



## Managing Inter-Agency Coordination in United Nations Peacebuilding Project Summary and Recommendations for Practitioners

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This Management Brief addresses the question, which factors lead to successful inter-agency coordination (IAC) in United Nations Peacebuilding Operations. It was written for practitioners and intends to provide concrete recommendations for improving IAC in integrated UN peace endeavors. The results are a product of a research project on the management of peacekeeping and -building operations conducted at the Center of Excellence of the University of Konstanz, Germany. The findings conveyed in this publication are based on data gathered during several field visits of UN operations in Liberia and Haiti and interviews at UN headquarters in New York City and Geneva.

As a result of an in-depth analysis of interview, participatory observation and document data, 20 factors were identified as being the most important influences on the IAC process in UN Peacebuilding Operations. They were categorized in the three basic groups structural, individual, and cultural factors (see the box on page 3). Of the 20 factors, nine constituted genuine ‘success factors’ that bear special relevance for effective inter-agency coordination (IAC) in UN peacebuilding:

### **Success factors for IAC in UN Peacebuilding Operations**

*Agency culture: The degree to which organizational members adopt and internalize the distinct values, norms and practices of their agency.*

*Collective culture of UN system: The degree to which UN specific values and norms are shared across the agencies of the UN system.*

*Training and development of agency staff: The extent to which trainings prepare employees for IAC through specific IAC trainings or joint trainings with other agencies.*

*Recruiting and selection of agency staff: The extent to which an agency’s recruiting procedures and criteria account for IAC requirements.*

*Performance appraisal: The degree to which IAC goals are incorporated and effectively tracked in an agency’s performance evaluation systems.*

*IAC relevant experiences: The extent to which an individual has acquired previous experiences relevant for IAC.*

*Individual interaction style: The manner in which an individual engages in inter-personal contacts with his IAC counterparts in other agencies.*

*Individual IAC commitment: The extent to which IAC partners are committed to IAC and use their authority to instruct subordinates to engage in IAC.*

*Familiarity with IAC partner: The degree to which an IAC partner is acquainted with another IAC partner through his or her job-related and private interaction.*

Based on our analysis and an examination of the nine success factors, the following main recommendations were identified:

**1. Focus on individual-bound IAC factors:** IAC related trainings and workshops for new staff should be increased and better targeted at developing individuals’ IAC abilities. Recruiting and selection procedures should put a stronger focus on individual IAC-relevant experiences and qualities. Individual IAC activities should become a discrete goal in the agencies’ performance evaluation. Evaluators from other agencies should be invited to participate in evaluations.

**2. Strengthening of the network character of the UN peacebuilding system:** More resources should be allocated to boundary-spanning entities. Their personnel count should be increased and their importance should be communicated more explicitly. Overlap in agency responsibilities should be reduced; actors should focus on their core competences. The “One UN” system-wide culture should be strengthened without undermining the agencies’ “home cultures”. As levers for influencing culture, the agencies’ mission statements, the training of agency staff system, and the agencies’ performance appraisal system should stand in the center of managerial attention.

**3. Foster exchange and interaction among the agencies through alternative forums:** More resources should be allocated for joint trainings bringing together members of all agencies. Existing training programs of Integrated Missions should be opened to staff from the other UN organizations. Personnel exchange between agencies should be facilitated, e.g. by using an UN-wide rotational program for young professionals and “high potentials”.

### **Guiding questions**

The management brief at hand intends to contribute to the understanding and to provide managerial insights on the functioning of IAC in UN Peacebuilding Operations. A micro perspective on the factors and mechanisms that influence operational IAC is provided. To this end, we started our analysis with four broad research questions:

1. How do UN organizations in reality coordinate themselves under the roof of a hierarchically designed integrated peacebuilding operation?
2. What are the driving and impeding factors for successful IAC?
3. What factors qualify as “success factors” for IAC?
4. What managerial mechanisms may improve IAC?

#### **Definition of inter-agency coordination**

*Inter-agency coordination (IAC) is defined as the process of concerted decision-making and/or action, be it formal or informal, of two or more UN agencies made with some degree of adjustment to each other in order to achieve coherence in the pursuit of a wide range of activities of the political, development, human rights, humanitarian, rule of law and security dimensions of the UN peacebuilding system towards common strategic objectives.*

### **Factors influencing IAC**

The first step on the research agenda was the identification of the most important factors influencing the IAC process in UN Peacebuilding Operations. What emerged from the analysis were 20 IAC factors that were categorized in three basic groups: (1) structural factors, (2) factors related to the characteristics of the individual interaction partner, and (3) factors associated with the organizational culture of the agencies involved in IAC.

**Structural factors** are understood to be those concrete arrangements of organizational design that are manifested in formal rules, practices, and institutional responsibilities. This includes all standard procedures, decision-making organs, resource allocations, and workplace arrangements officially imposed by any of the UN actors. From the data, 13 such factors emerged.

**Individual factors.** When asking for the reasons of perceived good inter-agency coordination, almost all interviewees gave responses that included some sort of reference to the idiosyncrasies of the interaction partner(s). To explore this personality metaphor in more detail, over the course of our interviews we included more questions targeted at the specific characteristics of people that were perceived to be good IAC partners. What emerged from these questions was a list of “soft” factors. We grouped them into five clusters that most respondents could agree on: familiarity among interaction partners, individual interaction style, individual IAC relevant experiences, professionalism, and individual commitment to IAC.

**Cultural factors.** The third group of factors which emerged from the data comprises statements that were directed at UN employees’ shared values, practices, self-images, and the like. With recourse to organization theory, we labeled this category “organizational culture”. In the interviews, indications for organizational culture were mentioned in two different contexts: (1) the particular organizational culture of one agency and (2) a collective culture of all agencies, i.e. in the sense of “One UN”. We refer to the first type as “agency culture” and the latter one as “collective culture of the UN system”. According to the data, the two are closely interdependent and both have a strong influence on IAC.

### **Impact of the factors**

In the field setting, we encountered both instances in which IAC was working well and such in which IAC was poor. In order to identify the reasons underlying this discrepancy, we systematically compared instances of successful IAC with IAC failures. What emerged from the comparison were the following insights:

- IAC success is the result of the interplay between the factors; thus, specific configurations of factors rather than a single factor account for successful/poor IAC.
- Instances of successful IAC always exhibit favorable characteristics of the individual factors.
- Structural and cultural factors related to the specificities of the overall system and

the agencies are supportive to individual factors if they exhibit favorable characteristics; however, they cannot compensate for a lack of conducive individual factors.

Thus, the individual factors seem to have the highest impact on the success of IAC whereas structural and cultural factors can only provide a supportive framework for IAC. This conclusion is also driven by an additional insight that surfaced during our interviews: the factors respondents had associated with unsuccessful inter-agency coordination were different from those the same interviewees had associated with successful IAC. We thus concluded that, instead of being two ends of the same “IAC continuum”, successful IAC and unsuccessful IAC constitute different constructs. In other words, we concluded that the opposite of successful IAC is not unsuccessful IAC but rather no coordination; and similarly the opposite of unsuccessful IAC, is not successful IAC but no unsuccessful IAC. Among the individual factors causing successful IAC in particular “individual interaction style”, “IAC relevant experience”, “familiarity with the IAC partner”, and “individual IAC commitment” played an crucial role.

### **Interdependence among the factors**

Our investigation furthermore revealed that interdependencies existed between the different categories and factors, in particular between structure, culture, and individuals’ characteristics and behaviors. According to our observations, among the interdependencies in particular two relationship patterns bear relevance for the development of successful IAC: First, the influence of structural and individual factors for the construction of a collective UN culture and secondly the relationship between some of the structural and individual factors.

### **Collective culture as product of structure, individual and agency culture**

According to our findings, the factor “collective culture of the UN system” was shaped by the interplay of eight of the previously introduced structural and individual factors and closely coupled with the culture salience of the individual agencies. We also found indications that

from both cultural factors, feedback emanates to structural factors and individual behaviors. In the following, we address the three major influences separately.

*Agency cultures and collective culture of the UN system:* We found that the salience of agency culture is an important determinant for the development of collective culture of the UN system in a given IAC situation. High agency culture salience exists when (1) the norms and values of an agency are distinct from those of other members of the UN family and (2) agency members have internalized them to a high degree, so that the norms and values guide their behavior.

### **Twenty factors influencing IAC processes:**

#### *Structural factors:*

- *Designated boundary spanners*
- *Agency task division*
- *Location of agency offices*
- *Common planning cycles*
- *Joint agency retreats*
- *IT and communications*
- *Planning and programming tools*
- *Formal coordination forums*
- *Agency mandate and mission statement*
- *Training and development of agency staff*
- *Performance appraisal*
- *Recruiting and selection of agency staff*
- *Staff availability for IAC forums*

#### *Individual factors:*

- *Professionalism*
- *Individual interaction style*
- *IAC relevant experiences*
- *Familiarity with the IAC partner*
- *Individual commitment to IAC*

#### *Cultural factors:*

- *Agency culture*
- *Collective culture of the UN system*

According to our findings, agency culture salience is coupled with the collective culture of the overall UN system in three ways. First, if agency culture salience is low, the development of a collective UN culture is less difficult. Second, if agency culture explicitly embraces the collaboration with other agencies, the development of a collective UN culture is less difficult. Third, when a strong collective UN culture exists, this reinforces the weakening of individual agency cultures.

*Structural factors and collective culture:* Structural factors influence collective culture by

providing a framework for it to develop. Some structural factors thereby influence collective culture directly and some via the factor “agency culture”. With respect to latter, the underlying logic is that by changing the mission statement of an agency or adapting the criteria of the performance appraisal system, agencies may be able to influence the norms and values of agency employees.

Direct influence on collective culture emanated in particular from the structural factors “formal coordination forums” and “location of agency offices” because they constitute forums in which the employees of the several agencies were able to interact. Based on first indications, we propose that when the agency culture or the culture of the UN system in a given instance embraces collaboration among the agencies, this will affect the agencies’ recruiting and incentive schemes.

*Individual factors and collective culture:* Among the individual factors, especially “individual leadership commitment”, “familiarity with IAC partners”, and “individual interaction style” of employees emerged as impacting the development of a collective culture. While the structures serve as the skeleton for culture, the commitment and style of individual employees adds “flesh to the bones” and shapes the culture in a given IAC situation.

The interviews suggest that agency culture and collective culture exert a strong influence on the individual IAC partners and the way they represent their agencies in inter-agency-coordination meetings. Especially for the bigger agencies such as UNDP, UNICEF, UNHCR and UNMIL, our respondents repeatedly drew implicit and explicit connections between the organizational background of an interaction partner and his or her personal coordination behavior.

### Structural impacts on individual behaviors and characteristics

The second important interaction pattern that surfaced from our analysis is the influence of certain structural factors on individual characteristics of agency members. Because they emerged to have special relevance, we will here elaborate more concretely on the impact of the six structural factors - “training of agency staff”, “recruiting of

agency staff”, “performance appraisal”, “location of agency offices”, “joint agency retreats”, and “formal coordination forums” - on the group of the five individual factors. We subsume these factors under the umbrella of what we identified as their common underlying logic; namely capability, motivation, and personal interaction. According to our findings, successful IAC was only possible when these conditions coincided.

*IAC capability and motivation:* The effect of the structural factors “training of agency staff”, “recruiting of agency staff”, and “performance appraisal” can be subsumed under the concept “IAC capability and motivation”. While capability refers to an individual’s ability to perform actions, motivation refers to the individual’s willingness to engage in that action. In this context, we found that through IAC specific trainings, IAC partners can be specifically prepared for the demands of IAC. Similarly, we found that if the recruiting criteria account for the demands of IAC, the IAC capability of staff was positively influenced. Finally, to enhance the motivation of agency staff, an agency’s performance evaluation tools proved to be the natural lever.

We find these results especially noteworthy as we also found a considerable deficit concerning their implementation. The factors that we identified as being positively influenced by capability and motivation are the “individual IAC commitment”, “professionalism”, and “individual interaction style” of IAC partners. In short, a capable and motivated IAC partner is more likely to be committed to IAC, to command the necessary professional skills, and interact with his or her counterparts in an adequate manner.

*Personal interaction:* Particularly interesting is the common logic underlying the factors “location of agency offices”, “joint agency retreats”, and “formal coordination forums”. The shared denominator of these factors is that they are enablers of personal interaction between representatives of the independent agencies. Such interaction seems to be a necessary precondition for the emergence of IAC. Our findings suggest that personal interaction influences the two individual variables “familiarity with the interaction partner” and “IAC relevant experiences” which are both important drivers of individual IAC ability and accounted as IAC motivators.

### **Recommendations for practitioners**

While the preceding discussion and the model have aimed at generating universally valid explanations for the development of IAC, we conclude this management brief with a focus on concrete management recommendations for practitioners in all UN Peacebuilding Operations. Based on the model's stipulations and the data gathered in interviews and observations, three "areas of improvement" stand out. These are (1) a stronger managerial focus on individual bound IAC factors, (2) the strengthening of the network character of the UN peacebuilding system, and (3) the intensification of inter-agency staff exchange through the use of alternative forums.

#### **Focus on individual-bound IAC factors**

One of the most evident findings of the analysis was the twofold importance of individual IAC factors for the success of IAC. Therefore, the individual characteristics of agency employees are of paramount importance for successful IAC and should be at the center of future efforts to improve IAC. Yet when discussing this recommendation with UN employees, we were confronted with the argument that it would be beyond the power of mission planners to change individual characteristics of agency staff. While this is partly correct, the links "personal interaction" and "IAC capability and motivation" have exemplified how structural factors can influence the individual factors. In our opinion, the current UN Peacebuilding Operations use this potential fairly well for the link "Personal Interaction". Through frequent formal coordination forums, joint agency retreats, and locating agency offices near one another, a high degree of face-to-face interaction can be provided. For the link "IAC capability and motivation", however, we see room for improvement. Based on our findings, we propose the following managerial activities to improve IAC. We believe that, through these structural modifications, the UN agencies could effectively enhance the individual IAC capability and motivation of their employees:

- Intensifying and broadening the scope of IAC related training: The training of IAC specific skills should be intensified and the scope of the already existing trainings broadened to include a larger portion of agency staff. As a

specifically well designed IAC skilltraining, a three-day orientation workshop for new Liberian CST staff in which all Civil Affairs UNVs receive an introduction to the common UN approach and build their sensitivity to facilitation could serve as example for future trainings.

- Revision of agencies' recruiting and selection procedures: According to our findings the considerable potential a fine-tuned recruiting and selection procedure could have on the IAC related qualities of agency staff has not been realized to the fullest extent. Therefore, the recruiting procedures of the agencies should be revised to include more IAC-relevant criteria. Some interviewees, for instance, revealed that previous work with the same agency was seen as an important asset in the application process, while work with a different organization (even from the UN family) was not regarded as equivalent. Yet according to our findings on the characteristics of successful IAC partners, the working

#### **Data sources**

*Our analysis is based on over 140 semi-structured interviews with agency and mission field staff in Liberia and Haiti, as well as experts at UN headquarters in Geneva and New York City. The interviews were conducted on four separate field trips conducted from June 2008 to June 2009. In addition, insights were gained through participatory observation of a number of inter-agency coordination meetings and extensive discussions with members of the NGO and diplomatic communities in Liberia and Haiti. Finally, a review of relevant UN internal documents, terms of reference, and guidelines as well as organizational charts, complemented the first-hand data.*

experience with other agencies particularly constitutes a valuable IAC experience and should therefore receive greater recognition in the recruiting process.

- Revision of performance evaluation: The agencies' performance evaluation tools should be revised and in the future incorporate IAC as discrete goal. While many of the agency heads we spoke to had IAC related goals in their performance evaluation we were surprised to find that despite the fact that "One UN" was a priority for the DSRSG,

SRSG, and most agency heads in the two operations we analyzed, few explicit coordination goals were anchored in the evaluation forms of mid- and lower level agency staff. With the exception of designated coordination officers, most mid level management respondents said that they were not specifically assessed on how they coordinated with other UN agencies or mission sections. According to our assessment, if IAC activities were given a more central role in the agencies' performance evaluation systems, this would have a positive impact on the behavior of the personnel and in addition the IAC success. In addition, if performance evaluation would also include evaluators from other agencies, e.g. members of a joint task force or team, more tangible incentives for committed IAC would be in place.

### Strengthen the network character of the UN peacebuilding system

The previous discussion has alluded to the network character of the Liberian peacebuilding community and stressed the positive impact of non-hierarchical coordination mechanisms for the IAC outcome. Therefore, we propose to strengthen the network character of the UN systems in countries that are host to a Peacekeeping Mission by taking following steps. In detail, in order to make "coordination without hierarchy" work even better, the UN should take three measures:

- Allocation of resources to boundary-spanning entities: In order to strengthen the network character of the UN community, more resources should be allocated in particular to the Resident Coordinators' offices so as to expand their boundary-spanning capabilities. As our inquiries have revealed, an important cornerstone for the development of a functioning peacebuilding network among the several UN entities is the support of designated boundary spanners. Notwithstanding the fact that they are regarded as useful, the designated coordination staff still lack recognition in some parts of the UN community. In addition, the designated coordination officers are overburdened with many responsibilities. The personnel resources of

the Resident Co-ordinators' offices should thus be expanded and their importance more explicitly communicated to the wider UN community.

- Reduction of overlap in agency responsibilities and tasks: As was highlighted under the factor "agency task division", an overlap in responsibilities can cause both a competition for resources and competence. We found ample evidence for this fact in the field. However, we also encountered instances in which actors under strong consideration of the task at hand achieved an appropriate division of task by limiting themselves to their core competences and strengths.
- Strengthening of "One UN" without undermining agencies' "home cultures": Based on our observations in the field, a system-wide culture has a considerable potential for integrating a country-level peacebuilding system and therefore for enabling IAC. As possible managerial levers for influencing a collective culture our study has identified "agency mission" statements, their "training of agency staff" system, and the agencies' "performance appraisal" system.

### Foster exchange and interaction among the agencies through alternative forums

Two of the most central "success factors" that surfaced from our analysis were "familiarity between IAC partners" and "IAC relevant experiences". Familiarity and IAC experiences develop only on the basis of personal face-to-face interaction. Personal interaction in turn has been shown to be influenced by "location of agency offices", "joint agency retreats", and the provision of "formal coordination forums".

As already alluded to in the first recommendation, the UN has generally done a good job in using these structural leverages to provide interaction among agency staff. This strategy should be continued and the UN should continue to push for locating its country offices near each other and maintaining its investments in joint agency activities. In addition to these existing forums, two other possibilities for exchange surfaced from the interviews:

- Allocation of resources for joint trainings: We believe that through the conduct of more

joint trainings, dynamics could be realized that are as positive as in the existing interaction forums. One option for initiating such activities may be for UN missions to revise regulations of the Integrated Mission Training Center (IMTC) and open their training program to staff from other agencies.

- Facilitation of personnel exchange between agencies: Missions and agencies should lobby their respective headquarters to establish a systematic personnel exchange among the agencies in order to provide its employees with more IAC experiences. One possibility would be the institution of an UN-wide rotational program for young professionals and “high potentials” combined with an adjustment of career paths within the UN that would not be restricted to one agency or body.

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