

# 2024 PBF Thematic Review

## Synergies between Human Rights and Peacebuilding in PBF-supported Programming

Erica Gaston, Fiona Mangan, Cristal Downing, Raphael Bodewig,  
Lauren McGowan, Emma Bapt, and Adam Day



This Executive Summary is extracted from the full 2024 Thematic Review on synergies between human rights and peacebuilding. The 2024 Thematic Review was commissioned by the UN Peacebuilding Support Office (PBSO) in partnership with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and the Government of Switzerland. The primary research was conducted from February to August 2023, including field research in Colombia and the DRC in February and March 2023. Further details about the scope of research, the methodology, and other key findings are included in the full Thematic Review.

**Cover image credit:** Hiliana Del Rosario Nunez Alvarez/PBF Secretariat Guatemala/2021.



# Executive Summary

Human rights are at the core of the United Nations (UN) system and are one of the building blocks of sustainable peacebuilding. Although these principles have long been recognized, they were recently reaffirmed in two twin resolutions by the UN Security Council and the General Assembly in 2016, which recognized that “development, peace and security, and human rights are interlinked and mutually reinforcing”, and that to succeed peacebuilding must encompass both “political and human rights mechanisms”.<sup>1</sup>

Despite broad consensus on these fundamentals, consistent cross-pillar and inter-agency coordination can be challenging, and the difficult political contexts in which UN peacebuilding takes place have often obstructed full realization of human rights objectives. As a result, since the twin resolutions were introduced, a range of actors, both within and outside the UN system, have been taking steps to strengthen human rights within peacebuilding and to further identify complementarity between the two fields and their respective institutions.

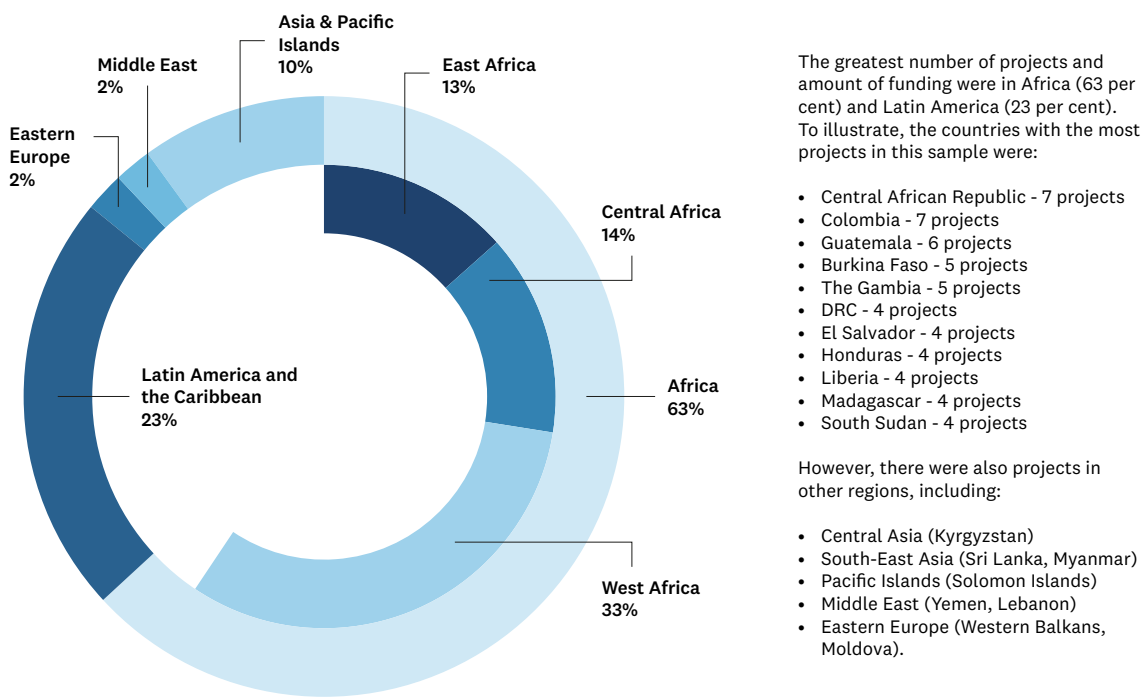
This Thematic Review is intended to further this conversation by examining one important node within this so-called “human rights and peacebuilding nexus”:<sup>2</sup> the Secretary-General’s Peacebuilding Fund (PBF) and related

work by the Peacebuilding Support Office (PBSO), which supports it. The Review explores a sample of 92 projects supported by the PBF between 2017 and 2022, with a view to assessing best practices and lessons learned, and drawing examples of the synergies between human rights and peacebuilding. Three case studies on PBF-supported work in Colombia, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), and relating to hate speech and disinformation allow for more in-depth consideration of 23 of these projects, and how they contribute to different peacebuilding and conflict prevention contexts.

The 92 projects examined, spanning 45 countries and territories (See Figure 1), covered a range of human rights themes, including projects related to transitional justice, civic space, protection of human rights defenders (HRDs), gender equality and women’s empowerment, gender-based violence (GBV), access to justice, support for National Human Rights Institutions (NHRIs), and strengthening state institutions.

Review of these projects evidenced the many ways that human rights strategies and tools can contribute to conflict prevention and peacebuilding, and vice versa. Across the case studies and the 92 projects reviewed, there were numerous examples of how human rights tools advance

Figure 1: Geographic Spread of Projects in the Review Sample



conflict prevention and peacebuilding. These included contributing to early warning, addressing root causes and underlying grievances, considering structural inequities, and enabling better government accountability and performance as a duty-bearer. The inverse was also true, with peacebuilding tools and actors sometimes helping to unlock progress on human rights in difficult situations, or otherwise enhancing human rights tools and strategies.

The case studies further contextualized how programming has realized complementarity between human rights and peacebuilding, as well as how investments in human rights initiatives and actors can advance peacebuilding objectives.

**In Colombia**, PBF-supported work on transitional justice, protecting HRDs, and improving the rights, access, and participation of women and marginalized groups took forward key commitments of the landmark 2016 peace agreement with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (People's Army). Addressing human rights issues that were perceived as the root causes of the conflict, and responding to threats from non-state armed groups, helped realize the promises of the peace agreement and strengthened the credibility of the Colombian Government. Collectively, these strategies helped reinforce and expand the peace process and contributed to conflict prevention. The projects in Colombia also offer programming lessons relevant to other peacebuilding contexts. Among these, multiple projects demonstrated that paying attention to socioeconomic needs and vulnerabilities, and advancing economic, social, and cultural rights (ESCR), can act as a linchpin for advancing civil and political rights for women and other disadvantaged groups.

**In the DRC**, the escalating conflict, past issues in human rights enforcement and accountability, and the ongoing withdrawal of the UN Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) presented significant challenges for advancing human rights and peacebuilding. Nonetheless, the case study showed that human rights-based strategies can still gain traction, even in difficult environments, and that human rights infrastructures and initiatives may be even more important in transition contexts. In two projects in the Kasai region, human rights-focused peacebuilders effectively took on tasks previously led by the transitioning peacekeeping mission (i.e. reintegration of ex-combatants). In addition, in these cases, the conflict prevention benefits appeared more likely to be sustained because these were nested within a larger rights-based justice and accountability project.

The DRC case study also illustrated some of the advances and outstanding challenges in fully realizing the application of the Human Rights Due Diligence Policy on United Nations support to non-United Nations security forces (commonly abbreviated to HRDDP). The mission in the DRC has been at the forefront of developing systems to apply the HRDDP more systematically. Nonetheless, even in the DRC, the HRDDP appeared less fully understood and applied by those in the peacebuilding field – an issue that experts and practitioners said was true globally.

The third case study, through a study of 12 projects spanning 15 countries and territories, took stock of efforts to counter negative trends associated with **hate speech and disinformation**.<sup>3</sup> Recent studies and evidence suggest that hate speech, disinformation, and misinformation have helped foment violence in election and transition periods, have exacerbated ethnic and religious discord, and have been used as a tool for minority persecution and GBV.<sup>4</sup> The results suggest that efforts to detect and counter hate speech have already contributed to early warning and preventive action in electoral contexts. There also appeared to be scope for such programming to contribute to conflict prevention, greater rights empowerment, and improved social cohesion in other peacebuilding contexts. However, the findings suggest that such programming could be even more impactful if greater attention were paid to the root causes driving hate speech and disinformation (often rights deprivations), and a more long-term, rights-focused perspective was adopted. Paying greater attention to guidance on human rights standards would also help ensure that technological tools used for monitoring speech are developed with appropriate safeguards related to protection of lawful speech and privacy rights.

## Catalytic Impact and Sustainability

PBF support proved to be catalytic in a number of areas; for example, through investing in “capacities for change” and seeding local ownership in the DRC and Colombia, or transitional justice projects in the DRC or The Gambia that ignited national conversations about accountability and rights reforms. Some of the projects that focused on preventing or addressing rights violations (for example, GBV) or that enhanced access to justice and government accountability were credited with helping “reset” public relationships with governments and opening space for both greater rights protection and peacebuilding. The work on countering hate speech was catalytic in a different way, helping pioneer new forms of digital or hybrid peacebuilding.

However, while the PBF's catalytic impact was recognized across a number of areas, so were the limitations inherent in the short-term nature of PBF funding. Many PBF-supported projects pursued appropriate remedies, but the time that would be required to realize these projects' theories of change was far greater than the average length of a project supported by the PBF (just under 21 months in this sample). More time is needed to address structural inequities, counter stereotypes and stigma, work through underlying grievances, promote justice and reconciliation, and address the fundamental rights deprivations that contribute to root causes.

One strategy that might address this is to invest in more iterative or sequential work, when requested. In both Colombia and the DRC (as well as in other countries), PBF support for sequential stages of transitional justice initiatives proved strategic, enabling the projects to adapt to evolving circumstances and overcome barriers, while still advancing unique objectives. The success of these initiatives suggests that sequential or iterative work may be useful for other areas of human rights and peacebuilding work in which incremental and adaptive strategies are necessary to meet the objectives in question, and where sustainability would otherwise be in doubt.

## Further Efforts to Strengthen Human Rights in Peacebuilding

Given the broader finding that human rights perspectives and tools can complement and enhance conflict prevention and peacebuilding strategies, the Thematic Review identified a number of steps that PBSO, other UN entities, implementing partners, and other Member States or donors might take to enhance human rights and peacebuilding. Chief among these was investing in human rights capacities, both within the UN system, as well as within the countries in question. The strongest projects within the Review tended to be those that were developed by personnel with strong expertise in human rights and peacebuilding, which were then taken forward in partnership with local civil society and government actors who were vested in the human rights and peacebuilding outcomes in question. A large subset of the projects examined were focused on supporting government institutions to better respond to human rights concerns and their connection to conflict drivers. This proved to be a crucial strategy, especially when balanced by project components that supported rights-holders in calling for and advancing rights protection.



PBF-supported activities in Colombia — like this outreach effort related to the Truth Commission — helped advance justice while also strengthening the credibility of the peace process. Such projects illustrate the promise of combining human rights and peacebuilding approaches. Photo by UNDP Colombia.



The Thematic Review also examined the degree to which UN system standards and references to the findings of other human rights bodies were reflected in the projects. While both were in evidence, and there was a high level of human rights mainstreaming overall, not all projects reflected full integration of human rights considerations and strategies. Greater promulgation of policy guidance, and more specific monitoring and tracking of protection risks and corresponding due diligence measures for certain types of projects may be merited.

Several areas of human rights and peacebuilding work appeared ripe for further investment and innovation – either as supported by PBF or taken up by other partners in the field. In the realm of programming to counter hate speech, positive results suggest even further room for such work in electoral contexts, while current gaps in the field led experts to recommend greater focus on gender-based hate speech, disinformation, and misinformation. Other key areas ready for further investment include projects engaging NHRIs and human rights defenders in peacebuilding work, those testing additional means of enhancing human rights protection and defence in areas beyond state control, and those exploring linkages between ESCR and peacebuilding. Greater theorization of the links between ESCR and peacebuilding, and testing ways to leverage this area of work through peacebuilding programming, offer strong promise in terms of both rights advancement and conflict prevention.

### **Investing in learning and innovation:**

- More nuanced tracking and categorization of human rights-related projects by PBSO, and more disaggregated beneficiary tracking, use of impact-centred indicators, and use of perception surveys and longitudinal data by those in the peacebuilding field would advance learning and evaluation on human rights in peacebuilding.
- The themes of civic space and peacebuilding, and ESCR and peacebuilding are ripe subjects for future Thematic Reviews and further programming innovation.

### **Reinforcing UN standards, policies, and practice:**

- Given continued evidence of uneven application of the HRDDP in the peacebuilding field, UN entities engaged in this work should consider whether there are sufficient processes, guidance, and resources in place to ensure systematic application of the HRDDP in all appropriate areas of work.
- PBSO might consider providing guidance on the HRDDP, encouraging more systematic inclusion of it within the

risk management and monitoring and evaluation strategies of PBF-supported projects, and continuing to allow funds for HRDDP review and analysis within the budget of PBF-supported projects.

- UN entities involved in developing peacebuilding programming should continue to take note of the findings of other human rights bodies or special mechanisms. As a learning tool, it would be useful to have greater reflection on how these tend to be used to inform or guide programming, in order to contribute to a stronger feedback loop between human rights and peacebuilding entities.
- PBSO might consider providing guidance on the Human Rights-Based Approach, for example, in any templates, proposal guidance, and other materials.
- For projects related to countering hate speech, those involved should ensure that there is appropriate attention given to existing guidance on human rights standards and protective measures, in particular, as these relate to the development and use of technological tools.
- Donors wishing to reinforce “do no harm” standards may want to consider allowing, or even encouraging, part of the budget be set aside for responding to protection risks or threats that arise.

### **Increasing catalytic impact and overcoming sustainability challenges:**

- PBSO should consider iterative or serial projects where appropriate, particularly in situations where more adaptive and sequential programming strategies would be likely to advance strategic priorities and leverage particular moments or opportunities for peacebuilding advancement.
- Implementing partners should weigh the sustainability of any technological tools proposed to detect and monitor hate speech.
- PBSO and its UN partners should continue to explore ways to encourage participation of civil society organizations, non-governmental organizations, and local peacebuilders in PBF-supported projects through greater transparency in subgrantees, open calls for partners, wider outreach, and further exploring “inception phase” or “pre-project” grants to support local partners in early project development.<sup>5</sup>

### **Strengthening synergies between human rights and peacebuilding, and advancing cross-pillar collaboration:**

- Investments in human rights capacity, both within UN entities and among other partners, are the strongest

ways to encourage synergies between human rights and peacebuilding within programming. In this vein, PBSO or other UN partners might consider ways to further buttress personnel capacity and expertise on human rights and peacebuilding programming, including through human rights advisers or other human rights capacities, where requested by the governments in question.

- PBSO, OHCHR, and other UN entities should continue to support cross-pillar linkages, including through inter-

agency collaboration, by exploring ways to link peacebuilders with human rights mechanisms and entities, and supporting communities of practice and other learning opportunities.

- UN entities working on preventive action should continue to explore not only the ways that human rights data and analysis can contribute to early warning, but also ways prevention-oriented mechanisms and platforms can be better resourced and operationalized to act on those warning signs.

## Endnotes

- 1 United Nations General Assembly (Hereinafter UNGA) and United Nations Security Council (Hereinafter UNSC) [A/RES/70/262-S/RES/2282](#), (2016). The twin resolutions further emphasize that “respect for, and protection of, human rights and fundamental freedoms” is central to sustaining peace and urge Member States participating in the Human Rights Council’s Universal Periodic Review process to “consider the human rights dimensions of peacebuilding”, pp. 2, 8.
- 2 Ibid. See also Riva Kantowitz, *Advancing the nexus of human rights and peacebuilding* (Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation, 2020), <https://www.daghammarskjold.se/publication/advancing-the-nexus-of-human-rights-and-peacebuilding/>.
- 3 The majority of the projects examined focused on efforts to track, monitor, and otherwise counter hate speech, with only one project focusing substantially on disinformation, and none substantially

focused on misinformation. References to this third case study and to the findings within it thus tend to be described as “counter hate speech” efforts, rather than repeating all three terms in each instance.

- 4 See, e.g., UNSC [S/RES/2686](#), (2023); United Nations, “Secretary-General Launches United Nations Strategy and Plan of Action against Hate Speech, Designating Special Adviser on Genocide Prevention as Focal Point,” 18 June 2019, <https://press.un.org/en/2019/pi2264.doc.htm>. For a further discussion, see UNHRC [A/HRC/39/64](#), (2018); Amnesty International, *The Social Atrocity, Meta and the right to remedy for the Rohingya* (London: Amnesty International, 2022), <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/asa16/5933/2022/en/>; UNGA [A/77/287](#), (2022).
- 5 Christoph Kurz et al., *Thematic Review on Local Peacebuilding* (New York: Peacebuilding Fund, 2022), pp. 35.

## **About UNU-CPR**

United Nations University Centre for Policy Research (UNU-CPR) is a think tank within the United Nations that carries out policy-focused research on issues of strategic interest and importance to the UN and its Member States. The Centre prioritizes urgent policy needs requiring innovative, practical solutions oriented toward immediate implementation.

The Centre offers deep knowledge of the multilateral system and an extensive network of partners in and outside of the United Nations. The United Nations University Charter, formally adopted by the General Assembly in 1973, endows the Centre with academic independence, which ensures that its research is impartial and grounded in an objective assessment of policy and practice.

[cpr.unu.edu](http://cpr.unu.edu)

---

### **New York** (Headquarters)

767 Third Avenue 35B  
New York, NY 10017  
United States  
Tel: +1-646-905-5225  
Email: [comms-cpr@unu.edu](mailto:comms-cpr@unu.edu)

### **Geneva**

Maison de la Paix  
Chemin Eugène-Rigot 2E  
Geneva, Switzerland  
Tel: +1-917-225-0199  
Email: [comms-cpr@unu.edu](mailto:comms-cpr@unu.edu)