Strategic Review of the UN Peacebuilding Fund's 'Country Support for Design, Monitoring, and Evaluation' initiative (PBF/IRF-99)

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Abbreviations

CoP	Community of Practice
DMEL	Design, Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning
GYPI	Gender and Youth Promotion Initiative
HQ	Headquarters
JSC	Joint Steering Committee
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
MPTFO	Multi-Partner Trust Fund Office
MTR	Mid-term review
NUNO	Recipient non-UN organization (of PBF funding)
PAC	Project Appraisal Committee
PBF	United Nations Peacebuilding Fund
PBSO	United Nations Peacebuilding Support Office
PDA	Peace and Development Adviser
PST	Program Support Team (PBF's 'Surge' Roster)
RC	UN Resident Coordinator
RUNO	Recipient UN organization (of PBF funding)
SRF	Strategic Results Framework
UNCT	United Nations Country Team
UNEG	United Nations Evaluation Group
UNSSC	United Nations Systems Staff College

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This strategic review analyzes key processes and achievements of PBF/IRF-99, 'Country Support for Design, Monitoring, and Evaluation,' which has been implemented since 2014. It is the first systematic review of its kind. The articulated **theory of change** of the project reads: "*If country partners are supported with dedicated peacebuilding DM&E expertise from the design through evaluation of interventions, interventions will have clearer peacebuilding outcomes, and evaluations will be timelier and of higher peacebuilding quality*." The review is based on document review and key informant interviews.

The overall **objective** of this IRF-99 strategic review is to summarize the main achievements of the IRF-99 and articulate its overall added value as part of PBF's peacebuilding design, monitoring, evaluation, and learning (DMEL) function. The review will examine the relevance and usefulness of DMEL activities under this project, broadly speaking during the timespan 2015-2022, and focusing on the more recent period since the beginning of the current PBF strategy period 2020. The review will also document areas that appear to be important areas for attention in the future. In this regard, the **purposes** of the review are two-fold: (1) **Repository**: provide an overview of what was done under IRF-99 and how PBF's DMEL function has evolved; (2) **Accountability and Learning**: Light touch review capturing the perceptions of select PBSO/PBF and PBF Secretariat staff, and Peace and Development Advisers regarding the relevance and usefulness of the project, identify potential gaps and pointers towards future directions and the next phase of the initiative, also concerning the relation with PBSO's new impact hub initiative.

IRF-99 has been an **essential instrument for PBF to provide DMEL support** using project funds. There are significant needs and demands for PBF support in this area by PBF Secretariats and those implementing PBF funding at the country level. IRF-99 has been an essential source of financing for PBF to provide this DMEL guidance and support for more relevant and effective peacebuilding interventions. The key informant interviews conducted as part of this strategic review confirm that the support provided by PBF using these resources is not only **highly appreciated** by those supporting and managing PBF portfolios at the country level, but it is also considered a **critical success factor** for effective and relevant peacebuilding initiatives and ongoing learning and improving practice. Against this background, it should be ensured that PBF's **DMEL team has adequate and sustainable staffing** to provide necessary support across all pillars of its work, including design, knowledge management, monitoring, and data analysis next to evaluation. This had also been recommended by the 2022 **mid-term review (MTR) of PBF's 2020-2024 strategic plan**: the MTR also states a significant investment in evaluative exercises and evaluations, while design, monitoring, and learning activities receive significantly less attention. The MTR recommended that the Fund enhance its support to design, monitoring and data analysis, including a recommendation to ensure adequate and sustainable staffing in PBSO within the DMEL team.

PBF has been continually **enhancing its DMEL capacities and processes since 2010**. This is in response to both internal prioritization of these capacities and external evaluations and reviews that called for establishing more vital DMEL systems and enhancing the integration of gender throughout PBF portfolios and evaluations. PBF's support using IRF-99 funds spans four distinct areas: Design, Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning, with PBF in New York supporting country-level teams and conducting global

DMEL efforts that complement project-level activities. The most important processes and achievements supported by IRF-99 in recent years include the following (please note that the below is not a complete list of all activities but only select highlights):

i) **Design**: Support for the design of Strategic Results Frameworks (SRFs); occasional support to specific country-level project design activities through PBF's Program Support Team.

ii) **Monitoring**: Support to SRF monitoring frameworks; roll-out of community-based monitoring guidance.

iii) **Evaluation**: New evaluation policy (2022-2024); mid-term review of PBF's 2020-2024 strategy; Country portfolio evaluations; impact evaluation initiative (PeaceField); synthesis review of evaluations; cohort evaluations; independent quality assessment of project evaluations.

iv) **Learning:** Thematic reviews (e.g., climate security and peacebuilding, gender-responsive peacebuilding, transitional justice, human rights, and peacebuilding); various guidance notes and tip sheets; and the convening of PBF's community of practice exchanges.

PBF's **flexibility** to adapt its DMEL approaches and requirements during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly during 2020 and 2023, was highly appreciated.

Since 2019, PBF has been building up a dedicated **program support team** (PST) - a roster of consultants with expertise in peacebuilding and DMEL, familiar with PBSO/PBF and UN peacebuilding approaches. PST experts support activities across all four DMEL areas. PBF is also expanding the roster to include more consultants with such profiles from the countries and regions where PBF is invested.

At the time of writing of this synthesis review, a few critical DMEL processes, funded by IRF-99, are underway, namely the revision of the **PBF gender marker guidance note** (based on findings of the gender-responsive peacebuilding thematic review), new guidance on how to understand and assess '**catalytic' peacebuilding**; new guidelines on **project performance tracking**, new **UNEG peacebuilding evaluation guidelines**, one **cohort evaluation** for GYPI (Gender and Youth Promotion Initiative) 2020 projects and three **portfolio evaluations**.

This strategic review reflects **insights and perspectives from PBSO/PBF staff and former staff, PBF Secretariat staff, and Peace and Development Advisers** on their perceptions of how relevant specific initiatives under IRF-99 have been for the strategic management of PBF portfolios, specifically in the areas of country support, evaluation, the community of practice, and the role of PBF Secretariats steering and supporting these functions at country level. The expressed priorities are reflected in the findings as well as the recommendations of this report.

PBF's overall resources and staff to support DMEL activities are limited, and PBF is well advised to seize opportunities to amplify and multiply its capacities. PBSO's newly created **impact hub** presents an opportunity for PBSO to scale its work related to peacebuilding impact if collaborative synergies between PBF and the impact hub are consciously developed. Particular areas of possible synergies and convergence between PBF and the impact hub seem to be related to thought leadership/knowledge development and

dissemination, engagement of a peacebuilding community of practice, and capacity development/training.

Going forward, a trend across key informant interviews was the suggestion for PBF to consolidate its DMEL work, **focus future IRF-99 funding more strategically** in line with an encouragement to commit to 'less is more,' including prioritizing certain processes over others or even dropping certain DMEL processes and products that have seemed less helpful.

More specifically, the review provides the following eight **recommendations**:

1) **Re-activate in-person community of practice**: Invest in PBF's community of practice and prioritize in-person and online meetings. This should include global and regional in-person meetings, e.g., global meetings every two years, with annual regional conferences (also considering language issues). The planned CoP retreat in 2024 will be a significant step in this direction. In-person gatherings will allow the CoP to become a more interactive network with strengthened connections between country-level colleagues and between country-level and HQ teams.

2) **Knowledge and guidance consolidation**: Put together a more explicit foundational 'one-stop shop' of PBF's peacebuilding DMEL quality standards, a repository and package of available resources and guidance (by PBF, the broader UN system, and the wider peacebuilding DMEL sector). Having a 'gold standard' readily available in one place on PBF's website that is accessible and user-friendly would provide an opportunity to consolidate PBF's DMEL work. These quality standards should also include standards on the dissemination of DMEL products.

3) **Develop a standard online foundational peacebuilding DMEL training package** based on the abovementioned peacebuilding quality standards. This should be an online training package of 'key steps and quality standards in peacebuilding DMEL' and could be accompanied by live or online facilitated training sessions (e.g., this could be done in collaboration with UNSSC and UNDCO and also explore synergies with PBSO's impact hub). Right now, training and onboarding of PBF Secretariats seems ad hoc. Making specific training elements mandatory for those involved with PBF management and oversight (at both country and HQ levels) might ensure greater coherence and consistency in applying clear peacebuilding standards across the board.

4) **Focus on strengthening PBF Secretariats** to be well-equipped to support strong DMEL at the country level across the board. Consider using the PST Roster more as multipliers in this regard - to help consolidate capacities within PBF Secretariats by accompaniment and mentoring, rather than using the PST to deliver single/individual country support activities, e.g., conflict analysis or project design support. PST support for thematic reviews, guidance products, synthesis reviews, or portfolio evaluations don't fall under this recommendation; such processes should remain at the core of PST support activities.

5) **Invest in a review of PBF Secretariat roles/functions**: those functions vary significantly, and some PBF Secretariats feel squeezed in between formal/informal reporting requirements between RCOs, UNDP (where many are housed), and PBF in NY. A review of roles/responsibilities/functions could help clarify and provide a solid foundation to strengthen PBF Secretariats further, particularly their DMEL roles. There

is also a clear link with the request to reactivate the in-person community of practice meetings, as maneuvering the complex PBF Secretariat functions could be put on the agenda of such sessions, and tips could be shared across countries.

6) **Ensure adequate staffing of PBF's DMEL Team**: the review revealed that an adequately staffed DMEL team is critical to retaining institutional memory, providing much-needed country support, and directing and managing PBF's global DMEL functions across its four pillars (design, monitoring, evaluation, and learning), including the implementation of above recommendations. PBF's mid-term review of its 2020-2024 strategic plan also recommended this, with a particular focus on design, monitoring, and data analysis.

7) **Leverage opportunities to scale PBF's work arising through PBSO's new impact hub**, mainly related to knowledge dissemination (e.g., thematic reviews), community of practice engagement, and possibly training, as outlined in this review. Such opportunities should be explored while maintaining a balance between the broad ambition of PBSO's new impact hub vis-à-vis the more specific and concrete PBF project and portfolio needs.

8) **Articulate transparently how PBF uses IRF-99 resources**. This could include a short and clear document on PBF's website about priorities under the project in a given year/timeframe, e.g., what types of DMEL processes and products are being prioritized. This should also include articulating how country-based colleagues can tap into IRF-99 resources in practical terms.

I. Background

The United Nations Secretary General's Peacebuilding Fund (PBF) was established in 2006 through General Assembly Resolution A/60/180 and Security Council Resolution S/RES/1645. The PBF is a country-focused global pooled fund that funds peacebuilding initiatives across the entire peace and conflict spectrum. The Peacebuilding Support Office (PBSO) is responsible for the overall PBF management under the Secretary-General's authority. The Multi-Partner Trust Fund Office (MPTFO) is the PBF's fiduciary agent. In 2020, the PBF launched a strategic plan covering the 2020-2024 period; a mid-term review was conducted in late 2022.

The PBF/IRF-99 "Country Support for Design, Monitoring and Evaluation" project (hereafter "IRF-99") funded by the PBF was first approved in November 2014 to provide for an enhanced design, monitoring, evaluation, and learning (DMEL) function at PBSO to support country-based development of peacebuilding programming directly and to manage country-based evaluations commissioned by PBSO. While reviewing the latest cost extension proposal (July 2022-December 2023), the Project Appraisal Committee (PAC) requested that a summary report of actions undertaken to date by PBF/IRF-99 be produced and a light touch evaluation be conducted.

The PBF Secretariat in New York manages IRF-99 funds. They mainly support peacebuilding initiatives in-country and global learning and guidance products aimed at advancing peacebuilding practice at the country level.

II. Objective and purpose of the IRF-99 strategic review

The overall **objective** of this IRF-99 strategic review is to summarize the main achievements of the IRF-99 and articulate its overall added value as part of PBF's peacebuilding design, monitoring, evaluation, and learning (DMEL) function. The review will examine the relevance and usefulness of DMEL activities under this project, broadly speaking during the timespan 2015-2022, and focusing on the more recent period since the beginning of the current strategy period 2020. The review will also document areas that appear to be important areas for attention in the future. This is the first strategic review of this kind for IRF-99.

In this regard, the **purposes** of the review are two-fold:

1) Repository: Provide an overview of what was done under IRF-99 and how PBF's DMEL function has evolved.
2) Accountability and Learning: Light touch review capturing the perceptions of select PBSO/PBF, PBF Secretariat staff, and Peace and Development Advisers regarding the relevance and usefulness of the work, identify potential gaps and pointers towards future directions and the next phase of the initiative, also concerning the relation with PBSO's new impact hub initiative.

This review provides a high-level strategic orientation; it will not provide an in-depth assessment of the results of individual or specific DMEL activities within specific portfolios, programs, or projects at the country level.

III. Key PBF developments in relation to IRF-99 in recent years

This section provides an overview ('repository') of crucial developments in PBF's DMEL functions since 2015. A deeper reflection of how specific processes and products were used and applied in practice will follow in subsequent sections of this report (IV – VIII).

IRF-99 has been an essential instrument for PBF to provide DMEL support using project funds. There are significant needs and demands for PBF support in this area by PBF in New York directly, by PBF Secretariats, or Peace and Development Advisers. IRF-99 has been an essential source of financing for PBF to provide this DMEL guidance and support for more relevant and effective peacebuilding interventions; financing such activities and guidance products from overhead costs alone would have been insufficient and not allowed for the same level of engagement.

> *"PBSO is one of the most structured funds to support UNCTs with peacebuilding."* [Quote from key informant interview]

As IRF-99 is the only mechanism for PBF to fund country support, evaluations, and guidance products from a global level at a larger scale, there has understandably been a lot of demand for this mechanism across the four pillars of DMEL work of PBF (design, monitoring, evaluation, and learning). This support has been provided on a needs basis (country support), guided by PBF policy guidelines (e.g., on evaluation requirements), and based on identified priorities by PBF (e.g., for thematic reviews). Beyond the IRF-99 project document, no written guidance or standard operating procedures would articulate the priorities for IRF-99 support in a given period.

PBF has been continually enhancing its DMEL capacities and processes since 2010. This is in response to both internal prioritization of these capacities and external evaluations and reviews that called for establishing more vital DMEL systems and enhancing the integration of gender throughout PBF portfolios and evaluations.[1] The 2014 PBF Review[2] recognized these improvements' positive impact, underscoring the need for continued and expanded support to country partners, specifically by establishing the IRF-99 project.

The overall rationale of the PBF/IRF-99 project as per the project document (PBF IRF/99 project document, as signed in June/July 2023) is to provide support to UN country teams with the design, monitoring, and evaluation of robust, relevant and effective peacebuilding initiatives funded by PBF. The stated theory of change reads as follows:
"*If country partners are supported with dedicated peacebuilding DM&E expertise from the design through evaluation of interventions, interventions will have clearer peacebuilding outcomes, and evaluations will be timelier and of higher peacebuilding quality*."

[1] For example, Kluyskens and Clark (2014), van Beijnum (2009), and Ernstorfer (2020).
[2] Kluyskens, Jups and Lance Clark (2014).

The four IRF-99 **project outcomes** as per the above project document are stated as follows:
Outcome 1: PBSO's support leads to better-designed peacebuilding and conflict prevention interventions, including in cross-border and transition contexts, more inclusion of women and youth, and more substantial and more actionable peacebuilding frameworks and strategies at the country level.
Outcome 2: Monitoring and Reporting: PBF supports monitoring and reporting processes and systems that effectively collect and consolidate data on the impact of peacebuilding.
Outcome 3: Evaluation: PBSO ensures robust evaluation processes and high-quality deliverables at global, country portfolio, and project levels.
Outcome 4: Knowledge Management and Learning: PBSO contributes to capacity development and global knowledge about peacebuilding.

The 2020 PBF Synthesis Review recognized the improvements in DMEL practices and valuable experimentation with new DMEL approaches. Also, it emphasized that "*there is still a long journey ahead for PBF, RUNOs, and NUNOs [Non-UN Recipients of PBF funds] to improve project-level DMEL and to design and monitor systematically for portfolio-level results*." The 2020-2024 PBF Strategy includes several commitments to more robust design, monitoring, and evaluation[3] as well as learning systems[4].

The below table provides an overview of DMEL activities that are centrally managed at PBF (source: PBF):

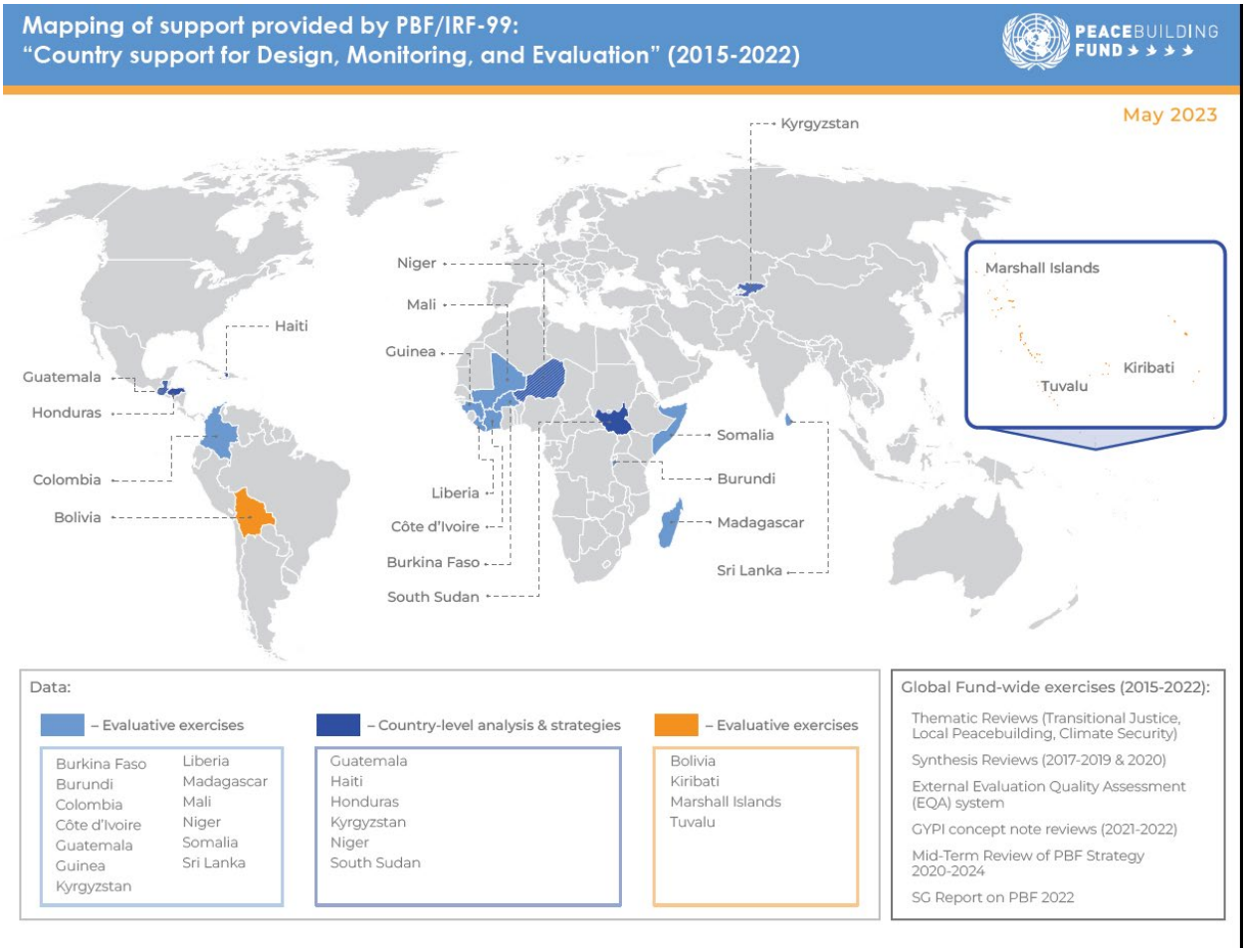
	Global	Country Portfolio	Project
Design	Gender and Youth Promotion Initiatives (GYPI)	Support for the design of Strategic Results Framework (SRF)	Support for project design via Program Support Team roster of consultants
Monitoring	• PBF Strategic Performance Framework (SPF)	• Community-based Monitoring • SRF monitoring frameworks	• Community-based monitoring • Project progress reporting (2/year) • Monitoring frameworks by PBF recipients

[3] According to the PBF 2020-2024 strategy, key M&E objectives are:
(i) Improve guidance on how to measure "achievable change" and "catalytic effect", with increased roles for PBF secretariats in close collaboration with recipient agencies, RCOs and Joint Steering Committees.
(ii) Pilot new evaluative approaches in three countries, e.g., using quasi-experimental approaches for innovative or risky initiatives.
(iii) Share noteworthy efforts of recipient agencies who innovate design, monitoring, and evaluation in peacebuilding programs.
(iv) Align with system-wide changes in mission and non-mission contexts, notably the updated UN Common Country Analyses and country evaluations (guided by the Development Coordination Office) and the Comprehensive Performance Assessment System (CPAS) being introduced for all UN missions.
(v) Establish a design, monitoring, and evaluation advisory function where leading experts periodically review and enhance monitoring and evaluation practices of the PBF and its recipients.

[4] The critical areas of learning put forward in the PBF 2020-2024 strategy are: (i) system-wide policy development and institutional learning, (ii) inter-agency knowledge, and (iii) country-based learning.

Evaluation	• Review of PBF strategy • Synthesis review • Cohort evaluation • Impact evaluation	• Country portfolio evaluations • Community-based monitoring	• Independent quality assessment of project evaluations, based on quality criteria developed by PBF (EQA-external evaluation quality assessment).
Learning	• Thematic reviews • Guidance notes & training • PBF Community of Practice (CoP) learning exchanges • Programmatic tip sheets		

The below map provides an overview of country support provided by IRF-99 as of May 2023 (source: PBF)



Other DMEL developments and **guidance products** since the start of the last PBF strategy period in 2020 include the following:

- A guidance note on theories of change (2021)
- A background note on community-based monitoring and evaluation (2022), building on UN Community Engagement Guidelines on Peacebuilding and Sustaining Peace. The UN Community Engagement Guidelines on Peacebuilding and Sustaining Peace are now recommended for application in the updated PBF guidance (October 2023).
- Tip sheets on select topics, e.g., on the prevention of hate speech (2023)
- PeaceField: the UN Peacebuilding Fund impact evaluation, learning, and dissemination project (PeaceField), an initiative implemented in partnership with 3ie (International Initiative for Impact Evaluation), the International Security and Development Center (ISDC), and funded by the German government. The initiative will conduct multi-year impact evaluations following PBF projects in varying countries. The scope of this work includes impact case studies, capacity development for UN partners along the way, and lesson sharing.
- In 2022, PBF developed a quality assurance mechanism for evaluations based on articulated criteria. PBF has engaged DeftEdge to conduct quality assurance reviews of select evaluations, starting in 2022 and the future (but not reviewing older evaluations). For the 2022 evaluation, out of the 51 evaluation reports that were assessed, six reports (12%) received a 'Very Good' rating, 21 reports (41%) were rated as 'Good', and 23 reports (45%) were assessed as being 'Fair'. One report was considered as 'unsatisfactory'. The average overall score was 74%, which is in the lower range for the 'Good' rating (75-89%).
- An aggregation exercise was conducted in 2023 (internal document) – a first of its kind. The exercise gathers consolidated information across all active projects in 2022. The main objective of this exercise was to review 154 annual project reports submitted in November 2022 and produce a dataset and analysis of 1) outcome and output level indicators as well as reported results, identifying commonly used indicators that can be used by projects in the future for more accessible aggregation of fund-wide results; 2) monitoring activities conducted and tools used; 3) catalytic effects reported (financial and non-financial); and 4) information about implementing partners, particularly civil society organizations (CSOs), including the amount of funding transferred and types of engagement.
- Under development as of December 2023:
    - Revision of the PBF Gender Marker Guidance Note.
    - Development of peacebuilding evaluation guidelines with the UN Evaluation Group.
    - New guidance on what it means for PBF initiatives to be catalytic – how to enhance understanding and monitoring of catalytic effects.
    - Three portfolio-level evaluations for The Gambia, Chad, and El Salvador.
    - Synthesis review based on 2021-2022 project evaluations.
    - Cohort evaluation for GYPI (Gender and Youth Promotion Initiative) 2020 projects focused on protecting civic spaces and mental health and psycho-social support.

For a detailed overview of all activities that PBSO implemented between 2015 and 2022 in the DMEL area, including all country-level evaluative exercises and portfolio evaluations, please see Summary Report PBF/IRF-99: Country support for Design, Monitoring, and Evaluation (June 2023).

Surge capacity through the PBF Program Support Team (PST):
In 2019, PBF established a 'surge roster' of peacebuilding programming and DMEL professionals who can i) deploy – at relatively short notice - to countries receiving PBF funds to support the development,

implementation, and monitoring of high-quality peacebuilding programs and (ii) at global level, lead and contribute to the development of guidance products and, thematic reviews, synthesis reviews, and portfolio evaluations.

The PST has been operational since June 2019 and initially included ten peacebuilding programming and design, monitoring, and evaluation experts. In 2020 and 2022, additional experts were recruited to this mechanism to allow the PBF to respond to increasing demands, with 30 members being part of the PST roster as of 2023. These additional members also included more junior- to mid-level experts. In 2023, PBF committed to updating this roster to ensure a more geographically diverse roster of consultants, including those recommended from the countries with PBF presence. An additional call for applications yielded an initial set of applications. However, adding more people with an adequate combination of peacebuilding and DMEL skills from specific countries and regions will remain an ongoing area of work for PBF. On a day-to-day basis, the Program Support Team is managed by PBF's Design, Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning Unit. UNOPS administers the recruitment and logistics, including travel arrangements, for all the PST consultants.

In addition to the PST, PBF maintains **institutional contracts** with consulting firms with expertise in peacebuilding and DMEL. So far, these contracts have mainly been used for portfolio and cohort evaluations.

Evaluations

Project evaluations

In 2018, the PBF made project evaluations mandatory for two reasons: 1) to inform PBF decision-making and the practice of recipient organizations and 2) to make project results more readily available to other interested parties for transparency and learning. This led to many project evaluations: 36 in 2020, 63 in 2021, and 54 in 2022. The respective RUNOS and NUNOs at the country level manage project evaluations. Each RUNO and NUNO are responsible for learning from these evaluations. At the global level, PBF has been commissioning synthesis reviews of project and portfolio evaluations to distill higher-level patterns that emerge across a large number of evaluations. At the same time, it became clear that there might be other and better ways to ensure learning across various projects by changing how these evaluations are done and reducing the overall amount of individual project evaluations. Those are reflected further in this review.

PBF's new Evaluation Policy (2022–2024) clarifies PBF's evaluation engagement at the global, country, and project levels. It also helpfully proposes an approach for conducting annual cohort evaluations of projects under or equal to USD 1.5 million. For projects with budgets of less than or equal to USD 1.5 million, RUNOs and NUNOs are not required to conduct evaluations. Instead, the PBF will commission an annual cohort evaluation of lower-budget projects. An internal scan of PBF's projects from 2019 to 2021 indicates that most lower-budget projects were approved through the Gender and Youth Promotion Initiative (GYPI) annual call for proposals. Given that the GYPI issues its annual calls based on priority themes, the yearly cohort evaluation for lower-budget projects will enable the PBF to tailor evaluation questions to pursue specific thematic foci. This is a welcome development, as the 2021/2022 synthesis review includes many evaluations of projects under or equal to USD 1.5 million. In principle, a cohort evaluation approach

offers better possibilities to distill learnings (under a specific thematic focus area) than many stand-alone project evaluations[5].

Portfolio evaluations

PBF's 2022-2024 evaluation policy states that in year four of a country's five-year eligibility cycle, the PBF will procure and manage an evaluation of the Strategic Results Framework (SRF) across the entire implementation cycle, including the Framework's underlying projects. The portfolio evaluation should be timed early enough to contribute to decision-making about possible eligibility renewal and launch of new programming. The evaluation policy further states that eligible countries of lesser investment are not required to conduct a portfolio-level evaluation and that a decision to a portfolio-level assessment will be a case-by-case decision by PBF. The evaluation policy does not specify the threshold for substantial investment. Portfolio evaluations are centrally managed by PBF in New York.

Synthesis reviews of evaluations

PBF has commissioned four synthesis reviews of project and portfolio-level evaluations of PBF-funded initiatives:

- The 2013 synthesis review was based on nine portfolio-level evaluations conducted between 2010 and 2012.
- The 2017-2019 synthesis review was based on eight portfolio evaluations, forty-six project-level evaluations; two lessons-learned reviews and three Evaluability Assessments of PBF Priority Plans.
- 2020 synthesis review, based on one portfolio evaluation, three evaluability assessments, one strategic review, one evaluative exercise, and twenty-four project evaluations, including an analysis of how PBF's evaluation approaches adapted during COVID-19.
- 2021/2022 synthesis review, based on 117 project-level and three portfolio evaluations and reviews (forthcoming publication).

Thematic reviews

Building on past efforts in the earlier days of the PBF[6], PBF renewed its commitment in 2019 to conducting thematic reviews of specific sectors that receive a significant share of PBF funding within and across PBF's priority areas and countries. PBSO is now approaching this in a more structured way and aims to conduct two thematic reviews per year, focusing on areas that might represent a particular gap in knowledge internal and external to the UN.

In recent years, PBF has invested in various thematic reviews: Transitional Justice (2020), Gender-responsive peacebuilding (2021), Local peacebuilding (2022), Climate Security and Peacebuilding, Human Rights and Peacebuilding (forthcoming). In 2021, PBF developed guidelines for the design and implementation of thematic reviews; these include consideration of methodology, partnerships, financial management, and strategic communication and dissemination. PBF has also invested in learning processes related to these thematic reviews, particularly their implementation and management processes, such as through a formal after-action review process associated with the local peacebuilding thematic review.

[5] Given the 2023 changes to IRF requirements (IRFs can now be up to USD 3 million, and GYPI up to USD 2 million) the evaluation policy might need to be revised to ensure that it remains valid.

[6] Such as for example, the PBSO Peace Dividends Report (on the role of social and administrative services in peacebuilding) or the PBSO report on DDR and peacebuilding, both developed in 2012.

Staying relevant during Covid

PBF has remained a steady and robust force for peacebuilding funding during the COVID-19 pandemic and was appreciated for responding flexibly to the changing parameters for peacebuilding work at the country level, given the impact of the pandemic.[7] The 2020 PBF synthesis review of evaluations[8] found that PBF has positively embraced the challenge of providing program design, monitoring, and evaluation support long-distance after international travel was halted in March 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This included experimentation with long-distance support, self-assessments (versus 'external assessment'), and shifting to lighter touch evaluative exercises given the in-person limitation. PBF also published initial questions to consider when determining whether the proposed evaluation exercise can take place in the current context of COVID-19.

MTR findings and recommendations

The 2022 survey of nearly 200 PBF country-based counterparts, including UN entities, civil society, and government, conducted as part of an independent Mid-Term Review of the PBF Strategy 2020-2024, found that the support from PBF Secretariats and PBSO on design, monitoring and evaluation, gender and youth-responsive programming, as well as conflict sensitivity, is overwhelmingly deemed as sufficient or more than sufficient (80% of responses), thus reconfirming the importance of the support provided through IRF-99.[9] The 2023 partner survey re-confirmed the overall trends of the 2023 survey. A few select survey areas from the 2023 survey are highlighted in this report.

The MTR of PBF's 2020–2024 strategic plan states that the **SRFs** constitute the most essential innovation under the current PBF strategy to increase portfolio coherence at the country level. SRFs were first developed in 2021 in response to the recommendations of the 2017–2019 synthesis review to strengthen strategic planning and oversight of PBF portfolios. Key stakeholders have supported their introduction based on the widespread realization that a projectized peacebuilding approach will yield only limited results and no higher-level insights on PBF portfolio level achievements. SRFs represent one– if not the only– way to strengthen a programmatic approach at the country portfolio level. The MTR further states that while significant efforts have been made in the development of SRFs, more attention and resources should be dedicated to their operationalization through guiding future investments, a clear articulation of their role in monitoring, evaluation, and learning, reporting, and resource mobilization efforts (the MTR also provides more detailed recommendations on SRFs more widely).[10]

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[7] The PBF reached out proactively to Resident Coordinators in April 2020 to express support for possible country-level adaptations to adapt PBF-funded initiatives to new needs emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic. While making it clear that the PBF cannot fund humanitarian response, PBF management communicated a clear commitment to addressing the social and economic impacts of the pandemic.

[8] Ernstorfer, Anita: **Synthesis Review of 2020 evaluative exercises of UN Peacebuilding Fund supported initiatives**. Independent review for the UN Peacebuilding Fund, February 2021

[9] The online survey was emailed to 968 country-level contacts, including government partners, UNCTs, and civil society. PBF program officers and in-country secretariats provided the contacts. The survey was rolled out in August and September 2022. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were asked for written consent. See also analysis in the Mid-term review of PBF's 2020-2024 strategy (January 2023).

[10] Before SRFs, PBF had worked with Peacebuilding Priority Plans (PPPs). These three-year strategic plans typically took 6–9 months to develop, and projects were only designed after PPP endorsement by the JSC and the PBSO. They consisted of a fairly long and complex document (conflict analysis, vision, theory of change, outcome statements, targeting, risks, fund recipient capacity review, results framework). PBF provided upfront support for the simultaneous start of PPP projects. Due to several challenges, the practice of PPPs was abandoned with the 2018

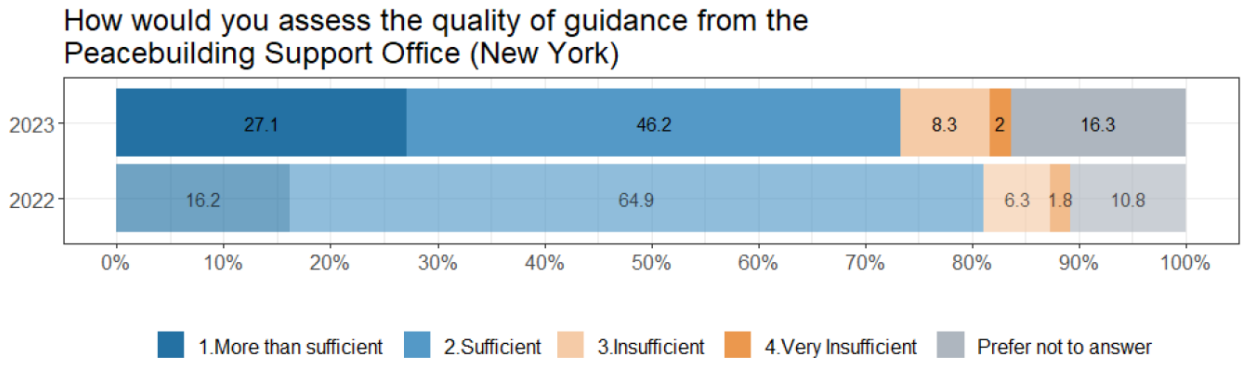
The Mid-Term Review of the PBF Strategy 2020-2024 also states a significant investment in evaluative exercises and evaluations, while design, monitoring, and learning activities receive significantly less attention. The MTR recommended that the Fund enhance its support to design and monitoring efforts, including ensuring **adequate and sustainable staffing in PBSO within the DMEL Team**.

IV. Country support provided by PBSO

Support from PBSO/PBF in New York to PBF Secretariats, Peace and Development Advisers (PDAs), and others in RC offices involved with steering and coordinating PBF initiatives at the country level is highly appreciated. This goes beyond IRF-99 support: the key informant interviews highlighted the day-to-day interactions between in-country staff and desk officers in NYC who provide critical and much-appreciated support.

> *"PBF colleagues in New York are helping us to succeed."*
> [Quote from key informant interview]

Those frequent and ongoing interactions between country-level and New York-based colleagues were essential for successfully designing and implementing PBF interventions based on a shared understanding of the context, related programmatic and operational challenges, and the need for flexible responses as much PBF funded is implemented in highly volatile contexts. The trusted and partnership-oriented exchanges and team relationships between PBF in New York and the country level were articulated as key to success, including the necessary balance between providing guidance and transparent frameworks and staying agile and adaptable. For this purpose, key informants expressed the need for regular visits from PBF HQ – from the respective desk officer and in combination with the DMEL team, depending on the nature and objective of the visit.



Source: PBF partner survey 2023.

revision of the PBF guidelines. During a brief interlude, the PBF experimented with so-called IRF packages to address shortcomings in portfolio coherence. To date, PBF has supported the development of 11 SRFs, namely in Guatemala, Kyrgyzstan, South Sudan, Liberia, Honduras, DRC, Niger, Sudan, Mauritania, Somalia, and Haiti.

The review also revealed that **consistent staffing in PBF's DMEL team** is critical to providing these much-needed DMEL functions across the four pillars of DMEL work – design, monitoring and data analysis, evaluation, and learning. Ensuring sustainable staffing in the future will go a long way in providing coherent DMEL guidance, retaining institutional memory, and positioning PBF adequately to provide required support to PBF Secretariats and portfolios and manage global DMEL processes and learning.

Beyond the generally high level of appreciation and need for PBF and PBSO support from New York, IRF-99 has been an important vehicle to support guidance with significant opportunities for country support and also for experts and Program Support Team members to engage directly with country-level colleagues involved in the design, implementation, and evaluation of PBF funded initiatives.

> *"If you want to be able to design a very good PBF portfolio at country level, you need support from HQ."*
> [Quote from key informant interview]

While this support is much appreciated and needed, the review revealed that a **greater systematization of peacebuilding DMEL requirements** might be helpful to enhance impact further.

Articulate PBF's 'quality gold standards' for effective and relevant peacebuilding programming and develop a peacebuilding DMEL training package.

Key informant interviews revealed a general appreciation for PBF's efforts to fund strategic, relevant, and effective peacebuilding initiatives. At the same time, a more explicit articulation of **peacebuilding quality standards** was recommended (beyond the specific pieces of guidance that exist).

> *"PBF needs to push more, and insist on clearly articulated peacebuilding quality standards, also in the PAC. Having clearer quality standards would also make PAC decision making more transparent."*
>
> [Quote from key informant interview]

These quality standards should involve two levels of standards:

- Peacebuilding programming quality standards
- Clear processes and standards on how specific DMEL processes and products are used. An example raised in this regard was clarity on how portfolio evaluations are used and shared publicly, including with the national governments.

Regarding **peacebuilding programming standards**, this could be a central PBF package that articulates PBF's standards in various core DMEL dimensions, particularly:
1) conflict analysis;
2) peacebuilding program design based on conflict analysis and theories of change, including examples of good peacebuilding theories of change across different sectors;
3) monitoring, including a repository of good sample peacebuilding indicators that can provide orientation (without becoming a 'blueprint');
4) conflict-sensitivity, including practical examples of what Do No Harm/conflict sensitivity implementation needs to look like in practice across the programming cycle;
5) evaluation, including examples of good project and portfolio evaluations that can serve as good examples; and
6) learning and adaptive management and what that looks like in practice.

The above would require the development of a more apparent '**one-stop shop'** on PBF's website that serves as a transparent and precise repository of PBF expectations in these areas, supported by links to various guidance products on three levels:
1) guidance specifically from PBF (as currently available through multiple links in different places),
2) guidance available from other relevant UN guidance documents that PBF recommends to apply[11], and
3) as well as the most relevant other peacebuilding and DMEL documents from external sources available in the wider peacebuilding sector.

> *"We keep on reinventing the wheel. We need more general clarity on our peacebuilding standards and what the expectations are."* [Quote from key informant interview].

Currently, existing guidance is perceived as not available in one place.

Another crucial aspect raised in this regard was that more clearly articulated **peacebuilding quality standards** by PBF will facilitate and strengthen the PBF Secretariat staff and PDAs' roles and responsibilities to work with RUNOs and NUNOs to assure specific quality standards.

Furthermore, it was recommended that such a more explicit articulation of peacebuilding quality standards be accompanied by a **foundational peacebuilding DMEL training** to be available for everyone – as a self-paced online version organized in different modules and different levels of depth (e.g., some people might only have to be familiar with specific standards, e.g., what a good conflict analysis needs to include, others need more hands-on knowledge how to conduct a conflict analysis and then how to practically and programmatically link it to program design). While the training offerings by PBSO/PBF have been much appreciated (e.g., on climate security and peacebuilding, or youth, peace, and security), it was suggested to develop such a foundational peacebuilding DMEL training as a core foundation for everyone, especially in light of high staff turnover amongst those involved in PBF programming and often limited institutional memory. The development of such a training offering could tap into existing resources from within PBF, other UN agencies, funds, and programs, and the wealth of other non-UN sources available in the wider peacebuilding sector, as outlined above.

It was suggested to make specific training content mandatory for staff coordinating and managing PBF portfolios for PBSO/PBF staff in New York and in-country teams (PBF Secretariats, PDAs, etc.). This would ensure a more consistent skill level and contribute to overall coherence based on a shared understanding of good peacebuilding quality standards.

Role of PBF in program design and monitoring

As highlighted above, the relationship between PBF country-level staff and PBF desk officers in New York is highly appreciated. At the same time, key informant interviews revealed a desire for a more explicit involvement and support of PBF in program design and monitoring, including support through the DMEL team. Currently, the DMEL team mainly gets involved with guidance on monitoring and evaluation issues on higher-level issues at the portfolio level and not on design at project levels, which lies within the responsibility of the respective country teams, with the support of PBF program officers in New York as much as possible. Occasionally, the PST Roster has been used to deploy consultants to support PBF design initiatives in countries.

[11] Key informant interviews conducted for this strategic review revealed that RUNOs are sometimes hesitant to use guidance from other UN agencies other than their own. A specific recommendation by PBSO about the relevance and applicability of particular guidance products across agencies, funds, and programs might remedy this.

Within current resources, it is unrealistic to expect PBF program officers or the DMEL team to have time and resources available to support individual project design and monitoring systematically. This lies within the responsibilities of RUNOs and NUNOs. Instead, it might be helpful to involve both PBF's desk officers and the DMEL team together with PBF Secretariats during critical moments of the design, implementation, and monitoring of Strategic Results Frameworks (SRFs), particularly during the initial design stage and as part of a mid-term reflection of these SRFs. This would also support one of the recommendations in the 2017-2019 synthesis review of evaluations to "Connect the 'D' with the 'M&E' and prioritize learning across portfolios"[12] and speak to the perceived gap between design on the one hand and M&E on the other as represented in PBF's current internal staffing/team setups (program officers /DMEL team).

Simultaneously, the most catalytic and sustainable way of approaching the quest for more design support is to provide sufficient resources to PBF Secretariats to adequately equip them to support PBF project and portfolio design and monitoring processes as much as possible (see further insights on PBF Secretariats in section VII).

PST Roster

As described in section III, PBF has continuously expanded the program support roster since its inception in 2019. It has been used actively in the last few years and can be used flexibly for smaller and larger assignments supporting PBF initiatives.

Key features that were highlighted as highly positive through the PST roster engagements:

- It is very positive to have a pool of experts with both peacebuilding and DMEL experience, who can be used for a variety of substantive engagements, as well as facilitated participatory processes;
- It is beneficial to have people who know PBF and UN systems
- It is essential to have people who understand the country's context and institutional dynamics of those involved in PBF implementation
- Availability of experts on relatively short notice is a big plus.

The interviews conducted as part of this strategic review re-confirm PBF's goal to add more qualified peacebuilding and DMEL experts from the countries and regions where PBF is active. The roster with such profiles is currently insufficient, and a proactive approach to tap specific experts might be required to gather the profiles needed. Experts with relevant peacebuilding, DMEL, and regional context understanding and language skills are essential.

Substantive and strategic issues related to the PST Roster[13] that were flagged as requiring ongoing reflection include the following:

- It is vital to ensure ownership and buy-in from PBF country staff concerning specific PST deployments. Some cases were perceived as PBF in New York being more behind a particular

[12] Ernstorfer, Anita: **Synthesis Review, 2017-2019 PBF portfolio and project evaluations**. Independent review for the UN Peacebuilding Fund, 2020

[13] The scope of work of this PBF/IRF-99 review did not include a managerial or administrative review of the PST Roster and its management by PBF and UNOPS.

assignment, which is challenging for the respective PST consultant and the sustainability of the effort if there is insufficient buy-in from the country level.

- A polarity to be managed: there might be a potential conflict of interest as PST Roster members might be hesitant to be more critical of specific PBF portfolios or related to other areas of PBF work, as they have an interest in being hired again for future assignments.
- There is a careful balance to be struck related to insider/outsider roles of PST Roster members and what that means for accountability and independence. On the one hand, it is a critical advantage for PST Roster members to have in-depth familiarity with PBF and its mechanisms at the country level. Simultaneously, it might compromise independent analysis. Practical questions raised in this regard include, for example, whether PST Roster members who are involved in supporting PBF Teams with the design or monitoring of specific initiatives can, in turn, be also engaged for reviews and evaluations that might include those same portfolios (which means: they essentially are asked to evaluate part of their own work – albeit indirectly).

More broadly, it was flagged to ensure that Roster members are consistently updated with new PBF developments and guidance to be effective 'PBF Ambassadors.' This would also enable a broader set of consultants from the PST to be used for assignments. Overall, PST Roster members should complement PBF's DMEL Team activities, while having sufficient and sustainable resources and staffing within PBF's core DMEL team is equally important.

V. Evaluation

PBF has invested significantly in enhancing and streamlining its evaluation function in recent years, culminating in the new **2022-2024 evaluation policy**, as outlined in section III.

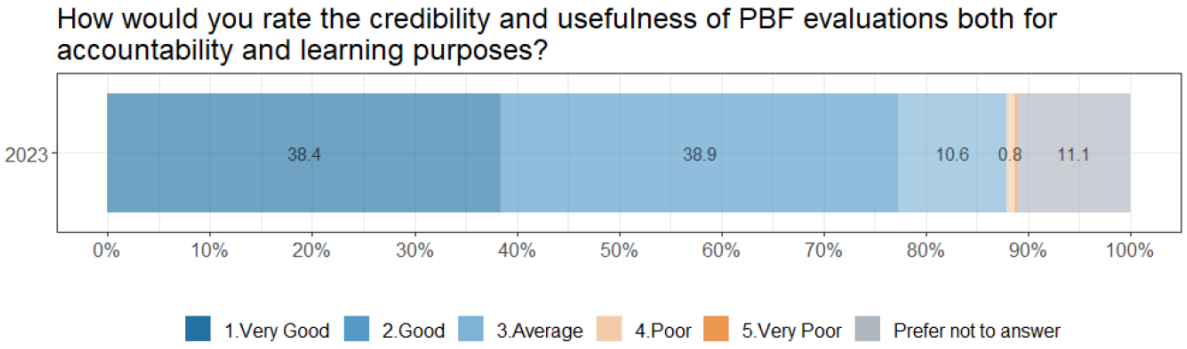
It is a welcome development that the overall amount of project evaluations will be reduced through the evaluation policy guidelines to conduct **cohort evaluations** for projects under USD 1,5 million. Those will also have more significant potential for learning in selected thematic areas. In some ways, a cohort evaluation will face some of the same strategic considerations and possible challenges as PBF's synthesis reviews of evaluations, as the distilled macro-level thematic findings will depend on the strength and thematic insights reflected in the individual project evaluations. Hence, those conducting cohort evaluations will require a qualitative and creative methodology and approach to distill some of the thematic patterns to inform further learning in the identified areas. So far, one cohort evaluation of GYPI 2020 projects has been conducted; the final report was being finalized at the time of writing this strategic review. Cohort evaluations for GYPI 2021 projects are planned for 2024 (with two themes: protecting civic spaces and providing mental health and psycho-social support). It will be necessary for PBF to **learn from these experiences with initial cohort evaluations** to determine whether these are valuable processes to invest in going forward.

It is further expected that the quality of project evaluations in the future might be strengthened through an enhanced roster of PST consultants from countries and regions where PBF is active while also ensuring greater coherence in necessary peacebuilding DMEL skills and capabilities.

The evaluation – learning feedback loop

An area of interest going forward will be to use portfolio evaluations more deliberately for learning at global and country levels and to incentivize the practical use and learning from project evaluations more amongst RUNOs and NUNOs.

The MTR of PBF's mid-term review states that the evaluation policy remains vague about using the information collected through the high number of project evaluations per year and recommends more explicitly articulating the value for money for the significant investment in project evaluations. The 2021-2022 synthesis review of evaluations comes to a similar conclusion.



Source: PBF partner survey 2023 (internal data)

As practical measures to increase the **systematic use of evaluation findings** in future project design and implementation, PBF proposals could include a section that would prompt RUNOs and NUNOs to articulate how findings from past evaluations or other types of evaluative reviews have been used pro-actively to inform current analysis and program strategy.

Portfolio evaluations

Portfolio evaluations are commissioned and managed centrally by PBF. The extension of the project cycles to 5 years through the SRFs implies a smaller number of portfolio evaluations overall going forward. This might be a welcome development overall, as it might help to ensure adequate resourcing and accompaniment of the portfolio evaluations by PBF's DMEL team. SRFs provide a critical step forward to enable portfolio evaluations to assess peacebuilding results at PBF portfolio levels and higher-level strategic questions emerging from PBF portfolios.

Like project evaluations, portfolio evaluations have been of varying degrees of quality. The IRF-99 strategic review collected a few **contextual factors and conditions that seem to enable the implementation of a solid and valuable portfolio evaluation:**

- There is a clear correlation between the strength of project designs, the availability of solid monitoring systems and data, and the possible quality of a portfolio evaluation. Weak monitoring systems limit the strength of portfolio evaluations. Hence, investing in robust SRF and project monitoring systems will be critical for the future utility of portfolio evaluations.

- Portfolio evaluations conducted in strong (not necessarily big) teams that complement each other are generally better. This includes strong international, national, and local peacebuilding evaluation experts and good collaboration between external and internal experts.
- As portfolio evaluations review more extended periods, there will necessarily have been a lot of staffing changes at the country level during this period. Investing in engaging critical people involved with PBF portfolios over the period under review (who might have moved on to new posts or countries) goes a long way to paint a more holistic picture of PBF investment at the portfolio level.
- Strong PBF Secretariats who can strategically anchor the portfolio evaluation process at the country level make a huge difference in the quality of the final product. At the same time, key informants stressed that the management of portfolio evaluations should remain with PBF in New York, as it might cause a potential conflict of interest for PBF Secretariats if they were to manage those directly. Also, many PBF Secretariats lack the experience to manage large-scale portfolio-level evaluations.
- PBF's DMEL team should be in the driver's seat for steering and accompanying portfolio evaluations. Those are complex, multi-layered evaluations that require dedicated capacity and ongoing guidance. It would be helpful for PBF to pinpoint those portfolio evaluations in recent years that are considered 'role models' for future portfolio evaluations and make those available (see the above recommendation about more explicit peacebuilding quality standards). Again, this requires adequate staffing of PBF's DMEL team.

Impact Evaluation

PeaceFIELD (Peacebuilding Fund Impact Evaluation Learning and Dissemination) was launched by the government of Germany and the Peacebuilding Support Office in early 2021 to strengthen the evidence base in the international peacebuilding sector by applying the analytical tools of impact evaluation to a select set of PBF projects and conducting related capacity development and engagement activities. 3ie's "Gap Map" of peacebuilding interventions shows that the peacebuilding sector remains evidence-light in absolute and relative terms.

So far, PeaceField has started impact evaluations in Guatemala, the Mali-Niger border region, the Sierra Leone-Guinea border region, and Sudan, analyzing project implementation through control groups. Early results indicate that the Fund's East Darfur projects positively affected its target communities despite the national-level political situation. Given the considerable lead time required to set up rigorous impact evaluations, endline data for the other case studies will be collected in 2024 and subsequent years after the end of project activities.

PBF intends to continue the PeaceField initiative in 2024-2026, which provides unique data and learnings on peacebuilding in countries funded by the PBF. This will also contribute to the work of the PBSO's new impact hub (see VIII/2). PeaceField is managed by PBF's DMEL team.

VI. PBF's role as a knowledge broker and facilitator of learning

In the area of **learning**, PBF has increased its activities significantly since 2021. Next to the thematic reviews and guidance notes highlighted above, PBF organizes regular brown bag discussions within PBSO, for example, around the findings of portfolio evaluations, the PeaceField initiative, or SRF developments (more on PBF's community of practice below). Key questions in the future seem to be how to incentivize further learning at the country level and how PBF can leverage its learning facilitation role within the broader DPPA-PBSO system.

Three levels of learning outlined in the current (2020-2024) PBF strategy are the following:

a. Learning at the global level: system-wide policy development and institutional learning; at the global level
b. Inter-agency knowledge: Learning within and across PBF implementing agencies
c. Country-based learning: Learning at the country level with partners in the country

a. At the **global level**, PBF has invested significantly mainly through the thematic reviews, sometimes also connecting topics of thematic reviews to training offerings (such as on climate security and peacebuilding in collaboration with the UN Systems Staff College, UNSSC). PBF country-level colleagues highly appreciate these opportunities.
b. **Learning within and across PBF implementing agencies**. This is not something PBF controls but can only incentivize amongst RUNOs, and it highly depends on how much RUNOS prioritize this. It has been an essential focus of PBF's community of practice.
c. **Learning at the country level with partners in the country**. It should be a priority for PBF to incentivize this type of learning in the future, particularly in light of its ambition to foster strong collaboration between RUNOs, NUNOs, and national and local partners. Some of the recent evaluative products (for example, the 2021 Burundi portfolio evaluation) observe that national and local partners sometimes have more substantial peacebuilding capabilities than RUNOs but that there has not been a proactive learning process from each other.

Guidance products

Generally speaking, guidance developed by PBF is highly appreciated as a useful 'compass' for PBF portfolios. Those involved with coordinating PBF investments at the country level confirm that the application of guidance by RUNOs requires a proactive and ongoing process of accompaniment and a lot of 'repeat' action given frequent staffing changes amongst RUNOs. Making RUNOs and NUNOs aware of the guidance available is an essential first step; then, it requires ongoing support. The guidance provides necessary instruments for PBF Secretariats to guide PBF portfolio design and implementation and gives them a concrete 'hook' to engage RUNOs and NUNOs. PBF guidance also empowers PBF Secretariat staff to work with RUNOs and NUNOs towards shared peacebuilding quality standards (see section IV).

> *"Repeat, repeat, repeat, repeat….. at all levels; constantly."*
>
> [Quote from key informant interview]

Along the third level of learning outlined above, key informants confirmed that engaging and training national and local counterparts in available PBF knowledge and guidance is vital, as they play an instrumental role vis-à-vis the success of PBF-funded initiatives. This includes national and local partners, Joint Steering Committees, and project steering groups.

A few suggestions that were provided to enhance the utility and uptake of guidance further include the following:

- There is a need for PBF to 'socialize' guidance more so that colleagues at the country level know what the guidance means in practice. Simply sending out an email with the basic information alone is perceived as insufficient.
- Community of Practice meetings could be used more systematically to present thematic issues, guidance, and new templates and provide an opportunity to engage with PBF, ask questions, etc.
- Some guidance products are perceived as too technical, abstract, and complicated. They could benefit from a complementary 'practice guide' to lay out, more concisely, what they mean in practice.
- Less is more. PBF should consolidate existing guidance products more, provide them in a user-friendly manner, and focus on supporting and accompanying country teams with the application of guidance – instead of producing a lot of new guidance.
- All PBF guidance should consistently be made available in crucial PBF languages other than English (French and Spanish, at least). Not having relevant guidance available in other languages is an impediment for those working at the country level.

Thematic Reviews

Like the PBF guidance products, the thematic reviews are highly appreciated by those supporting the implementation of PBF portfolios at the country level. They are appreciated on several different levels:
i) being tuned into broader developments at the PBF through thematic reviews and higher-level learnings and insights based on evidence;
(ii) useful to understand broader trends in the peacebuilding field beyond PBF; and
(iii) relevant to help design specific thematic projects and portfolios aligned with thematic reviews (this depends on the particular thematic PBF portfolio in a given country).

If linked to a clear dissemination strategy, thematic reviews give PBF visibility in the wider peacebuilding sector.

The following criteria were identified by key informants that make thematic reviews particularly helpful:

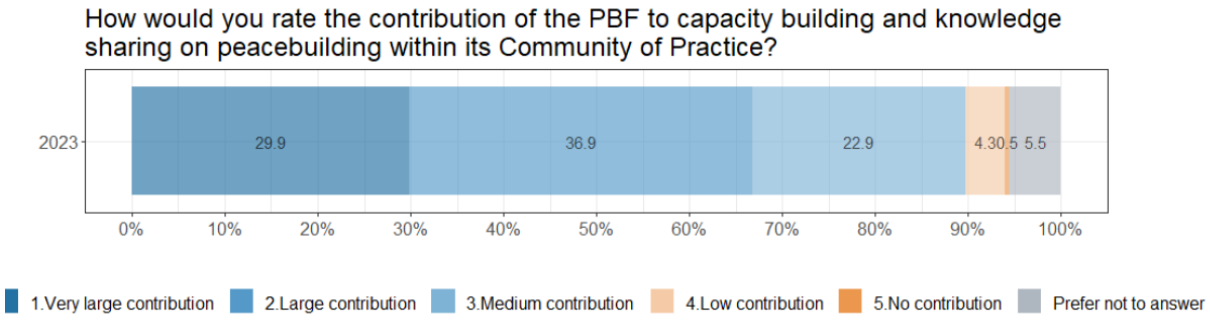
- The topic of a thematic review needs to be relevant and provide insights into a new area that is not already covered elsewhere (within the UN or outside).
- Thematic reviews should be planned to include a clear outreach and dissemination strategy from the beginning (e.g., a good example is the climate security and peacebuilding thematic review).
- A strong implementing partner as lead author for the thematic review is crucial to success.
- Likewise, PBF must make sufficient resources and staff time available internally to manage the process and invest in dissemination.

> *"Thematic reviews give us inspiration."*
>
> [Quote from key informant interview]

Community of Practice

PBF's community of practice function was highlighted as paramount for coherent PBF portfolio management at the country level.

The PBF Community of Practice (CoP) exchanges include PBF Secretariats, PBF focal points, Peace and Development advisers, Human Rights advisers, RUNOs, and others involved in PBF portfolios at the country level. In 2019, PBF convened a global in-person CoP in Kenya. Since 2022, PBF has facilitated virtual CoPs quarterly. For 2024, PBF is planning to convene another global in-person CoP gathering.



Source: PBF partner survey 2023 (internal data)

PBF Secretariats and those involved in managing PBF portfolios at the country level appreciate the commitment and leadership that PBF has demonstrated with the community of practice engagements, for example, through the participation of PBF senior staff, including the head of PBF. The enhanced push from PBF to facilitate online CoP meetings in 2022 and 2023 has been highly appreciated.

Key informants consulted for this strategic review expressed the following recommendations for PBF to consider regarding the community of practice engagement going forward:

- In-person community of practice meetings are critical to building personal relationships, exchanging key issues of a more sensitive nature, and providing a platform for ongoing learning. In-person relationships amongst PBF countries and between PBF Secretariats and PBF in New York require continuing nurturing. Colleagues drew the analogy between PBF Secretariat staff and the Peace and Development Advisers deployed through the UNDP/DPPA Joint Program on conflict prevention that has benefitted from a very active community of practice. Something along those lines would also be appreciated for PBF.
- It is suggested that PBF consider in-person global CoP meetings, as well as sub-regional CoP meetings, to consider language issues and the fact that more specific issues in one region could be discussed. Global and regional meetings could be organized in an alternating manner.
- Online CoP meetings are also beneficial and appreciated; however, in addition to and not instead of in-person CoP meetings. The creative use of technology for those meetings, e.g., through the simultaneous translation in real-time using artificial intelligence, is much appreciated. It is also expected that even more participation and engagement in online CoP meetings will be possible if people meet each other in person more frequently through in-person CoPs.
- PBF shouldn't lose the momentum on the CoP in 2024 and roll out the guidance products and reviews that are currently being produced (e.g., new gender marker guidance, catalytic peacebuilding, synthesis review of evaluations, new UNEG peacebuilding evaluation guidance further down the road in 2024).

Regarding the **facilitation of the online CoP meetings**, the following suggestions were made to make those even more conducive for peer exchange and learning:

- Be clear about the objectives of a specific online session, and develop a clear agenda and facilitation plan.
- To make CoPs more participatory, they could focus more on prioritizing horizontal exchanges between Secretariats and country-level staff in addition to hearing updates and inputs from PBF in New York.
- In practical terms, this could mean the following:
    - Limit the time of inputs/presentations and leave more time for Q&A and discussion.
    - Consider putting people into small online working groups to discuss specific questions in addition to plenary exchanges.
    - Build on successful experiences in which PBF Secretariats or others at the country level have presented an exciting process, an evaluation, and do more of that. This requires proactive outreach by PBF's DMEL team to explore who might be interested in sharing something and set up a calendar of 'presentations/inputs' throughout the year.

VII. PBF Secretariats and country-level mechanisms for PBF implementation

PBF Secretariats play important in-country support functions for conflict analysis and DMEL. Those functions are also frequently covered and supported by Peace and Development Advisers and their teams in the RC Office, depending on the specific country setup.

> *"If PBF is serious about wanting PBF Secretariats to provide excellent support in guiding PBF portfolios, training, guidance and high-level results monitoring, capacities of PBF Secretariats need to seriously be strengthened."*
>
> [Quote from key informant interview].

PBF Secretariats, if staffed and appropriately equipped, play critical roles, especially if they provide strategic steering support to PBF portfolios across RUNOs and NUNOs, if they provide technical/substantive support in peacebuilding and DMEL, or if they facilitate country-level communities of practice. These essential functions go beyond the effective administration of PBF funds and require PBF Secretariat staff to have the right skills.

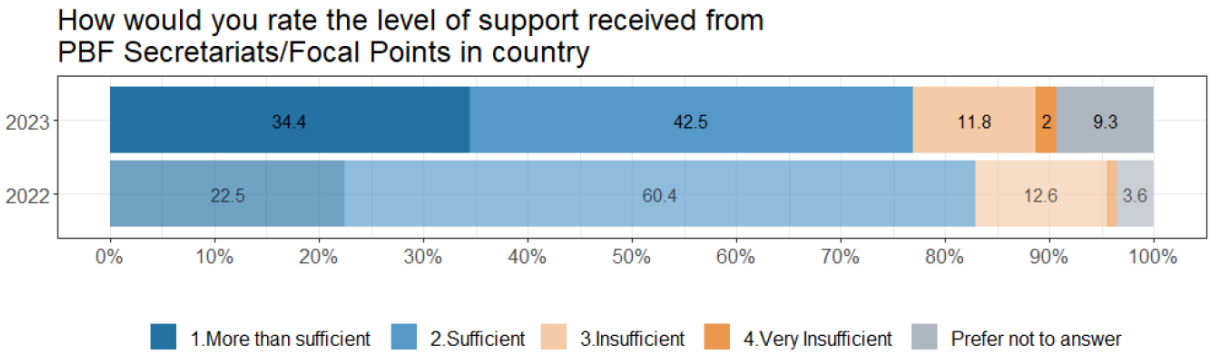
As per the PBF Secretariat guidance note, PBF Secretariats "1) support the organization and work of the PBF Joint Steering Committee, which provides strategic oversight over the PBF portfolio in a given country; and 2) foster integration, strengthen coordination and provide technical guidance to the work of the different UN (RUNOs) and non-UN recipient organizations (NUNOs) implementing PBF supported projects throughout the phases of the project cycle (Design, Monitoring and Evaluation) and ensure collaboration among recipient organizations and synergies of the PBF portfolio as well as its visibility."

Fully staffed PBF Secretariats in eligible countries have a PBF coordinator, a monitoring & evaluation expert (usually also with a communications role if there is no separate communications support), an administrative and financial assistant, and a driver. Some PBF Secretariats have been able to count on

sustainable funding and are equipped with a potent combination of peacebuilding programming and DMEL skills; others have been struggling to secure consistent funding and might also not have all the required skills and capabilities needed for the strategic management and oversight of PBF portfolios. In situations with limited funding for PBF Secretariats, UNVs are brought on board to help, for example, for the M&E expert role. While many UNVs bring excellent experience, managing PBF initiatives in the country is a complex undertaking (particularly the cross-cutting DMEL needs) and requires more sustained funding and close support from senior-level staff.

Key informants interviewed for this strategic review confirmed that **solid and sustained capacities in PBF Secretariats are critical for strategically managing PBF portfolios** and finding particular entry points for the niche PBF investments try to fill. Ideally, PBF Secretariats should be positioned and capable of providing DMEL support on all levels, including relevant training for RUNOs in critical areas of peacebuilding programming, conflict analysis, conflict sensitivity, and related DMEL.

At the same time, it is also critical to flag PBF Secretariats' need to be conscious of their particular roles as **facilitators, supporters, and enablers** – to play strategic support roles to enhance the work of RUNOS and NUNOs- and not do the work for them or become too overpowering. This is a delicate and specific set of skills beyond the specific substantive/technical skills to understand and embrace such accompaniment and mentoring functions (rather than 'doing' the work themselves).



Source: 2023 PBF partner survey

Strong and sustained capacities were flagged as becoming even more critical because PBF has started supporting other multi-donor trust funds and related functions at the country level, further stretching existing capacities.

Finally, it was highlighted that a **strategic communications function** is critical from a DMEL perspective: it needs to be someone with the adequate skill set to communicate positive peacebuilding change and human impact stories. Strong communications support at PBF NYC was also flagged as necessary.

Clarity of roles

The review reveals that some PBF Secretariats struggle with **clarity related to roles and reporting lines** based on the matrix reporting arrangements they have: PBF Secretariats are based in RC Offices (not part of the UNCT), and have a direct reporting line to RCs, with sometimes also an apparent link to others in the RC Office, such as PDAs[14]. Many (albeit not all) PBF Secretariat staff are on UNDP contracts, including a UNDP reporting line, and then there is a dotted reporting line to PBSO/PBF in New York.

A **more explicit induction and ongoing orientation** program for PBF Secretariat staff was suggested to fulfill two functions:

- Guide how to maneuver these multiple interlinked roles and ensure coherence between PBSO/PBF, the RC, and the PBF Secretariat. The PDA induction program was highlighted as a possible reference point for how to handle this.
- To establish a clear understanding of the required skills and capacities of PBF Secretariat staff (along the lines of the suggested 'gold star' quality standards package outlined in section IV) and develop a clear capacity development plan depending on what might have to be strengthened within a given team.

> *"There are different reporting lines and different incentive structures between PBF in New York, UNDP, the RC, and the link to the work with the PDA. We would need a clearer conversation amongst all those involved to clarify our roles and reporting requirements."*
>
> [Quote from key informant interview].

Some key informants also flagged that it would be helpful for PBF to help with the ***'professionalization' of PBF Secretariat functions***, meaning how to support PBF Secretariat staff to develop more evident career trajectories within the UN system based on a more clearly articulated package of skills. This could include a clearer professional roster for PBF coordinators and DMEL staff, along the lines of the PDA Roster under the joint UNDP/DPPA joint program on conflict prevention. In that sense, it would also be helpful to streamline the host agency so that all contracts are managed by the same agency (most but not all PBF Secretariat staff contracts are governed by UNDP).

Regarding ***relationships between PBF Secretariats and PBF in New York***, PBF's support is highly appreciated and regarded as outlined above. Given the various changes in the DMEL team at PBF in New York over the past two years, colleagues feel that a more explicit connection and ongoing relationship with the DMEL Team in New York would also be helpful to build up again more directly, including more clarity on the priorities of the DMEL team. One possible way to support this could be a more explicit plan and strategy that articulates PBF's DMEL priorities in a given timeframe and more clarity about how PBF/IRF-99 resources will be used and how country teams can access them.

[14] Key informant interviews revealed one case where a PBF coordinator reported formally to the PDA, which was not considered a conducive set up.

VIII. Looking Ahead

The utility and appreciation of PBF/IRF-99 support have been documented in this strategic review. In the future, it seems essential for PBF to consider the learnings from past PBF/IRF- implementation to shape future engagement priorities and to leverage the potential opportunities emerging through PBSO's new impact hub. Both issues are reflected upon in this section.

1. Priorities going forward

Key informants interviewed for this strategic review expressed clear priorities for a future phase of PBF/IRF 99 DMEL support:

- Use IRF-99 more strategically to catalyze/amplify sustainable capacities at the country level rather than only invest in specific support projects.
- Develop a more apparent package of PBF peacebuilding quality standards, including a foundational peacebuilding DMEL induction and training package ('stop reinventing the wheel').
- Prioritize investing in PBF Secretariats (upfront and ongoing), articulate more clearly the substantive requirements and peacebuilding DMEL methods that are binding and expected from PBF Secretariat staff, which could, in turn, further contribute to a greater professionalization of PBF Secretariat staff roles and open up more apparent career paths;
- Develop greater clarity of roles and reporting lines of PBF Secretariat staff. Conducting a learning review of PBF Secretariat functions and roles could help with this.
- Invest in consolidating and focusing rather than producing many new things. But also, don't stop commissioning essential products, such as thematic reviews.
- Go back to basics and ensure those involved with PBF implementation are equipped with the critical foundations of peacebuilding and DMEL tools and skills.
- Focus on application/accompaniment/ implementation of guidance.
- Drop processes and products perceived as less beneficial (some mentioned evaluability assessments as an example of a less helpful process from their perspective).
- Prioritize and remain committed to convening community of practice engagements in-person, globally, and at a regional level.
- Maintain a good balance between clarity of standards and guidance on the one hand and agility and flexibility on the other.
- Invest more in PBF communication functions (global and at country level) to better capture human impact stories.
- Provide more clarity on how PBF/IRF-99 funding is used and how to tap into it.

2. Relationship between IRF-99 activities and PBSO's new Impact Hub

In December 2023, PBSO launched its new impact hub after the conceptual development of the hub in 2023. The impact hub aims to be a platform for peacebuilding thought leadership, knowledge development and sharing, and advocacy on peacebuilding in the broader UN system and with civil society and think tanks. It aims to foster a deeper understanding of the effects and impact of peacebuilding interventions and practice to enhance the ability of peacebuilders to make evidence-informed decisions for effective and adaptive action at all stages based on sound analysis - from conflict prevention to recovery and sustaining peace and development. The hub has an ambitious vision and will organize its strategy around a few key pillars of activities: engage, analyze, reflect, share, and empower[15]. The impact hub will commence operational activities in early 2024, starting with a small team – with parts of the functions related to DMEL being shared with PBF.

The impact hub presents an opportunity for PBSO to scale its work related to peacebuilding impact if collaborative synergies between PBF and the impact hub are consciously developed (the initial 2-year funding for the hub includes support from PBF). Particular areas of possible synergies and convergence between PBF and the impact hub seem to be related to **thought leadership/knowledge development and dissemination, engagement of a peacebuilding community of practice, and capacity development/training.**

This strategic review does not provide an in-depth strategy for how PBF and the impact hub should collaborate. However, it gives some initial pointers on possible synergies and coherence below with a view for PBF to leverage the new opportunities under the impact hub.

Thought leadership/knowledge development and dissemination: The vision of the impact hub is to develop global overview reports to provide a snapshot of specific peacebuilding and conflict prevention themes and identify future trends and opportunities. These products could be very relevant for those implementing PBF-funded initiatives to connect with the broader trends and development in the peacebuilding sector. On the PBF side, a highly regarded area of work has been the thematic reviews on various topics. The new cohort evaluations provide an additional possible avenue for learning across specific thematic areas in the future. At the same time, PBF has not had enough time and resources to invest in more in-depth dissemination, outreach, and facilitation of learning around the thematic reviews across the board (with exceptions, e.g., the climate security review has been disseminated widely and extensively and also linked to training). The impact hub could complement PBF's work with learning dissemination and further outreach to amplify PBF's work.

Community of practice: The vision of the impact hub on developing a community of practice is centered around the idea of establishing a convener within the UN system to gather the peacebuilding community within the UN system and beyond (INGOs, think tanks, etc.) around critical areas of interest in the conflict prevention and peacebuilding space. PBF's community of practice has been more UN internally focused on those involved with implementing PBF funded initiatives. It has mainly facilitated discussions around

[15] https://www.un.org/peacebuilding/content/impact-hub

thematic reviews, portfolio evaluations, new guidance products, or promising practices at the country level. The two ambitions would seem complementary, and PBF and PBSO could share a community of practice activities. At the same time, PBF should not give up a dedicated COP space for those directly involved in implementing PBF projects, as there are also specific issues and questions to be discussed (geared towards PBF Secretariats, PDAs, etc.).

It could also be explored how to leverage the role of PBF Secretariats and Peace and Development Advisers to extend the community of practice idea to the country level – they could act as conveners and facilitators of peacebuilding learning around critical questions within and beyond the UN system. This would need to happen based on a pragmatic and organic approach without too much formalization; it would also need to be based on the available appetite and energy of select PBF Secretariats and PDAs to play such roles.

Training: As part of this IRF-99 strategic review, and as outlined above, several interviewees expressed a need for more and more systematic training and capacity development opportunities at all levels of PBF involvement (PBF in New York, PBF Secretariats, others involved in steering PBF portfolios in RC Offices, national partners, etc.). It was noted that a foundational training package on peacebuilding and peacebuilding DMEL would go a long way in establishing a common understanding of all those involved. This could ideally be offered as a self-paced online training with several modules that people can take in their own time, complemented possibly by online facilitated training sessions or in person where time and resources allow for this. The strategy of PBSO's impact hub includes developing and rolling out training. Hence, this could be a prominent area of convergence and synergy.

For this complementarity between the impact hub and PBF to succeed, it will be paramount to develop a clear **vision for a collaborative and joint approach** and a clear, practical division of roles and responsibilities to foster collaboration and avoid competition. It is recommended for PBF to proactively develop transparent working relationships with the new PBSO impact hub team to develop such a joint vision and clarity of roles and complementarities. Simultaneously, it is essential for PBF not to lose sight of the **specific needs of those implementing PBF-funded initiatives**.

IX. Recommendations

This strategic review makes recommendations based on the general high appreciation of PBF/IRF-99 and the clear priorities articulated by key informants for a future phase of PBF DMEL support.

As a general point, it is recommended to use the beginning of a new phase of the PBF/IRF-99 project and upcoming conversations on the PBF strategy in 2024 to **consolidate a more strategic focus on how resources are being used** (aligned with the findings in this review about 'less is more'). The general nature of this strategic focus should be on the application and implementation of guidance and current processes rather than investing in many new priorities. It is also recommended to consciously reflect on processes PBF might want to drop and stop doing as part of a focusing/prioritization exercise (a 'more of'/'less of' exercise might be helpful). Such an exercise should be based on clear criteria developed by PBF, with inputs from PBF Secretariats and others involved in managing PBF portfolios at the country level on what has been most beneficial and what is needed more (or less).

More specifically, the review provides the following eight **recommendations**:

1) **Re-activate in-person community of practice**: Invest in PBF's community of practice and prioritize in-person and online meetings. This should include global and regional in-person meetings, e.g., global meetings every two years, with annual regional conferences (also considering language issues). The planned CoP retreat in 2024 will be a significant step in this direction. In-person gatherings will allow the CoP to become a more interactive network with strengthened connections between country-level colleagues and between country-level and HQ teams.

2) **Knowledge and guidance consolidation**: Put together a more explicit foundational 'one-stop shop' of PBF's peacebuilding DMEL quality standards, a repository and package of available resources and guidance (by PBF, the broader UN system, and the wider peacebuilding DMEL sector). Having a 'gold standard' readily available in one place on PBF's website that is accessible and user-friendly would provide an opportunity to consolidate PBF's DMEL work. These quality standards should also include standards on the dissemination of DMEL products.

3) **Develop a standard online foundational peacebuilding DMEL training package** based on the abovementioned peacebuilding quality standards. This should be an online training package of 'key steps and quality standards in peacebuilding DMEL' and could be accompanied by live or online facilitated training sessions (e.g., this could be done in collaboration with UNSSC and UNDCO and also explore synergies with PBSO's impact hub). Right now, training and onboarding of PBF Secretariats seems ad hoc. Making specific training elements mandatory for those involved with PBF management and oversight (at both country and HQ levels) might ensure greater coherence and consistency in applying clear peacebuilding standards across the board.

4) **Focus on strengthening PBF Secretariats** to be well-equipped to support strong DMEL at the country level across the board. Consider using the PST Roster more as multipliers in this regard - to help consolidate capacities within PBF Secretariats by accompaniment and mentoring, rather than using the PST to deliver single/individual country support activities, e.g., conflict analysis or project design support. PST support

for thematic reviews, guidance products, synthesis reviews, or portfolio evaluations don't fall under this recommendation; such processes should remain at the core of PST support activities.

5) **Invest in a review of PBF Secretariat roles/functions**: those functions vary significantly, and some PBF Secretariats feel squeezed in between formal/informal reporting requirements between RCOs, UNDP (where many are housed), and PBF in NY. A review of roles/responsibilities/functions could help clarify and provide a solid foundation to strengthen PBF Secretariats further, particularly their DMEL roles. There is also a clear link with the request to reactivate the in-person community of practice meetings, as maneuvering the complex PBF Secretariat functions could be put on the agenda of such sessions, and tips could be shared across countries.

6) **Ensure adequate staffing of PBF's DMEL Team**: the review revealed that an adequately staffed DMEL team is critical to retaining institutional memory, providing much-needed country support, and directing and managing PBF's global DMEL functions across its four pillars (design, monitoring, evaluation, and learning), including the implementation of above recommendations. PBF's mid-term review of its 2020-2024 strategic plan also recommended this, with a particular focus on design, monitoring, and data analysis.

7) **Leverage opportunities to scale PBF's work arising through PBSO's new impact hub**, mainly related to knowledge dissemination (e.g., thematic reviews), community of practice engagement, and possibly training, as outlined in this review. Such opportunities should be explored while maintaining a balance between the broad ambition of PBSO's new impact hub vis-à-vis the more specific and concrete PBF project and portfolio needs.

8) **Articulate transparently how PBF uses IRF-99 resources**. This could include a short and clear document on PBF's website about priorities under the project in a given year/timeframe, e.g., what types of DMEL processes and products are being prioritized. This should also include articulating how country-based colleagues can tap into IRF-99 resources in practical terms.

ANNEXES

Annex 1: Documents reviewed

Hyperlinks accessed of Dec 1st, 2023

- DFID Review of the PBF 2018/2019, September 2019.
- Klyskens, Jups and Clark, Lance: Review of the United Nations Peacebuilding Fund, May 2014.
- PBF 2020-2024 strategy
- Mid-term review of PBF's 2020-2024 strategy (January 2023)
- UN PBF 2022-2024 Evaluation Policy
- IRF-99 project proposal, latest updated version June 2023, and December 2021 version see here
- IRF 99 progress report (June 2023, 'summary report'), see here
- IRF -99 map of countries supported (up to May 2023, provided by PBF)
- Draft IRF-99 project proposal for next phase (starting in 2024, draft internal document)
- UN PBF partner surveys 2022 and 2023, internal PBF data source.
- Updated PBF guidelines, October 2023
- Synthesis Reviews of evaluations
    - Ernstorfer, Anita: Synthesis Review of UN Peacebuilding Fund (PBF) 2021-2022 Evaluations and Evaluative Exercises (draft version, December 2023)
    - Ernstorfer, Anita: Synthesis Review of 2020 evaluative exercises of UN Peacebuilding Fund supported initiatives. Independent review for the UN Peacebuilding Fund, February 2021
    - Ernstorfer, Anita: Synthesis Review, 2017-2019 PBF portfolio and project evaluations. Independent review for the UN Peacebuilding Fund, 2020
    - Van Beijnum, Mariska: Challenges and opportunities to peacebuilding: analysis of strategic issues identified by country-specific PBF evaluations. The Clingendael Institute – Conflict Research Unit, July 2013
- Internal documents related to the strategy of PBSO's impact hub development
- PBF Secretariat Terms of Reference (internal document)
- PBF Coordinator Terms of Reference (internal document)
- PBF M&E Specialist Terms of Reference (internal document)
- Various PBF thematic reviews and guidance documents are available on the PBF website and through the MPTF Trust Fund webpage

Annex 2: Key informant interviews

PBF Headquarters, incl. former staff	
Marcus Lenzen	Senior Adviser and Deputy Chief, UN PBF
Bushra Hassan	Head of DMEL team, UN PBF
Deborah Gribaudo	Monitoring and Evaluation Officer, UN PBF
Diane Sheinberg	UN PBF Program Officer
Tammy Smith	Former Senior Adviser, head of DMEL team PBF (until 2022)
Nigina (Khaitova) Qminacci	Knowledge management officer with PBF until September 2023
PBSO Impact Hub-related	
Patrick Vinck	Independent consultant to PBSO on impact hub. Director of Research, Harvard Humanitarian Initiative
PBF Secretariat staff and PDAs	
Ulan Shabynov	PBF Secretariat coordinator, Sudan
Kyle Jacques	M&E Specialist, PBF Secretariat, Sudan
Salif Nimaga	Interim PBF Secretariat Burkina Faso, former PBF HQ staff, and PST Roster member
Lucy Turner	PBF Secretariat Coordinator, Guatemala
Natalia Peral	PDA El Salvador
Patrick MacCarthy	PDA The Gambia
Abdel Khdeim	PBF Secretariat Coordinator, The Gambia
Mamadou Salieu Bah	M&E Officer, PBF Secretariat, The Gambia
Mamadou Bamba	PBF Secretariat Coordinator, Haiti
Tony Kouemo	M&E Officer, PBF Secretariat, Haiti
Jean Claude Cigwerhe	PBF Secretariat coordinator, Niger
Simonetta Rossi	PDA Sierra Leone
Brice Bussiere	Former PBF Secretariat coordinator in Madagascar and Guinea. Currently head of RCO in Gabon