

Operationalizing Conflict Prevention: Peace and Development Advisors in Non-mission Settings

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United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres took office in January reaffirming his determination to prioritize conflict prevention as a key objective of the UN system. Guterres stressed that prevention activities should cut across all pillars of the UN's work to help countries avert the outbreak of crises. This Policy Briefing focuses on one such practical prevention tool – the *Peace and Development Advisors*, which are deployed through a joint programme of the *UN Development Programme* (UNDP) and the *UN Department of Political Affairs* (DPA). These advisors represent a cross-pillar effort to help UN presences adapt to politically sensitive contexts and develop and implement strategic conflict prevention programmes. While small in numbers, the deployment of these civilian experts is a practical and effective example of how conflict prevention can be operationalized on the ground.

Complex Political Contexts

The United Nations plays a vital role in preventing the onset and recurrence of conflict through the activities of its peacekeeping and political missions. The mandates of these missions are political in nature, where conflict analysis – ideally – helps inform decisions on how the mission operates.

The role of the *UN Country Teams* is fundamentally different than that of peace operations. *UN Country Teams* are present in over 130 countries and composed of UN agencies, funds, and programmes. Led by a *Resident Coordinator*, their main purpose is to support the host Government's development agenda.¹

In countries where both a peace operation and a *UN Country Team* are present, the head of the peace operation and the *Resident Coordinator*

agree on a shared set of priorities within a political framework. In countries where only a *UN Country Team* is present – so-called “non-mission settings” – the balance between a political and developmental focus is usually heavily tipped to the latter. However, the countries in which *UN Country Teams* operate are not immune to complex political developments and conflict. A better understanding of these contexts and the ability to work and respond to these situations go hand in hand with development efforts in sustaining peace.

The degree to which *Resident Coordinators* should play a “political” role is still debated, those arguing against noting that it could harm the working relationship between the *Resident Coordinator* and the host government. However, it is now generally recognized that *Resident Coordinators* and *UN Country Teams* benefit from a more conflict-sensitive approach.

¹ The *UN Country Teams* encompass all the entities of the UN system that carry out operational activities for development, emergency, recovery and transition in programme countries. For more information see: <https://undg.org/about/un-country-level/>.

Joint UNDP-DPA Programme

While Guterres has given the concepts of “prevention” and “sustaining peace” new momentum, the ideas are not new. Back in 2004, a group of like-minded UN senior staff set about translating the rhetoric on prevention into action on the ground and launched the *Joint UNDP-DPA Programme on Building National Capacities for Conflict Prevention*. The impressive programme initially flew somewhat under the radar, with its managers striking a delicate balance between touting it to gain donor support and being sensitive to some member states’ concerns about political engagement in countries where the UN had no political mandate per se. According to the managers of the *Joint Programme*, these sensitivities have become the exception rather than the rule with most member states now welcoming the initiative. The renewed focus on “conflict prevention” has also helped boost the *Joint Programme’s* *raison d’être*.

The *Joint Programme* (expanded in 2012) focuses on four areas of support:

- Developing strategic conflict prevention initiatives at the country level, including through

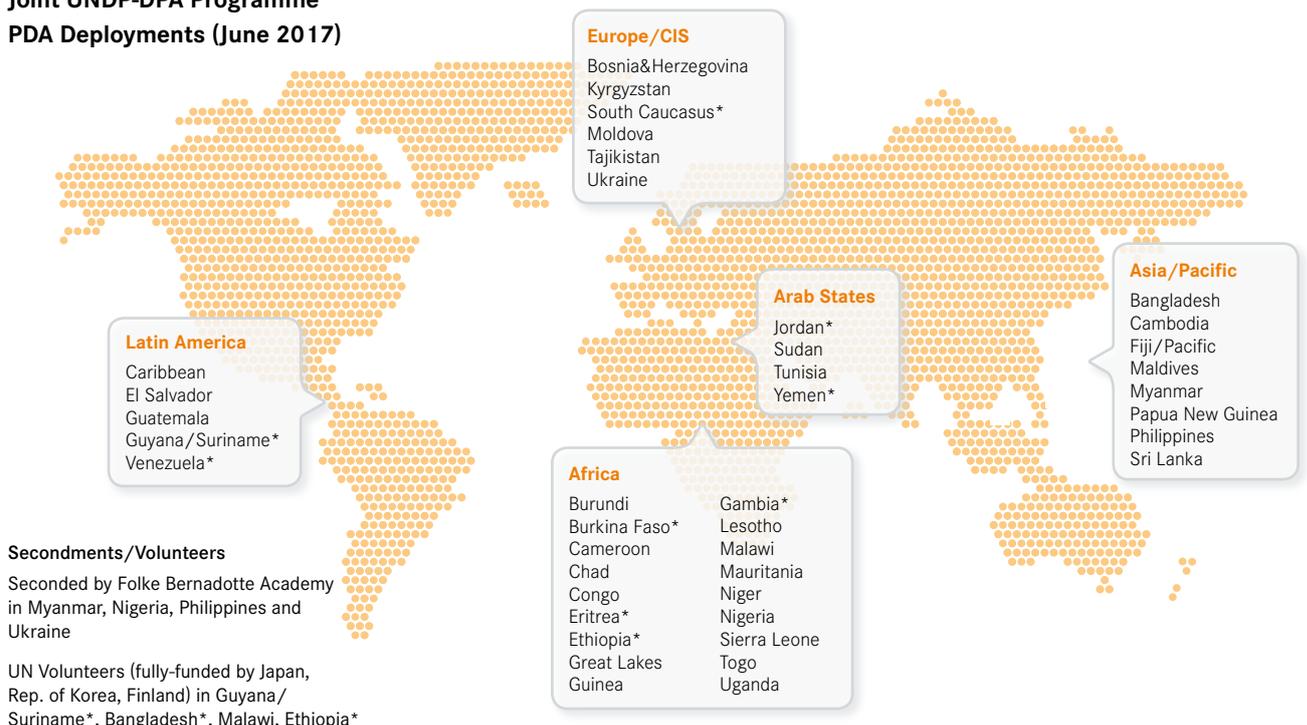
the deployment of *Peace and Development Advisors* (PDAs);

- Providing targeted assistance for specific facilitation activities undertaken by UNDP and DPA in non-mission settings;
- Supporting joint assessment, analysis, and knowledge development by DPA and UNDP in the context of support for joint country-level initiatives; and
- Providing short-term support for conflict and political analysis through deployment of advisors in countries experiencing crisis or transition.

Key Functions and Achievements of PDAs

The predominant focus of the *Joint Programme* is the deployment of PDAs. PDAs are mainly deployed in non-mission settings and where the need for extra conflict prevention knowledge and capacities is warranted. At the beginning of 2017, there were 41 PDAs deployed around the world. It is generally recognized that more *Resident Coordinator* offices would benefit from a PDA, but, given financial constraints, an increase in the number of PDA deployments is unlikely unless funding for the programme

Joint UNDP-DPA Programme PDA Deployments (June 2017)



Content of map provided by Joint UNDP-DPA Programme.
*under recruitment to be deployed

increases. However, the *Joint Programme* is using secondees from Sweden and UN Volunteers to support advisors on the ground. Key functions of PDAs include:

- Strengthening dialogue, mediation and national peace architectures, including early warning mechanisms;
- Providing conflict analysis to enable appropriate strategic responses for the UN; and
- Supporting conflict prevention and peace-building programming.

Examples of recent PDA activities:²

Burundi | The PDA supported the *Resident Coordinator* in developing the *UN Country Team's* joint response to the political crisis based on a common analysis of the root causes and impact of the crisis.

Togo | The PDA is helping to establish a national peace architecture in the country, leading an initiative to create 36 local peace committees covering all regions. Members of the committees, which include religious leaders, traditional chiefs, retired policemen, teachers, and other key stakeholders, are trained in mediation, negotiation, and conflict analysis and now serve as early warning mechanisms in their communities.

Maldives | Recognizing that the inclusion of women is a key factor to building sustainable peace, the PDA has worked to enhance women's political participation in the country, including through training for women's wings of major parties.

Tunisia | The PDA worked with the *UN Country Team* on the issue of preventing violent extremism (PVE), developing a risk assessment on PVE engagement, a review on the drivers of PVE and the design of a multi-stakeholder project. This work helped the UN articulate its support to the national responses to violent extremism.

While many UN staff remain in their political or developmental "silos," PDAs are meant to have a combination of both skills. They are usually conflict prevention and peacebuilding experts with senior level experience in conflict analysis, policy and strategy development as well as a policy and advisory experience in engaging with senior levels

of government, the UN and donors. The UN has now also developed a roster of qualified PDA candidates to be selected for future assignments.

Challenges

While the *Joint Programme* has a proven track record of enhancing UN collaboration on conflict prevention, promoting analysis that leads to conflict sensitive UN programming and strengthening national capacities to support preventive action, several challenges remain:³

Funding | Funding is critical to ensure that the programme can be sustained. The annual financial requirements for the *Joint Programme's* activities amount to approximately \$10 million. Key current donors include the European Union, Germany, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom, with most of the funding going towards PDA deployment. Additional funds have come from UNDP, DPA and the *Peacebuilding Fund*. Since the demand for PDAs is increasing, deployment could be expanded if more resources were available. The *Joint Programme* is seeking to enlarge the donor base and involve a broader group of member states known to be interested in conflict prevention, peacebuilding, mediation and related areas. The 19 June 2017 "Joint Programme Partner Event" in New York, where more than 40 member states participated, provided a platform to give it more visibility and hopefully expand its donor base.

Relationship with Resident Coordinator/ UN Country Team | On the ground, one of the most if not the most essential factor that has the greatest impact on a PDA's efficacy is whether the *Resident Coordinator* fully understands and supports the role of the PDA. Thus, it is clear that the PDA's role and mandate needs to be clearly articulated from the outset. However, even if the *Resident Coordinator* is supportive, some *Country Team* members may not fully understand the PDA's function. The mentality where development, humanitarian and political actors remain in their own "silos" is still prevalent and hinders acceptance of the PDA's role or involvement in their programming. Some of these challenges are

² See Joint UNDP-DPA Programme Annual Report 2016 for more details. Link: <http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/librarypage/democratic-governance/conflict-prevention/joint-undp-dpa-programme-on-building-national-capacities-for-con.html>.

³ See also "2014 Independent Review of PDAs and the Joint Programme."

institutional, but many are personality driven. Continued sensitization is needed for *Resident Coordinators* and *Country Teams* to fully appreciate the role of the PDAs and the importance of their deployment.

Relationship with host government | In some contexts, while the presence of a PDA may be warranted, their presence also touches upon certain sensitivities with some countries being wary of why the UN would need to have in-house political awareness and/or conflict prevention expertise. While these sensitivities still exist for *Resident Coordinators* in terms of them taking on a more political role, sensitivities regarding PDA deployments are becoming rarer. Additionally, relationships with local authorities and civil society are generally positive, demonstrative of the PDA's sincerity in wanting locals to lead on their own development strategies. If PDAs are able to prove their usefulness to national authorities and civil society, any remaining sensitivities could become less prevalent.

Support structure | Some practitioners have noted that since they are usually a one-person team, PDAs could benefit from a more established support structure to help brainstorm on ideas and provide feedback on reports and guidance if necessary. While there is now a stronger engagement from the DPA country desks, the level of substantive Headquarters engagement with PDAs is also dependent on the degree to which the desk officer recognizes the PDA's utility. Recognizing the need for a more established support structure, the *Joint Programme* managers have tried to establish more systematic opportunities for peer-to-peer mentoring and for PDAs to exchange experiences through annual retreats as well as developing an online portal for lessons learned.

Conclusion

It is now widely accepted that *Resident Coordinators* working in complex political environments need political and conflict prevention support. The 2015 reviews of UN peace operations and the peacebuilding architecture both highlighted

the *Joint Programme* as an example of effective collaboration across the UN system on conflict prevention and peacebuilding and an effective vehicle through which the UN is able to engage with national stakeholders to prevent and resolve conflict.

From day one of his term, Guterres has prioritized prevention on his agenda, noting that prevention is a cross-pillar activity with a broad scope for engagement. The deployment of PDAs has been a prime example of turning the conflict prevention rhetoric into concrete practice while also bringing together the different "silos" of the UN. However, the impact of PDAs should not be overstated. It is one person doing this job in a little over a third of the countries where *UN Country Teams* are present. But this "light touch" intervention is an excellent practical example of UN system-wide engagement on prevention and sustaining peace which could be further expanded with the support of member states to demonstrate their commitment to conflict prevention.

Recommendations for member states

- Member states should increase their financial support to the *Joint Programme* (amounting now to approximately \$10 million) to expand the programme and increase its impact on the ground.
- While the *Folke Bernadotte Academy* supports the biannual induction courses, member states could provide support for additional training opportunities, workshops and peer-to-peer mentoring to further enhance this tool. This should also include support for workshops which help sensitize *Resident Coordinators* and *UN Country Team* members to the role of the PDA.
- Apart from placement through the PDA roster, donor countries such as Germany could consider deploying secondees to work alongside PDAs and reinforce their capacity. While absorption capacity for this recruitment method has its limits, additional secondees would still be welcome.

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