learning is still very much defined by the resources and personal leadership of mission management. DPKO is a field-driven department, and the influence of headquarters to promote the collection of lessons learned is limited or at least at the mercy of those responsible for running the mission on the ground. In theory, the recent introduction of Best Practice Officers or Focal Points[11] into all field missions is a positive development. In practice, all too often these officers are not sufficiently integrated into the work of the missions.

The fundamental problem of coordination adds to the obstacles. The rhetorical and doctrinal move toward 'integrated missions' under the leadership of SRSGs who would enjoy line authority not only over peacekeepers, police forces and other DPKO-supplied components but also over the field offices of other UN agencies involved, has not yet been implemented in an effective way. As a consequence, any inter-agency sharing of lessons learned or best practices depends on personal networks and initiative, while the official infrastructure of learning covers only the core tasks and components under DPKO's authority. Being far removed from their understaffed and overworked operations desks in New York, mission leadership usually enjoys an exceptional extent of freedom from interference by headquarters. A distinct organizational culture in field missions, based on different recruiting practices and the demands of the tasks themselves, often adds to the disjoint between headquarters and field. This makes the flow of knowledge between the field and headquarters, and between the different departments and agencies involved, difficult. A regular job rotation

between headquarters and the field would be an important antidote. However, many jobs in the field are short-term and there are simply not enough headquarter jobs to allow for such a systematic rotation.[12]

Toward a Learning Organization: Unfinished Business

Based on this first overview it is safe to conclude that turning the UN into a learning organization is unfinished business at best. As much as the first post-Cold War 'peacekeeping boom' in the early 1990s was likely a necessary factor to push organizational learning on to the agenda of senior officials, the dismal resource endowment of the Lessons Learned Unit at DPKO in its early years shows that it was by no means sufficient. The strain of the rapidly rising quantity and scope of missions prompted the much-needed recognition within the Secretariat that learning was indeed a core task in the strategic management of peace operations, as the OIOS later put it (UN Secretary-General 1995).

But it was not enough to overcome the opposition of member states to fund the corresponding increases in the budget. Only after the peacekeeping disasters of Rwanda and Srebrenica, a second and still ongoing wave of rising demand for peacebuilding since 1999 (see Figure 1) provided a second window of opportunity. Not least due to the leadership of senior officials, this second window has been used more effectively to mobilize some of the necessary resources and to implement the beginnings of what might become an effective infrastructure of learning at DPKO. Still, these efforts face formidable obstacles in the adverse incentive structures, permanent overstretch and bureaucratic politics that continue to shape the Secretariat as a whole. At the same time, only very few Secretariat officials have significant experience with the latest in evaluation, best practices gathering and knowledge management. To a significant degree, many regard the retrospective and introspective work of gathering lessons as much less appealing than an exclusive focus on prospective policy development – without the occasionally cumbersome look in the rear-view mirror.

We need further research to analyze the key determinants of the development of the UN's learning apparatus in greater detail. Our preliminary analysis shows that member state demand, internal recognition of learning needs, the development of the necessary skills and tools and progressive leadership by senior and mid-level managers are likely to be crucial factors influencing the development of a learning infrastructure. Its success in actually promoting learning for the organization as a whole, however, will also depend on the extent to which modern management practices are implemented. As a knowledge-based organization, the UN peacebuilding bureaucracy depends on strong incentives that impel managers and staff to contribute to the collective knowledge base and to help them overcome the entrenched departmentalism. For further research, a comparative perspective on the UN and other international bureaucracies such as those of the European Union, NATO, multilateral donors or even governments and
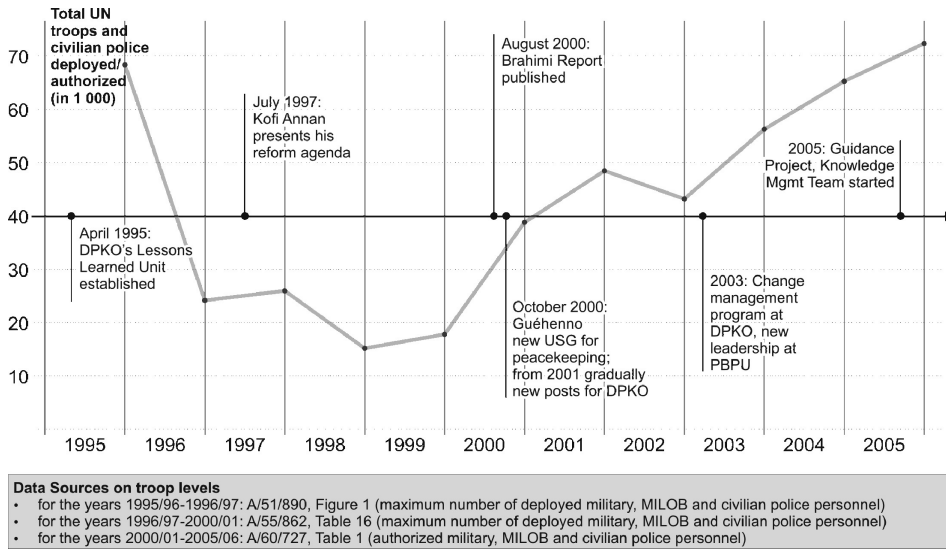
Figure 1 Demand for peace operations and the evolution of the learning infrastructure, 1995–2005

NGOs could shed further light on the determining factors in the evolution of learning infrastructures.

In the UN peacebuilding bureaucracy, it is often think tanks, NGOs and major UN-friendly governments that are to some extent bridging the learning gap. For example, various European governments such as those of Sweden and Germany as well as charitable foundations such as the Ford Foundation have been supporting DPKO's learning unit with considerable resources since its inception in 1995. The governments of Canada, Norway and the UK, among others, have funded numerous external studies and conferences in close connection to the UN secretariat and with the explicit purpose of compensating for the limited internal resources for such evaluation work. Another such example is the recently introduced 'Senior Mission Leaders Course' for senior leaders in peace operations, conducted by the German Zentrum für Internationale Friedenseinsätze (ZIF) together with DPKO and other member state agencies. Think-tanks close to the Secretariat, such as the International Peace Academy, the Center for International Cooperation at New York University, or the Henry L. Stimson Center have been instrumental in providing intellectual support for many of the advances made in recent years – not least in providing much of the research staff for the Brahimi and High-Level panels (Malone and Nitzschke 2004).

As indispensable as these forms of external assistance are for the UN to temporarily bridge some of the gaping holes in its learning infrastructure, they are not a sustainable solution to the challenge of making the UN peacebuilding bureaucracy a true learning organization. One crucial step toward this end would be to improve the collaboration between the largely self-contained learning units in DPKO, UNDP, OCHA, other agencies and even NGOs. As much as all of these organizations contribute their functional shares to the cross-cutting task of

peacebuilding they are also trying to learn and could benefit from more and better coordinated exchange than has been the case so far. There are a few hopeful signs in this direction. For example, an Inter-Agency Working Group on Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) jointly chaired by DPKO and UNDP was established in March 2005 and formally launched the new integrated standards on 18 December 2006. A similar process and working group is currently working on security sector reform.

Researchers and policymakers working on organizational learning need to take the concerns of sceptics seriously. Michael Barnett, for example, argues that the bread-and-butter business of an international bureaucracy such as the UN, namely determining and operating on universal and generalized rules, might not be possible in the case of peacebuilding because of the historic specificity of the individual cases. Barnett argues that bureaucratic universalism is dangerous: 'In order to be the rationalized, efficient actors that they present themselves to be, [UN peacebuilding officials] must flatten diversity and ignore contextual variations' (Barnett 2005, p.5). It should be clear that learning cannot and should not equal the search for a 'one-size-fits-all template'.

The context-specific nature of peacebuilding certainly requires strong local knowledge and shrewd and sober political analysis coupled with skilled leader-ship. This makes learning much more difficult than in other contexts (such as a number of environmental issues) where consensual knowledge based on general-ized scientific evidence is much more likely to be produced by 'epistemic communities' such as the scientists working on ozone depletion and climate change. However, the fact that peacebuilding is marked by increasing complexity and uncertainty coupled with a high degree of context specificity should not lead us away from pushing for the UN to become more of a learning organization. We hold that, ultimately, a learning organization that revises doctrines and guide-lines based on experience and relevant new knowledge is a worthy model. In the area of peacebuilding, the UN should experiment with new network-based forms of knowledge management by transferring and adapting the lessons from other organizations to the politicized bureaucracy that the UN is. In essence, the UN peacebuilding apparatus is a knowledge-based organization. However, all too often its operating procedures do not take this crucial fact into account. Only a thorough and sober analysis of the successes and (even more importantly) the failures, shortcomings and roadblocks can point to promising and realistic policy strategies for getting the UN peacebuilding apparatus closer to the model of a learning organization.

At the same time, it is important to recognize that an organization's ability to learn is not just about formal structures and resources for policy development. We can only fully understand an organization's learning capacity and record when taking into account factors such as leadership, staff skills, incentives and career development as well as the coordination and interaction with external experts and other players.[13] Therefore learning to learn is more than a question of technology. Ultimately, drawing and applying lessons is a craft. Finding the right balance between generalization and context-specificity is a constant challenge.

To some extent, training programmes can contribute to improving this craft. Investing in people is a crucial component of strengthening the overall learning capacity of the UN peacebuilding apparatus. Only when an able and dedicated staff, as well as the leadership within the Secretariat, other UN agencies and the Security Council (and the representatives of UN member states) have the incentive and capacity to learn, will the UN peacebuilding apparatus be able to handle the ever-growing demands and challenges in a sustainable manner.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1   For an overview of the evolving terminology see (Barnett *et al*. 2007). While there is still significant terminological proliferation, we take multidimensional peacebuilding (short: peacebuilding) missions to include both civilian and military personnel mandated to consolidate peace and prevent a recurrence of fighting in a country emerging from conflict. 'Peace operations' is a more general term comprising diplomatic peacemaking, traditional peacekeeping, peace-enforcement and peacebuilding (Paris 2004, p.38, Schneckener 2005).

2   In line with the majority of recent research on organizational learning, this understanding rejects both simple behavioural stimulus-response models and models that analyze organizations as closed systems independent of their environment. Its focus on rules and routines, inter alia, builds on the work of Michael Barnett and Martha Finnemore (2004). Its emphasis on the cognitive dimension is in line with the pioneering work of Ernst Haas (1990). Haas' understanding of learning processes is very much based on the importance of consensually held scientific knowledge in dealing with environmental problems. This is less applicable to the field of peacebuilding since there is no equivalent 'science of peacebuilding'.

3   We plan to take a closer look into each of these factors over the course of a two-year in-depth follow-up study on learning processes in the UN peacebuilding apparatus that commenced in February 2007.

4   The exercise was obviously not very successful, as the same task has been taken up again by the Peacekeeping Best Practices Section in late 2005.

5   Interview with UN official, New York, 25 April 2006.

6   'There is a "knowledge deficit" that is one of the repeating dilemmas of United Nations work in post-conflict countries – the most important decisions are those ones taken at the beginning, when everything is fluid, but at the very time when we know least about the people and the place with which we are dealing' (Lakhdar Brahimi, Hiroshima, March 2005, cited in Harland 2005, p.2).

7   Interviews with DPKO official and external experts, New York, 25–26 April 2006.

8   Interview with DPKO official, New York, 24 April 2006.

9   Interviews with DPKO staff, New York, 24–25 April 2006.

10   Interviews with various UN staff and outside experts, New York, 24–26 April 2006.

11   As of early 2006, only four of the current 14 peace operations under DPKO's management had been assigned a single full-time Best Practice Officer. In the other missions, one person has been designated Best Practice Focal Point, in addition to their other responsibilities (interview with DPKO staff, New York, 26 April 2006).

12   Kofi Annan's proposal to create a 2,500-strong cadre of career peacekeeping officials who would rotate through headquarters positions and field assignments would solve this problem for a reasonable core strength of civilian peace operations specialists (Annan 2006). However, it remains stuck in the budgetary process to the present day.

13   We are grateful to the anonymous reviewer for pressing us to make this argument more explicit.

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