

UN Regional Political Offices and Prevention for Sustaining Peace

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Conversations on Prevention for Sustaining Peace

We are beginning to understand what peace is—the structures, attitudes, and institutions that underpin it, and the motives that drive people to work for it. Still, peace remains largely an elusive goal, often negatively portrayed as the absence of violence.

It has been assumed that if we can understand the complexity of war and violence, we will be able to foster and sustain peace. We do not study peace, and therefore we tend to focus on the problems of conflict and aggression rather than the solutions associated with peace.¹ With this approach, prevention is viewed as a crisis management tool to address the destructive dynamics of conflict after they have occurred, typically through short-term and externally driven responses.

To address this peace deficit, IPI is seeking to reframe prevention for the purpose of sustaining peace rather than averting conflict through a series of conversations from October 2016 to June 2017. The overarching aim will be to build a shared understanding of what sustaining peace and prevention look like in practice at the national and international levels.

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Introduction

The identical 2016 UN Security Council and General Assembly resolutions on sustaining peace define peace as both a goal and a process to build a common vision of a society that takes into account the needs of all segments of the population.² Sustaining peace is conceived of as a shared task and responsibility that needs to be fulfilled by governments and all other national stakeholders. It is seen as flowing through all three pillars of the UN's work, integrating development with peace and human rights, and is intrinsically linked to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, where peace is both an enabler and an outcome.

As outlined in previous IPI issue briefs, viewing prevention through the lens of sustaining peace encourages a shift from time-bound, externally driven activities that use conflict rather than peace as the starting point in the search for solutions. Prevention for sustaining peace keeps a long-term perspective and is motivated by the humility to learn from what still works well in societies and to respect that people and communities, even under stress, have existing capacities for resilience, not just needs. This conceptual shift entails identifying and strengthening those capacities while addressing the threats to peace and their underlying drivers. The focus is no longer on restoring stability after violence but on investing in structures, attitudes, and institutions associated with peaceful societies.

Seen through this lens, peace is not needed only in conflict-affected societies. Prosperous countries cannot take their continued peace and stability for granted if they pursue or tolerate policies that create inequalities, exclusion, and discrimination.³

This issue brief focuses on how the mandates of UN regional political offices could best be leveraged to support key regional and country-specific stakeholders to engage in prevention not only as a tool to avert the outbreak of, escalation of, or relapse into violence, but also to lay the foundations for self-sustaining peace.

1 Peter Coleman, "The Missing Piece in Sustainable Peace," Earth Institute, November 6, 2012, available at <http://blogs.ei.columbia.edu/2012/11/06/the-missing-piece-in-sustainable-peace>.

2 Security Council Resolution 2282 (April 27, 2016), UN Doc. S/RES/2282; General Assembly Resolution 70/262 (April 27, 2016), UN Doc. A/RES/70/262.

3 Magdy Martínez-Solimán, "Sustaining Peace for Development," *Huffington Post*, September 22, 2016, available at www.huffingtonpost.com/magdy-martanezsoliman/sustaining-peace-for-deve_b_12090260.html.

Why Were Regional Political Offices Created?

In 2002, in an attempt to address increasingly regional and cross-border challenges to peace and security and to promote cooperation and partnerships in West Africa, the United Nations created its first regional political office, the UN Office for West Africa (UNOWA), in Dakar, Senegal. This was followed in 2007 by the UN Regional Centre for Preventive Diplomacy for Central Asia (UNRCCA) in Ashgabat, Turkmenistan, and in 2011 by the UN Regional Office for Central Africa (UNOCA) in Libreville, Gabon.

An intermediate level between country-specific field operations and UN headquarters, these offices were intended as a discrete tool for the United Nations to provide good offices for preventive diplomacy based on early warning and mediation. They were envisioned as having a key role in harmonizing efforts by other UN entities (country teams or other UN missions in the region) and by regional and subregional organizations to identify threats early and defuse tensions (e.g., trans-border security challenges or illicit trafficking in West and Central Africa and Central Asia). Moreover, regional political offices played a key role in strengthening capacities of countries and regional organizations.

A tool for both pre- and post-conflict situations, as well as for peaceful societies, regional political offices were established to provide knowledge and analysis channeled through strong political leadership. Their strategic position and location in the region enabled them to build relationships, both in national capitals and in local communities, and keep open channels of communication, thereby improving information exchange with a variety of local actors and encouraging dialogue. As UN regional presences, they provided important knowledge to the UN system in times of crisis.⁴ In addition, the creation of these regional offices by an exchange of letters between the secretary-general and the president of the Security Council and the minimal reporting demanded of them were

thought to allow them to work with a high degree of discretion and flexibility.

Current Mandates and Links to Prevention for Sustaining Peace

WEST AFRICA AND THE SAHEL

Since its inception in 2002, the UN Office for West Africa (UNOWA) has been tasked with providing good offices to prevent conflict in the region, promote peacebuilding, and develop effective partnerships with regional organizations, in particular the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), to draw attention to possible threats to regional peace. In 2016 UNOWA was merged with the UN Office of the Special Envoy for the Sahel to create the UN Office for West Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS).

UNOWAS has been mandated to “craft synergies to better engage with the countries of West Africa and the Sahel” and “to support regional solutions to cross-cutting threats to peace and security, such as terrorism and violent extremism, transnational organized crime, piracy and maritime insecurity.”⁵ It has also been tasked with enhancing the capacities of regional institutions and leading the implementation of the 2013 UN Integrated Strategy for the Sahel, which focuses on a wide range of programs and initiatives in the areas of governance, security, and resilience. The regional office has contributed to a number of positive diplomatic outcomes, including leveraging its geographic proximity, diplomatic expertise, and cooperation with regional organizations to prevent the escalation of conflict in Guinea in 2010.

Although the mandate of UNOWAS has evolved and contains many tasks relating to prevention and sustaining peace, the actions of the office have remained reactive rather than driven by the long-term goal of sustaining peace. Moreover, due to the number of countries under its purview and its limited staff and funds, UNOWAS has mostly focused on assessing fragility and challenges to peace in the region. Nonetheless, it has made a

⁴ Teresa Whitfield, “Political Missions, Mediation and Good Offices,” in *Review of Political Missions 2010*, Center on International Cooperation, 2010, available at http://peaceoperationsreview.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/2010_rpm_whitfield_politicalmissions.pdf; Richard Gowan, “Multilateral Political Missions and Preventive Diplomacy,” US Institute of Peace, 2011, available at www.usip.org/sites/default/files/resources/SR299.pdf.

⁵ See <https://unowas.unmissions.org/background>.

number of attempts, in coordination with regional organizations, in particular ECOWAS, to map progress and capacities for peace at the local level.⁶

CENTRAL ASIA

The UN Regional Centre for Preventive Diplomacy for Central Asia (UNRCCA) was established in 2007 in Turkmenistan at the request of the five countries of Central Asia. Its role was to liaise with the governments of the region on issues relevant to preventive diplomacy, conduct monitoring and analysis, maintain contact with regional organizations, and facilitate coordination and information exchange. In addition, UNRCCA was meant to provide an overall framework and leadership for preventive activities conducted by the UN country teams and to maintain close contact with the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan to ensure a comprehensive and integrated analysis of the situation in the region.

The special representative of the secretary-general for UNRCCA, Miroslav Jenča (2008–2015), supported the preventive capacity of the office by building its credibility and ensuring a high degree

of access to the region's governments. According to Jenča, "Initially, [there was] some thought to call the regional center a regional conflict prevention center, and there were some voices saying that this was an inappropriate title—'we don't have conflict, so we want preventive diplomacy.'" The UN's experience with a regional office in Central Asia is indeed different from that in West and Central Africa, as it evolved in a subregion where there are no peacekeeping operations.

UNRCCA has sought to focus on building knowledge and relationships in the region through in-depth analysis and cultivation of communication channels with leaders, elites, security forces, and civil society. Such an approach has been found to help develop national capacities and common positions on how to act in an emerging crisis.⁸ Moreover, engaging and balancing the interests of external actors early on can help create pathways to peace by opening up alternatives to violence among conflicting parties.

This approach was crucial in resolving the 2010 crisis in Kyrgyzstan. UNRCCA worked in close

Box 1. Preventing the outbreak of violent conflict

In the Gambia, after conceding the presidential election to his opponent Adama Barrow in early December 2016, former President Yahya Jammeh contested the results and declared a state of emergency, creating a significant risk of violent protests and conflict in the country. The response of ECOWAS was swift and united. A mission was deployed within several days to convey ECOWAS's support of a peaceful political transition in conformity with the results of the election. A few days later, ECOWAS declared its intent to take all measures necessary to enforce the results of the election; in other words, the only solution for Jammeh was to accept defeat and cede power.

The special representative of the secretary-general for UNOWAS, Mohamed Ibn Chambas, seeking to raise international pressure on President Jammeh to respect the outcome of the presidential election, engaged with national, regional, and international stakeholders to help resolve the crisis peacefully. He spearheaded joint AU-ECOWAS-UN statements, accompanied ECOWAS heads of state in their visits to Banjul, and advocated full support for regional efforts, including the joint ECOWAS-AU mediation team. The efforts of UNOWAS, the AU, and ECOWAS were fully supported by a united Security Council and by the secretary-general. Since the peaceful resolution of the crisis in the Gambia, UNOWAS, in close coordination with ECOWAS and the AU, has been working closely with the new government in support of its efforts to advance democratic governance, respect for the rule of law and human rights, socioeconomic recovery, and sustainable development.

⁶ See www.gppac.net/news/-/asset_publisher/fHv91YcOz0Cl/content/regional-response-capacity-for-conflict-prevention/ and <http://issat.dcaf.ch/Learn/Resource-Library2/Case-Studies/Creating-a-National-Dialogue-to-Prevent-Future-Conflict-in-Guinea-Bissau>.

⁷ Youssef Mahmoud, "Acting Locally on Preventive Diplomacy: Q&A with Miroslav Jenča," *IPI Global Observatory*, March 31, 2017, available at <https://theglobalobservatory.org/2017/03/preventive-diplomacy-central-asia-kyrgyzstan/>.

⁸ International Crisis Group, "Seizing the Moment: From Early Warning to Early Action," June 23, 2016, available at www.crisisgroup.org/global/seizing-moment-early-warning-early-action.

Box 2. Water diplomacy as an entry point for prevention

Water issues were one of the key areas of engagement of UNRCCA's preventive diplomacy. Indeed, water issues in Central Asia are both potential sources of conflict and enormous opportunities for cooperation. The regional office first conducted water diplomacy under the leadership of its former head, Miroslav Jenča, and continues to do so under its current head, Petko Draganov. As Jenča explained, "We provided technical support, prepared the documents [for agreements on water sharing], based on the advice and expertise of top international water law experts and based on existing UN water law conventions. [But] we also drew extensively on local expertise, combined it with international best practice and worked closely with the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea. It involved political engagement too because ultimately it is a question of building trust and political will."⁹

cooperation with a number of international partners, including the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and the EU, to engage with national partners to defuse the conflict. UNRCCA was effective in acting as a conduit for diplomatic efforts, reducing risks of duplication and maximizing impact. It built on its anticipatory analysis of the actors, as well as on the dividends of its long-term investment in relationship building. Moreover, strong cooperation with the UN country team and the resident coordinator in Kyrgyzstan, as well as with the UN Peacebuilding Fund and international financial institutions, meant that the engagement was truly integrated.

CENTRAL AFRICA

The UN Regional Office for Central Africa (UNOCA) was established in 2011 in Gabon at the request of countries in the subregion for such a regional office. It was mandated to "assist Member States and Sub-regional organizations in consolidating peace and preventing potential conflicts." In addition to providing good offices for prevention and peacebuilding, the mission also cooperates with the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) and other regional organizations to promote peace and stability.¹⁰ Its mandate was shortened and reviewed in 2015 following a strategic interagency review and consultations with all international and national stakeholders, giving the mission more flexibility in conducting tasks and setting priorities.¹¹

The resources at UNOCA's disposal are limited

in the face of the region's size and challenges (as is the case for the other regional offices). As a result, the mission has had to focus its attention on countries at risk of instability, mostly due to disputed electoral or constitutional processes, as well as on regional security challenges such as violent extremism, piracy, poaching, and the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA). Its regional partner, ECCAS, remains weak and has not been fully empowered by countries in the region to act on its behalf. The regional office does, however, cooperate extensively with the UN country teams present in Central Africa and, when needed, provide them with political cover to tackle sensitive issues. It also hosts regular meetings of heads of UN offices in the subregion to ensure a common understanding of current threats to peace and security and to identify areas for cooperation and partnership.

In the Central African Republic, for example, UNOCA has worked closely with the UN mission (MINUSCA) to ensure countries in the subregion buy into the government's efforts to restore peace and stability. To that effect, UNOCA was able to use its regional mandate to engage with subregional heads of state, as well as with the ECCAS Secretariat (also based in Libreville), to advocate for additional support for the Central African Republic.

GREAT LAKES

The United Nations also deploys a number of special envoys with regional political coverage and a focus on good offices, mediation, and prevention,

⁹ Mahmoud, "Acting Locally on Preventive Diplomacy: Q&A with Miroslav Jenča."

¹⁰ See <https://unoca.unmissions.org/en/mandate-and-missions>.

¹¹ The 2015 mandate, for example, explicitly called for UNOCA to establish a dedicated analytical unit under the Political Affairs Section, which would contribute to better analysis of the region. See <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N15/226/90/PDF/N1522690.pdf?OpenElement>.

Box 3. Working with mediators and women editors

In July 2016 UNOCA, in partnership with Gabon and the secretariat of ECCAS, hosted a conference of national mediators and ombudsmen of Central African states in Libreville. The mediators of Gabon and Chad, the ombudsman of Burundi, and the deputy defender of the people of Equatorial Guinea attended the conference. One of the outcomes of the conference was the establishment of a steering committee that included representatives of the mediators of Central African states present during the conference, the ECCAS Secretariat, UNOCA, and the Association of Mediators of the West African Economic and Monetary Union (chaired by Senegal). In May 2017 UNOCA, with assistance from the UN Department of Political Affairs, hosted a training workshop for the staff of the offices of these national mediators and ombudsmen. The workshop aimed to build the institutional capacity of the offices and enhance working-level cooperation within and between these offices, the ECCAS Secretariat, and UNOCA.

In 2017 UNOCA is working to strengthen a regional platform of women editors in order to promote the women, peace, and security agenda in Central Africa through the print media; to mobilize and foster solidarity and cohesion among current and aspiring leading women editors on the women, peace, and security agenda; and to promote mentorship and coaching of the next generation of women editors and publishers in the subregion on women, peace, and security.

including for the Great Lakes. The mandate of the Office of the Special Envoy for the Great Lakes Region was established by an interdepartmental delegation in 2013. A key driver of the mandate was the adoption, in February 2013, of a UN-brokered framework aimed at stabilizing the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the region. The Peace, Security and Cooperation Framework—signed by Angola, Burundi, the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Republic of the Congo, Rwanda, South Africa, South Sudan, Tanzania, and Uganda—encompassed commitments at the national, regional, and international levels to bring peace and stability to eastern Congo

and the region.

As with the other regional political offices, the special envoy's collaboration with UN country teams has helped orient the office's work toward prevention and sustaining peace. The special envoy has also worked to mobilize private investment for infrastructure, development, tourism, and youth employment as part of efforts to increase stability and implement the Peace, Security and Cooperation Framework. Across the regional political offices, however, progress is still needed to work with resident coordinators to integrate the Sustainable Development Goals into their mandates.

Box 4. Support to local initiatives

Since its inception, the Office of the Special Envoy for the Great Lakes Region has supported women and youth initiatives in the region as part of efforts to deliver peace and stability. Since 2014, for instance, the special envoy has hosted the Women's Platform for Peace, Security and Cooperation. This initiative builds on momentum already generated by women's groups and movements to bring peace, justice, and security to all citizens in the Great Lakes region and to channel their voices and lessons into the implementation of the Peace, Security and Cooperation Framework signed in February 2013.

More recently, in April 2017 the special envoy supported the tenth multifunctional youth forum of the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. This youth gathering has been organized annually since 2007 under the leadership of the Congolese Catholic Church. It aims to provide a platform for youth to exchange experiences and good practices, to advocate for the participation of youth in public decision making, to promote dialogue between youth and decision makers, and to reinforce the capacity of youth organizations to coordinate and network.

How Could Regional Political Offices Be Strengthened from a Sustaining Peace Perspective?

The mandates of regional political offices contain many elements related to prevention and sustaining peace (good offices, mediation, and inclusion). These offices engage in cross-regional issues, build key relations with regional partners, and strengthen national capacities for peace. Overall, however, they remain focused on addressing the proximate causes of conflict rather than identifying and reinforcing capacities for peace with a view to prevent the outbreak of conflict. Moreover, they lack resources and rely exclusively on extra-budgetary funding for many of their core activities. Below are several broad suggestions as to how the mandates of these regional political offices could be strengthened from the perspective of sustaining peace:

- **Regional political offices should work with regional partners and other UN entities, including country offices/resident coordinators and peace operations, to identify resilient capacities for peace.** These should include the capacities of women, youth, business and religious leaders, traditional authorities, and educators. Regional political offices should also advise on how to leverage these capacities to address ongoing or potential threats to regional peace and stability. Such peace mapping would enable national and international interveners to build on what still works in society and avoid doing harm while still addressing urgent challenges to peace and security.
- **The secretary-general should empower the heads of regional political offices to implement his “surge of diplomacy for peace” from a sustaining peace perspective.** This could be undertaken through various instruments, including the compacts he co-signs with them. This would have obvious implications both for resources (in terms of the availability of regular and predictable funding) and for leadership (in terms of the selection, performance, accountability, and professional development of special representatives/special envoys of the secretary-general). These implications would need to be taken into account in the implementation of any reform of the UN Secretariat’s peace and security architecture.
- **Regional political offices should support and accompany UN resident coordinators to further strengthen resilient local and national capacities as well as infrastructures for peace** as an integral part of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. An explicit element of the mandate relating to the implementation of the SDGs could be considered as part of the above-mentioned compact. Prevention will thus be treated as a nationally driven governance and development function, rather than only a peace and security imperative. This support to country teams in non-mission settings with a political dimension should focus on both the capital and the local level.
- **The relationship between regional political offices and the Peacebuilding Commission should be strengthened and leveraged,** notably with a view to increase access to Peacebuilding Fund resources. This would help increase the regional dimension of peacebuilding and strengthen resource mobilization efforts.

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