Transitions from UN Special Political Missions to UN Country Teams

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Executive Summary

The UN Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA) currently manages twenty-five special political missions (SPMs) that have a field presence. Nonetheless, research and guidance on UN transitions has mainly focused on peacekeeping operations. This paper takes a first step toward filling that gap by exploring transitions from SPMs to UN country teams (UNCTs), looking at four cases: the withdrawal of the United Nations Mission in Nepal (UNMIN) in 2011, the United Nations Office in Burundi (BNUB) in 2014, the United Nations Integrated Peacebuilding Office in Sierra Leone (UNIPSIL) in 2014, and the United Nations Integrated Peacebuilding Office in Guinea-Bissau (UNIOGBIS) in 2020.

These cases provide several lessons for transitions from SPMs to UNCTs. First, the baseline for a successful transition is a shared vision of peace among national actors and the UN system, as well as agreement on the guiding principles and the role of the UN in contributing to this vision. This shared vision encompasses a common understanding of the "end state"—the conditions that must be met in order for the mission to leave.

Second, during transitions, the UN needs to be clear about the substantive differences between the various stages of its presence and the implications for political engagement and peacebuilding efforts. At the same time, it needs to maintain continuity in its cooperation with national authorities and in its peacebuilding objectives.

Third, transitions from SPMs require the UN to put in place arrangements to ensure continuous political engagement and provide conflict-sensitive analysis to support the work of the UNCT. This can be done through UN regional presences, regional organizations, the resident coordinator's office, and UN headquarters. Finally, the UN Peacebuilding Commission can play an important role during transitions by maintaining international support to address a country's ongoing peacebuilding and development needs.

Some of these lessons also apply to the drawdown of peacekeeping missions. For example, all UN transitions require agreeing with national authorities on a political vision and guiding principles, coordinating between the mission and the UNCT, and involving regional organizations and the UN peace-building architecture. Some aspects, however, are more specific to SPMs, due in part to their smaller size and composition. To address these differences, the UN could consider developing more specific guidance on the transition of SPMs.

Introduction

The UN currently has twenty-five special political missions (SPMs) with a field presence.[1] But despite the increasing deployment of SPMs, research and guidance on UN transitions has mainly focused on peacekeeping operations.[2] This report is a first attempt to address the gap in attention on the transition of SPMs.

UN transitions refer to "a change in the configuration of the UN field presence on the ground in response to changing requirements and demands."[3] This report focuses on the transition from SPMs to a UN presence that is limited to the UN country team (UNCT), signaling a shift toward a focus on longer-term development.[4]

In recent years, the UN has updated its guidelines on transitions, including in issuing the UN secretary-general's Planning Directive for the Development of Consistent and Coherent UN Transition Processes in February 2019. This builds on the Policy on UN Transitions in the Context of Mission Drawdown or Withdrawal (2013) and the Policy on Integrated Assessment and Planning (2013). The directive focuses especially on "the drawdown or withdrawal of a multidimensional peace operation or a transition from a multidimensional peacekeeping operation to a small peacekeeping mission, special political mission or UNCT."[5] It does not specifically address the drawdown or withdrawal of SPMs. While the 2012 Special Political Missions Start-up Guide highlights the importance of "[proposing] a

> Despite the increasing deployment of special political missions, research and guidance on UN transitions has mainly focused on peacekeeping operations.

transition or exit strategy… even prior to the issuance of a mandate" for an SPM with a field presence, there is no guidance on how to do so.[6]

There are commonalities between the drawdown of peacekeeping missions and SPMs. For example, the success of all UN transitions depends on a shared political vision, national ownership, coordination within the UN system, and the leveraging of external actors.[7] However, there are also differences between these two types of transitions. For example, the withdrawal of an SPM can signal a greater decrease in international attention, including by the Security Council, leading to a loss in both political and financial leverage despite ongoing peacebuilding needs.

Focusing on the programmatic and political aspects of transitions, this paper explores the particular challenges of transitioning from an SPM to a UNCT by studying the closure of four missions: the United Nations Mission in Nepal (UNMIN) in 2011, the United Nations Office in Burundi (BNUB) in 2014, the United Nations Integrated Peacebuilding Office in Sierra Leone (UNIPSIL) in 2014, and the United Nations Integrated Peacebuilding Office in Guinea-Bissau (UNIOGBIS) in 2020. After presenting the main characteristics of SPMs, it discusses some of the challenges and characteristics of SPM transitions based on the four case studies. Drawing on desk research and a dozen interviews with current and former UN officials, it highlights crosscutting lessons from the closure of these missions.

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1   UN Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, "DPPA Around the World," available at https://dppa.un.org/en/dppa-around-world .

2   The number of SPMs with a field presence has steadily increased since the early 1990s. See: UN Secretary-General, "United Nations Political Missions," 2015, p. 13; Daniel Forti and Lesley Connolly, "Pivoting from Crisis to Development: Preparing for the Next Wave of UN Peace Operations," International Peace Institute, July 2019; Daniel Forti, "Walking a Tightrope: The Transition from UNAMID to UNITAMS in Sudan," International Peace Institute, February 2021. See also Dirk Druet's forthcoming IPI policy paper on the protection of civilians by SPMs.

3   UN Secretary-General, "United Nations Political Missions," p. 20.

4   While there are other types of SPM transitions, this report only discusses a specific subset of SPMs: those with country-specific mandates and a field presence in-country that have been mandated by the UN Security Council.

5   UN Secretary-General, "Planning Directive for the Development of Consistent and Coherent UN Transition Processes," 2019, p. 1.

6   UN Department of Political Affairs, "Special Political Missions Start-up Guide," 2012, p. 24.

7   Forti and Connolly, "Pivoting from Crisis to Development"; UN Transitions Project, "Transitions: Sustaining Peace and Development Beyond Mission Withdrawal," 2020; Adam Day, "UN Transitions: Improving Security Council Practice in Mission Settings," UN University Centre for Policy Research, 2020.

Box 1. The context and role of UNMIN, BNUB, UNIPSIL, and UNIOGBIS

- **The United Nations Mission in Nepal (UNMIN) (2007–2011):** UNMIN was established in 2007 with a timebound and technical mandate to support the implementation of the 2006 Comprehensive Peace Agreement between the government and the Communist Party of Nepal, as well as the election of a Constituent Assembly.[8] National authorities had full ownership over the political process from the outset. They perceived the UN's role as limited to three main areas: monitoring the management of the arms and armed personnel of both sides, monitoring the cease-fire, and supporting the elections.[9] Despite UN attempts to get an explicit good offices mandate, national authorities, as well as India—the main regional power—objected to further UN political involvement.[10] This focused and technical mandate provided clear parameters for the role of UNMIN in the lead-up to the elections.[11]

  However, UNMIN's mandate did not include a provision on how the mission would draw down, and there was no agreed-upon end state.[12] This lack of a shared vision for the end state limited the flexibility of the mandate to evolve after the elections. After the Maoist party unexpectedly won a majority in the Constituent Assembly, Nepal and India were not open to reassessing UNMIN's mandate or to endowing it with broader political tools.[13] Instead, the mission began drawing down, and its mandate was reduced to the tasks involved in implementing the Comprehensive Peace Agreement. The mission closed in January 2011 at the request of the interim government. Ultimately, the fact that UNMIN and the national authorities shared an understanding that the mission was not there to stay facilitated the transition planning.[14]

- **The United Nations Office in Burundi (BNUB) (2011–2014):** BNUB was the third consecutive UN peace mission in Burundi since 2005. At the request of the Burundian government, the UN reduced the size and scale of its presence from a large peacekeeping mission, the UN Operation in Burundi (2004–2006), which was first established after the signing of the 2000 Arusha Agreement, to a smaller integrated mission without peacekeepers, BINUB (2007–2010). This occurred after the signing of a 2006 Comprehensive Ceasefire Agreement between the government of Burundi and the last remaining rebel movement. Finally, the UN moved to a smaller mission, BNUB (2011–2014).[15]

  Each transition took place following or during a national election period and was intended to signal the success of the peace processes and of the country's transition. BNUB was deployed after the 2010 elections as the political and security situation deteriorated. While the 2010 elections had marked the completion of the transition rooted in the Arusha Agreements, they were marred by violence and led to the marginalization of the opposition.[16] Nonetheless, national authorities requested that BNUB focus primarily on institution building, transitional justice, and socioeconomic development.[17] The mission's mandate was extended in 2011 and 2013, when the Security Council extended the mandate of the mission and tasked the mission with supporting the 2015 elections.[18] The mission's mandate was extended for the last time in 2014.[19]

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8   UN Security Council Resolution 1740 (January 23, 2007), UN Doc. S/RES/1740. See: Rebecca Brubaker, "Breaking the Mold: Lessons from Sixteen Years of Innovative UN Engagement in Nepal," International Peace Institute, February 2021.

9   UN Security Council Resolution 1740 (January 23, 2007), UN Doc. S/RES/1740, op. para. 1.

10 Ashild Kolas, Kristoffer Liden, and Jason Miklian, "The Perils of 'Going Local': Liberal Peace-building Agendas in Nepal," *Conflict, Security & Development* 11, no. 3 (2011); Aditya Adhikari, "International Support for Peace and Transition in Nepal," Conciliation Resources, March 2017.

11 Astri Suhrke, "Virtue of a Narrow Mission: The UN Peace Operation in Nepal," *Global Governance* 17, no. 1 (2011).

12 Interview with UN official, October 2020.

13 Interview with former UN official, October 2020.

14 Astri Suhrke, "UN Support for Peacebuilding: Nepal as the Exceptional Case," Chr. Michelsen Institute, 2009.

15 See: Youssef Mahmoud with Mbiatem Albert, *Whose Peace Are We Building? Leadership for Peace in Africa* (London I. B. Tauris, 2021).

16 International Crisis Group, "Burundi: From Electoral Boycott to Political Impasse," February 7, 2011.

17 UN Security Council Resolution 1959 (December 16, 2010), UN Doc S/RES/1959, op. para. 3.

18 UN Security Council Resolution 2017 (December 20, 2011), UN Doc. S/RES/2027; UN Security Council Resolution 2090 (February 15, 2013), UN Doc. S/RES/2090.

19 UN Security Council Resolution 2090 (February 15, 2013), UN Doc. S/RES/2090, op. para. 1.

In 2014, the government of Burundi requested that BNUB withdraw to "enable Burundian actors to take full ownership of its political process."[20] BNUB transferred its responsibilities to the UNCT on December 31, 2014.

- **The United Nations Integrated Peacebuilding Office in Sierra Leone (UNIPSIL) (2009–2014):** UNIPSIL was the last UN operation in Sierra Leone after a decade-long peacekeeping presence. Both the government of Sierra Leone and the UN had a common understanding of the UN's role, as reflected in UNIPSIL's mandate. The government saw UNIPSIL as having a useful role to play in responding to the evolving situation in the country, addressing emerging challenges, and consolidating peace. The government thus worked with the UN in designing UNIPSIL's configuration and determining the role it would play, allowing the UN mission to fully align its strategy with that of the government.

  The transition from the UN Integrated Office in Sierra Leone (UNIOSIL) to UNIPSIL provided an early opportunity to begin preparing for the UN mission's exit from the country.[21] The UN Family's Joint Vision for Sierra Leone (2009–2012), which was developed during this transition, already included benchmarks. These were relatively easy to articulate because UNIPSIL had a clear mandate focused primarily on institution building and peace consolidation.[22] The Security Council extended UNIPSIL's mandate annually from 2009 to 2013. The 2010, 2011, and 2012 resolutions emphasized the role of UNIPSIL in supporting the 2012 elections. UNIPSIL was also mandated to prevent conflict, promote good governance, and tackle youth unemployment, as outlined in the UN Family's Joint Vision for Sierra Leone.[23] Following the 2012 elections, UNIPSIL's mandate was renewed for a final time in 2013, articulating a timeframe for its withdrawal in 2014.[24]

- **The UN Integrated Peacebuilding Office in Guinea-Bissau (UNIOGBIS) (2009–2020):** UNIOGBIS was established ten years after the establishment of the country's first SPM, UNOGBIS, in 1999, and the signature of the Abuja Agreement, the first formal agreement between the government of Guinea-Bissau and the self-proclaimed military junta. The intervening decade saw persistent political instability and several coups and coup attempts. In 2009, the assassination of the president and the chief of staff of the armed forces, as well as growing political instability, contributed to the Security Council's decision to expand the UN mission's mandate in the country. UNIOGBIS's mandate prioritized support to political dialogue and the national reconciliation process, institution building, and assistance to the UN Peacebuilding Commission.[25] The parallel military presence of the Economic Community of West African States Mission in Guinea-Bissau (ECOMIB) provided a strong security guarantee until its cantonment in March 2020 and subsequent withdrawal in September.

  In 2018, due to the lack of progress on the ground, the secretary-general proposed a three-phase withdrawal plan for UNIOGBIS.[26] The mission withdrew on December 31, 2020, transferring responsibility for its development and peacebuilding priorities to the resident coordinator's office.

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20 Gustavo de Carvalho and Liezelle Kumalo, "Tension between Burundi and the UN Are Indicative of Greater Challenges within the UN's Peacebuilding Architecture," Institute for Security Studies, July 9, 2014.

21 UN Security Council Resolution 1829 (August 4, 2008), UN Doc. S/RES/1829; written exchange with former UN official, October 2020.

22 Ian Johnstone, "Emerging Doctrine for Political Missions," in "Review of Political Missions 2010," Center on International Cooperation, 2010.

23 UN Security Council Resolution 1941 (September 29, 2010), UN Doc. S/RES/1941, op. para. 2; UN Security Council Resolution 2005 (September 14, 2011), UN Doc S/RES/2005, op. para. 2; UN Security Council Resolution 2065 (September 12, 2012), UN Doc. S/RES/2065, op. para. 2.

24 UN Security Council Resolution 2097 (March 26, 2013), UN Doc. S/RES/2097.

25 UN Security Council Resolution 1876 (June 26, 2009), UN Doc. S/RES/1876, op. para. 3.

26 UN Security Council, *Strategic Assessment of the United Nations Integrated Peacebuilding Office in Guinea-Bissau—Special Report of the Secretary-General*, UN Doc S/2018/1086, December 6, 2018.

Characteristics and Role of Special Political Missions

The UN did not institutionalize special political missions until the early 2010s.[27] Before that, not all officials in UN headquarters shared the view that there could be "[tools] called special political missions."[28] SPMs were, first and foremost—and sometimes still are—regarded as missions sharing a distinctive budgetary category rather than a common doctrine.[29]

The Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA) currently manages forty SPMs, ranging from country-specific to regional offices.[30] Institutionally, they are divided into three clusters: cluster I (special envoys, advisers, and representatives of the secretary general), cluster II (sanctions monitoring teams, groups and panels, and other entities and mechanisms), and cluster III (regional offices, offices in support of political processes, and other missions).[31] Twenty-five SPMs, all in clusters I and III, have field presences.[32]

Although these categories overlap, SPMs with a field presence can also be categorized based on their political objectives and the stage of conflict at which they are deployed: some are deployed during an armed conflict, often with a mediation role; some are deployed after a peacekeeping mission or after a peace deal to support the consolidation of peace; and some are deployed with a prevention role, often with a regional, open-ended mandate.[33] They can also be distinguished based on their source of authority: while some are established by exchanges of letters with the secretary-general (in particular under cluster I), most missions that have a field presence (especially under cluster III) are

mandated by the Security Council under Chapter VI of the UN Charter.

SPMs can be established in different political and security contexts and in response to different triggers. They may be deployed following the closure of a peacekeeping mission, as in Burundi, Sierra Leone, Haiti, and Sudan; following another Security Council–mandated SPM, as in Guinea-Bissau; or as the first Security Council–mandated presence in the country, as in Nepal and Colombia. The UN engagement preceding an SPM tends to influence its ability to perform and to navigate its transition. In particular, when SPMs follow the presence of peacekeeping operations, they inherit the political relationship with the national authorities. This relationship is important as, like all peace operations, SPMs are vulnerable to the host state's perception of sovereignty and must find a way to work within the expectations of host governments.

All SPMs have political mandates and functions.[34] Good offices, mediation, facilitation, preventive diplomacy, early warning, political oversight, advisory support, and technical advice to national authorities constitute the core functions of an SPM.[35] SPMs have more recently also been mandated to monitor and report on human rights abuses; coordinate international assistance; coordinate components of disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) processes; and even contribute to the protection of civilians.[36]

Unlike peacekeeping operations, SPMs are composed exclusively of civilian staff. They are not backed by a police or military component to complement and reinforce their mandate by providing physical security guarantees and leverage for engaging and negotiating with host-state

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27 See, for example, the UN Department of Political Affairs' Special Political Missions Start-up Guide, which was the first attempt to develop standardized guidelines for SPMs.

28 Interview with former UN officials, November 2020.

29 Johnstone, "Emerging Doctrine for Political Missions," pp. 15–26.

30 UN Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, "DPPA Around the World," available at https://dppa.un.org/en/dppa-around-world .

31 For a full list of missions currently deployed under these three categories, see: UN General Assembly, *Overall Policy Matters Pertaining to Special Political Missions—Report of the Secretary-General*, UN Doc. A/75/312, August 13, 2020, A/75/312, Annex A.

32 See: UN Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, "Current Presences," available at https://dppa.un.org/en/current-presences .

33 The first category includes the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) and the UN Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL). The second category includes the UN Integrated Office in Haiti (BINUH) and the UN Verification Mission in Colombia. The last category includes the UN Office for West Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS) and UN Regional Office for Central Africa (UNOCA).

34 UN Secretary-General, "United Nations Political Missions."

35 Johnstone, "Emerging Doctrine for Political Missions," pp. 15–26.

36 See Dirk Druet's forthcoming IPI policy paper on protection by SPMs.

authorities.[37] Their success, therefore, depends primarily on the leadership and authority of the head of mission and their ability to maintain a constructive relationship with the host government. SPMs also have a smaller footprint than peacekeeping missions. Together, all forty SPMs have a total budget of just over $780 million—less than each of the four largest UN peacekeeping operations on its own.[38]

This smaller footprint should give them more flexibility to adapt their posture and presence without the operational and logistical challenges associated with large numbers of uniformed personnel.

Lessons from the Transitions of Special Political Missions

SPMs with a field presence can undertake several types of transitions.[39] For example, they can transition to another SPM, as in the case of the transition from UNOGBIS to UNIOGBIS in 2009, as well as from BINUB to BNUB in 2011. They can also transition to a UN peacekeeping operation or to a UNCT. This report focuses on the latter. A successful transition from an SPM to a UNCT enables the UNCT to solidify the gains achieved by the SPM and minimize the risk of relapse into a political or security crisis. Several actors are involved in such transitions, including the mission's leadership, national authorities, the Security Council, and international and regional partners.[40]

This section highlights crosscutting lessons from the closure of UNMIN, BNUB, UNIPSIL, and UNIOGBIS. First, it looks at how the lack of a

> A successful transition from a special political mission to a UN country team enables the country team to solidify the gains achieved and minimize the risk of relapse into a political or security crisis.

common political vision and shared understanding of guiding principles can affect transitions. It then discusses coordination between SPMs and UNCTs to ensure continuity while shifting toward long-term development goals. It then analyzes arrangements for continuing political engagement after the mission's departure, including through UN regional presences, regional organizations, the resident coordinator's office (RCO), and UN headquarters. Finally, it touches upon the role of the UN peacebuilding architecture.

Building a Common Political Vision for the Transition

A shared vision of peace among national actors and the UN system, as well as agreement on the guiding principles and the role of the UN in contributing to this vision, is the baseline for the successful transition of all peace operations—peacekeeping missions and SPMs alike. This shared vision encompasses a common understanding of the "end state"—the conditions that must be met in order for the mission to leave. Developing this common understanding can help set and manage expectations.

Benchmarks have been used since 2009 as technical tools to help define this shared political vision and measure progress on mandate implementation. Although benchmarks are not binding, they have been widely used to inform transition planning, as in the case of Sierra Leone (see Box 1). However, benchmarks are most valuable if stakeholders use them to continually reassess the role of the UN and evaluate progress toward the end state.

Employing pragmatic, benchmarked exit strategies has been a recurring challenge for all UN peace operations.[41] In particular, tensions can emerge

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37 In cases like Hodeidah in Yemen, observers are non-uniformed military personnel (in keeping with the civilian nature of SPMs). In other locations, police or military personnel are deployed to SPMs in an advisory capacity. In contexts where guard units are deployed (such as Iraq, Somalia, and Libya), these units have no outward function and do not "back" the implementation of the mandate.

38 United Nations, "By 151 Votes in Favour to 2 against, with 1 Abstention, Fifth Committee Approves $3.21 Billion Budget for 2021, Concluding Main Part of Seventy-Fifth Session," UN Doc. GA/AB/4362, December 30, 2020.

39 Other transitions could also be discussed but are beyond the scope of the paper, including mandate extensions for panels of experts. Other special political missions, such as special envoys, are deployed more at the secretary-general's discretion, which also affects the way they transition out.

40 Forti and Connolly, "Pivoting from Crisis to Development."

41 As evidenced by the experience of the UN Operation in Côte d'Ivoire (UNOCI) and the UN Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH), see: Forti and Connolly, "Pivoting from Crisis to Development."

between the "end state" (when the achievement of certain benchmarks determines the timeline for a transition) and the "end date" (when a predetermined timeline dictates how ambitious benchmarks are).[42] Transitions anchored in end states are likely to be more aligned with conditions in the country. In some cases, however, the end date of the mission is implicitly mentioned in the mission's mandate. This is the case when the role of a mission is tied to a clearly defined political event or outcome, such as a national election, which sometimes leads to the mission's departure without other benchmarks being achieved (see Box 2). In other cases, internal pressure within the Security Council or external pressure from the host government can also lead the council to prioritize the withdrawal date over progress on key benchmarks.[43]

> Transitions anchored in "end states" rather than "end dates" are likely to be more aligned with conditions in the country.

Beyond tensions around the end date and the end state, the UN and national authorities may disagree on the guiding principles of the mission. SPMs, whose core function is political, need to operate and fulfill their mandate in a way that aligns with the expectations of host governments while upholding certain norms, such as ensuring political inclusivity and promoting human rights.[44] These tensions can make it harder for missions to operate and can influence the way they undertake transitions.

In the extreme, tensions may result in the host state requesting that the UN withdraw. This was the case in Burundi, where the government requested the scale-down of BINUB in 2011. This was in part due to a fundamental misunderstanding of the scope of the UN's role in facilitating political dialogue in the lead-up to elections, as well disagreement over guiding principles for transitional justice and the protection of human rights.[45] Again in 2014, the government of Burundi requested BNUB's withdrawal to "enable Burundian actors to take full ownership of its political process" due to "different views over the pace of the democratic process in the country."[46]

Box 2. Elections: The risk of a "double transition"[47]

Accompanying a democratic transition is often an important role of UN missions in post-conflict countries. As such, the successful transfer of power following elections is often set as the end date for UN peacekeeping operations and SPMs. This was the case, for example, for ONUB, BINUB, and BNUB in Burundi, which were mandated, respectively, to support the 2005, 2010, and 2015 elections.[48] It was also the case for UNMIN, which was mandated to support the election of Nepal's Constituent Assembly in 2008, as well as UNIPSIL, which was mandated to support Sierra Leone's 2012 elections.[49]

When such political events are complete, SPMs are vulnerable to pressure to leave even if the broader political environment is not stable. A mission's immediate withdrawal or reconfiguration after an election incurs the risk of a "double transition."[50]

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42 Forti and Connolly, "Pivoting from Crisis to Development," p. 3.

43 Ibid., p. 4.

44 To a certain extent, these questions are similar to those posed for peacekeeping operations. See Patryk Labuda, "With or against the State? Reconciling the Protection of Civilians and Host-State Support in UN Peacekeeping," International Peace Institute, March 2020.

45 Interview with UN officials, New York, December 2020.

46 De Carvalho and Kumalo, "Tension between Burundi and the UN Are Indicative of Greater Challenges within the UN's Peacebuilding Architecture."

47 Day, "UN Transitions," pp. 19, 24.

48 UN Security Council Resolution 1545 (May 21, 2004), UN Doc. S/RES/1545, op. para. 5; UN Security Council Resolution 1858 (December 22, 2008), UN Doc. S/RES/1858, op. paras. 6–7; UN Security Council Resolution 1902 (December 17, 2009), UN Doc. S/RES/1902, op. paras. 5–10. See also: UN Security Council Resolution 2090 (February 15, 2013), UN Doc. S/RES/2090, op. para. 1: "(a) Promoting and facilitating dialogue between national actors and supporting mechanisms for broad-based participation in political life, including for the implementation of development strategies and programmes in Burundi and towards ensuring a conducive, free and open environment for the run-up to the 2015 elections."

49 UN Security Council Resolution 1740 (January 23, 2007), UN Doc. S/RES/1740, op. para. 1; UN Security Council Resolution 1941 (September 29, 2010), UN Doc. S/RES/1941, op. para. 2; UN Security Council Resolution 2005 (September 14, 2011), UN Doc S/RES/2005, op. para. 2; UN Security Council Resolution 2065 (September 12, 2012), UN Doc. S/RES/2065, op. para. 2.

50 Day, "UN Transitions," pp. 19, 24.

There was a somewhat similar dynamic in Nepal after the 2008 elections and the surprise win of the Maoist party. Although the UN continued to support the implementation of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement, the change of government led to a perception that the UN was biased toward the Maoists. As a result, some national actors became uncomfortable with UNMIN's role. This led to repeated short-term mission renewals for two years without the addition of any tools to the mandate to address the changing political dynamics. The government finally requested UNMIN to withdraw in 2010.

When SPMs do not have a constructive and cooperative relationship with the host government, they may struggle to fulfill their mandate and reach the foreseen end state. They are also more susceptible to a precipitous exit, sometimes at the government's request, rather than a gradual, benchmarked, and evidence-based transition planned in coordination with national authorities.

Differentiating Special Political Missions from UN Country Teams while Maintaining Continuity

As a UNCT's presence predates and outlasts that of an SPM, "the sustainability of the success of any special political mission depends to a large extent on how well transitions to UNCTs are managed."[51] Managing this transition requires being clear about the substantive differences between various stages of the UN's presence and the implications for political engagement and peacebuilding efforts. At the same time, it requires maintaining continuity in the UN's cooperation with national authorities and in its peacebuilding objectives.

In terms of planning, the drawdown of an SPM requires the UN to shift from focusing on peace and security to focusing on longer-term development. The go-to document outlining the UN's longer-term development goals in each country is the UN sustainable development cooperation framework, formerly known as the UN development assistance framework (UNDAF).[52] During transitions from SPMs, some UNDAFs/cooperation frameworks have been preceded by interim documents that bridged peacebuilding and development efforts to provide a steppingstone to a full-fledged development framework. This can facilitate a gradual shift in focus toward longer-term development goals. For example, the Transitional Joint Vision (2012–2014) in Sierra Leone preceded the 2015–2018 UNDAF.[53] Similarly, the UN Peacebuilding Strategy for Nepal (2011–2013) "[mainstreamed] and [embedded] [a] peacebuilding approach in the programmes of UNCT partners" before the adoption of the 2013–2015 UNDAF.

In other cases, the UNDAF/cooperation framework incorporates residual political elements of a mission's mandate. For example, the first axis of Burundi's 2012–2016 UNDAF focused on "democratic process, good governance and institution building" and included assistance to the 2015 electoral process.[54] Similarly, the forthcoming UN sustainable development cooperation framework for Guinea-Bissau (2022–2026) will build on the residual peacebuilding priorities identified by the UN common country analysis.[55] Due to delays in developing this framework, the UNCT is presently developing a UN Partnership Framework for 2021 as a bridging document that incorporates relevant peacebuilding priorities, including residual political elements.

Programmatically, transitioning to a UNCT is reportedly easier for SPMs than for peacekeeping operations. This is because they already rely on support from the UNCT to carry out key parts of their mandates, particularly when the mission and

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51 UN Secretary General, "United Nations Political Missions," p. 20.

52 The UN development system reform led to the restructuring of the resident coordinator's office (RCO), whose role is to orchestrate policy coherence across the UNCT. The RCO is guided by the UN sustainable development cooperation framework, which sets priorities for UN efforts in the country. UN agencies, funds, and programs, however, also continue to develop their own work plans and risk analyses. Although the cooperation framework is the go-to document for all UN agencies, funds, and programs and seals the partnership with the host government, accountability in practice is more dispersed throughout the UNCT. On the role of RCOs, see: Agathe Sarfati, "Operationalizing the Sustaining Peace Agenda: Lessons from Liberia, Burkina Faso, and Papua New Guinea," International Peace Institute, June 2020.

53 UNCT in Sierra Leone, "UN Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF) 2015–2018," July 2015.

54 The two benchmarks under the area of democratic process, governance, and institution-building were developed in accordance with UN Security Council Resolutions 1959 (2010) and 2027 (2011).

55 The common country analysis involves all UN entities at the country level. It aims to lay out the major risks and opportunities and identify the UN's comparative advantage in supporting national plans. Interview with former UNIOGBIS official, January 2021.

the UNCT are integrated. In the case of UNIOGBIS, for instance, the UNCT was already contributing to the mission's mandated outcomes and continued to "consolidate the stability and the rule of law, democratic participation, and equitable access to opportunities for all" after the mission's withdrawal.[56] In fact, the UNCT took over many of these responsibilities ahead of the mission's closure after the Security Council decided to downsize it.[57]

In other cases as well, SPMs have handed over tasks to UN agencies present in the country during the transition. For instance, OHCHR retained a field presence to continue promoting human rights following the drawdown of BNUB and UNMIN.[58] Furthermore, UNMIN handed over programs to support the demobilization and reintegration of child soldiers to the UN Development Programme (UNDP) and UNICEF, and BNUB handed over election support to UNDP.[59]

To continue delivering these activities effectively, the UNCT needs to maintain an understanding of the political and conflict dynamics. To do so, some missions increase coordination among the UNCT at the operational level during the transition. For instance, both UNMIN and UNIPSIL opened field coordination offices. In Nepal, the mission established four field offices during the second half of 2010, a few months before UNMIN's closure, as part of an expanded resident coordinator's office. These

> Transitioning to a UN country team is reportedly easier for special political missions because they already rely on the country team to carry out key parts of their mandates.

offices played "a 'service-provider role' dedicating [their] resources and energies to providing useful field information and analysis to development actors working in Nepal." They also enabled the RCO to develop relationships with local leaders and populations, collect information, and analyze social trends.[60] Similarly, in Sierra Leone, the UN set up field offices "to promote a joined-up approach across the UN family and liaise with local council, parliamentary and civil society to ensure [its] projects [were] well understood and in line with local initiatives."[61] The presence of such field offices can help maintain operational and programmatic continuity as well as political awareness during a transition.[62]

Finally, the continuity of the resident coordinator's (RC) leadership appears to be a key factor in maintaining cooperation between the government and the UN during a transition. In Sierra Leone, in the lead-up to the withdrawal of UNIPSIL, both the executive representative of the secretary-general and the RC "coordinate[d] the UN system… so as to maintain continuity of support in some selected substantive areas such as natural resource management."[63] In Guinea-Bissau, the deputy special representative of the secretary-general/RC retained his role after UNIOGBIS's departure. In Nepal, "the continuity of the RC leadership was an asset" throughout the transition.[64] Continuity in leadership helps prepare the UN to deliver and mobilize funds through its new in-country configuration.[65]

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56 UN RCO in Guinea-Bissau, "Partnership Framework between Guinea-Bissau and the United Nations, 2016-2020," April 2016, available at https://extranet.who.int/nutrition/gina/sites/default/filestore/GNB%202016%20UNPAF.pdf .

57 UNIOGBIS, "Together, We Build Peace: A History of Peacebuilding in Guinea-Bissau," December 2020.

58 See: "Summary of Arrangements for Continuity" in United Nations in Burundi, "Joint Transition Plan," 2014; Oliver Walton, "UN Peace Support Mission Transition: Nepal," Governance and Social Development Resource Centre, March 30, 2012.

59 United Nations, "United Nations Peace-Building Strategy for Nepal 2011-12," 2011; United Nations in Burundi, "Transition Plan," p. 8.

60 Megan Prince and Lina Titulaer, "Beyond Transitions: UNDP's Role Before, During and After UN Mission Withdrawal," Clingendael Institute, 2013, p. 26.

61 United Nations, "Transitional Joint Vision for Sierra Leone of the United Nations Family (2013-2014)," March 2012, p. 1.

62 The UNCT in Burkina Faso has recently rolled out integrated subregional offices to help tailor UN national planning and strategies to the subnational contexts. This roll-out is not taking place in the context of a transition but continues to be perceived as a tool to anchor the UN's role at the subregional level. See, for instance, Christian Lara and Gabriel Delsol, "Sustaining Peace in Burkina Faso: Responding to an Emerging Crisis," International Peace Institute, May 2020.

63 The executive representative of the secretary-general (ERSG) headed both the UNCT (as a triple-hatted resident and humanitarian coordinator and UNDP resident representative) and the SPM. This role was an important feature of UNIPSIL and BINUB but is no longer in contemporary use within the UN system. However, this integrated model was an early sign of the integrated SPM approach that is now commonplace in many SPMs, with the UN leaders fulfilling two roles such as SRSG/head of mission and the DSRSG/RC. United Nations, "Transitional Joint Vision for Sierra Leone of the United Nations Family (2013-2014)."

64 Prince and Titulaer, "Beyond Transitions."

65 The RC was particularly proactive in raising funds for Nepal during and after UNMIN's departure. "In parallel, the Resident Coordinator worked with and coordinated the activities of the donor community in order to ensure sustained attention to the needs of Nepal during the country's transition, while also ensuring that the programmatic engagement is aligned with a clear political strategy." Peacebuilding Commission Working Group on Lessons Learned, "The Transition of UN Missions: Main Findings," June 10, 2014.

Maintaining Political Engagement after a Mission Leaves

During most transitions, the UN has put in place arrangements to ensure continuous political engagement and provide conflict-sensitive analysis to support the work of the UNCT after a mission's departure. UN regional offices and special envoys with regional mandates have enabled the UN to maintain political engagement during and after transitions.[66] For instance, the UN Office for West Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS, previously UNOWA) took on political tasks initially under the mandate of UNIPSIL and UNIOGBIS. In the case of Guinea-Bissau, "the RC will be called upon to support UNOWAS in its good offices role, encouraging inclusive political dialogue and reform of the political system and ensuring continuous strategic national dialogue on key reforms."[67] Where there is no UN regional presence, DPPA continues to backstop RCOs either through frequent visits to the country or through a special envoy, such as the special envoy in Burundi.[68]

Beyond the UN, regional organizations can also take over some of an SPM's political engagement, particularly on pushing for key reforms and safeguarding space for peacebuilding work. This requires the UN and regional organizations to agree on priorities, strategies, and programming. For instance, the Joint Transition Plan in Burundi designated the African Union (AU) to fill the vacuum on political mediation after the departure of BNUB.[69] In the case of Guinea-Bissau, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS)—in tandem with UNOWAS—is playing a similar role. ECOWAS will take over UNIOGBIS's role providing good offices, with the support of the UN, AU, Community of Portuguese Speaking Countries, and European Union, collectively known as the Group of Five.[70]

The UN may also build the capacity of the RCO to engage politically. In Guinea-Bissau, for instance, the RCO is recruiting for permanent and temporary positions including "head of office/strategic planner; peace and development advisor, transition specialist, along with officers covering human rights, rule of law/security sector reform, and communications." This additional expertise can help the UNCT identify and support peacebuilding priorities previously handled by UNIOGBIS.[71]

In Nepal, the UN adopted a particularly innovative configuration in an effort to integrate political, development, and humanitarian analysis to guide the UNCT. UNDP and the Department of Political Affairs (DPA, the predecessor of DPPA) supported the creation of a small DPA Liaison Office located within the RCO in 2011. The Nepalese government implicitly approved the presence of this residual office on the condition that it be a formal extension of the RCO. This office was able to follow up on the mission's political engagement and continue providing analysis and political advice to the RC and the UNCT. Over the seven years of its existence, it "provided a crucial link to DPA on the ground" and "helped sustain DPA's primary political goals in Nepal."[72]

Fostering Unity within the UN System through the Peacebuilding Commission

During transitions from SPMs, the Peacebuilding Commission (PBC) can play an important role in maintaining international support for a country to address its ongoing peacebuilding and development needs. The PBC played a major role in the transitions of UNIPSIL and BNUB. Sierra Leone and Burundi were among the first countries on the PBC's agenda after it was created in 2005, and the PBC had thus been coordinating on priorities for these countries well prior to the closure of the

66 Current UN DPPA-led regional offices include UNOCA, UNOWA, and UNRCCA, as well as the special envoys of the secretary-general to the Great Lakes Region and the Horn of Africa.

67 See interview with Mamadou Diallo, deputy SRSG and UN RC, in UNIOGBIS, "Together, We Build Peace," p. 156.

68 The Office of the Special Envoy in Burundi was first established in 2015 by Security Council Resolution 2248 (2015), following the presence of the UN Electoral Observation Mission in Burundi (MENUB), which concluded its mandate after determining "that the environment was 'not conducive' to a free and credible process." DPPA, "Special Envoy in Burundi," available at: https://dppa.un.org/en/mission/special-envoy-burundi .

69 "The AU will increase its involvement in providing good offices, mediation, facilitation and high-level advocacy." United Nations in Burundi, "Transition Plan."

70 UNIOGBIS, "Together, We Build Peace," p. 159.

71 Ibid., p. 156.

72 Brubaker, "Breaking the Mold," p. 18.

SPMs. For UNIPSIL, the PBC played a major role in gathering all stakeholders to articulate, agree on, and move forward on the implementation of the UN Family's Joint Vision for Sierra Leone and then of the Transitional Joint Vision. Similarly, visits from the PBC configuration chairs to Burundi and their subsequent strategic advice to the Security Council throughout the existence of BNUB helped prepare for the transition.[73] The PBC was also part of the Steering Group Committee to plan the programmatic transition of BNUB.[74]

During the transitions of both BNUB and UNIPSIL, the PBC thus provided a "broad-based political platform for drawing greater international attention" and aligning the UN system and its partners around common goals.[75] This is also the role the PBC has been playing during the transition in Guinea-Bissau. Together with the RCO and DPPA, the PBC has been the leading platform for gathering international partners to sustain momentum and accompany the country's reform efforts.[76]

Conclusion

These four case studies show that the drawdown of special political missions with a field presence share several features with the drawdown of peacekeeping missions. These include the challenges of agreeing on a political vision and guiding principles with national authorities, as well as the importance of coordination between the mission and the UNCT. Another similarity is the role of regional organizations and the UN peacebuilding architecture in maintaining unity among the UN system and its partners at a time when a transition could prompt a decrease in international attention.

Some aspects, however, are more specific to SPMs. The small structure of SPMs requires them to rely on UNCTs to carry out key parts of their mandates during their lifecycle, which can make it easier to

transfer these responsibilities during a transition. At the same time, because the transition from an SPM to a UNCT removes the country from the agenda of the Security Council, it can be particularly important to maintain continuity in leadership to ensure ongoing cooperation between the government and the UN system in the country. Relatedly, there may be greater potential for a vacuum in political engagement after the transition from an SPM to a UNCT, which can be filled by the RCO, UNCT, regional UN presences, regional organizations, and DPPA.

To better understand the transitioning of SPMs, it would be beneficial to study a wider sample of cases, as well the human resources and operational aspects of transitions. These include the role of mission leadership in managing the transition, both within the UN system and with the host government. Similarly, when relevant, the presence of parallel forces deployed alongside UN SPMs, such as ECOMIB in Guinea-Bissau and NATO in Afghanistan, should be analyzed to understand the nature of the security guarantees they provide and the sequencing of their withdrawal.

> Eventually, the UN could consider developing more specific guidance on the transition of special political missions.

In the coming years, the UN will need to develop a more comprehensive picture of the key elements to take into consideration during SPMs' lifecycles and transitions. This is particularly important following the establishment of new SPMs with a field presence, including, most recently, the UN Verification Mission in Colombia, BINUH, and the UN Interim Transition Assistance Mission in Sudan (UNITAMS), and as longstanding missions such as the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) and UN Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) continue to operate. Eventually, the UN could consider developing more specific guidance on the transition of SPMs. This could help the UN deliver a "continuum of responses and smoother transitions" while supporting national priorities.[77]

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73   Security Council Report, "Burundi: Chronology of Events," July 6, 2020.

74   The Joint Transition Plan recognized the role of the Peacebuilding Commission during the transition: "In its Resolution 2137 (2014), the UN Security Council welcomed 'the continued engagement of the Burundi Configuration of the Peacebuilding Commission, encouraging the continued constructive cooperation between the Government of Burundi and the Peacebuilding Commission, and acknowledging the contribution that the Peacebuilding Fund has made to peacebuilding efforts in Burundi.'" UN in Burundi, "Transition Plan," p. 14.

75   Peacebuilding Commission Working Group on Lessons Learned, "Transition of UN Missions: What Role for the PBC?" 2014, p. 4.

76   UNIOGBIS, "Together, We Build Peace," p. 153.

77   UN General Assembly and UN Security Council, *Report of the High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations on Uniting our Strengths for Peace: Politics, Partnerships and People*, UN Doc. A/70/95–S/2015/446, June 17, 2015.

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