

The Primacy of Politics at the Local Level in UN Peace Operations



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The “primacy of politics” has become a central tenet of UN peacekeeping. This reflects a broad recognition that peacekeeping operations should be deployed in support of a political solution to conflict. In practice, however, the primacy of politics is often narrowly understood as referring to formal, national-level political processes. This overlooks the fact that politics also happens at the local level, both formally and informally. It is critical for UN peace operations to address these local-level politics. Local-level conflicts account for a large share of conflict-related deaths in peacekeeping contexts. They are also closely tied to national-level peace efforts. This has led UN peace operations to become increasingly involved in supporting local peace processes.

While finding local political solutions is a collaborative effort within UN peacekeeping operations, the civil affairs component plays a crucial role. The role of civil affairs personnel varies, depending on missions’ differing mandates and strategic priorities, leadership, structures, and operating environments. Nonetheless, their local political engagement often includes tasks related to conducting local mediation; increasing participation, including of women, youth, and underrepresented groups; supporting local conflict resolution; building the capacity of civil society actors; and building and supporting local state and non-state institutions.

The work by civil affairs personnel has repeatedly been found to increase local peace agreements’ prospects for success. Nonetheless, peacekeepers have sometimes been critiqued for pursuing “one-off” approaches to local-level political engagement without following up to ensure peace is sustainable. Three conditions are necessary to positively influence the prospects for reach sustainable local

political solutions. First, local actors need to own the processes and solutions. This means that UN peacekeeping personnel need to empower local actors to devise and implement the solutions. Second, local solutions need to address conflict drivers related to the political economy. Third, local processes need to be aligned with processes at the national level. This section looks at how these three conditions shape the sustainability of local political solutions.

Beyond engaging with local and national officials and other stakeholders outside the mission, civil affairs components also need to integrate their local-level political work with other mission components. This includes not only vertical integration to ensure that local-level political strategies are connected to the overarching strategy of mission headquarters but also horizontal integration with other field offices. They also need to work closely with the head of the field office and other substantive and uniformed components.

Ultimately, missions’ civil affairs components play a critical role in helping UN peacekeeping operations prioritize political solutions at the local level and foster sustainable peace. When effectively integrated into broader mission strategies, the localized approaches of civil affairs personnel not only address immediate conflict drivers but also contribute to the durability of national-level agreements. These efforts demonstrate that the success of peacekeeping operations hinges on balancing top-down mandates with grassroots engagement, underscoring the interconnectedness of local and national dynamics.

To read the full policy paper visit: <http://bit.ly/3CVYRGq>

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Member states

- **Define the primacy of politics broadly:** Member states and policymakers should adopt a definition of the primacy of politics that is intentionally broad and encompasses both formal and informal political processes at the national and subnational levels.
- **Include support to local political processes in mission mandate:** The UN Security Council should, as appropriate, continue incorporating tasks related to local political processes into mission mandates. This includes tasks related to conducting local mediation; increasing participation, including of women, youth, and underrepresented groups; supporting local conflict resolution; building the capacity of civil society actors; and building and supporting local state and non-state institutions.
- **Adequately resource missions' local-level work:** To support such mandates, and in recognition of how effective peacekeepers can be at the local level, the General Assembly should adequately resource the work of missions at the local level, particularly the work of civilian components. This includes providing funding for QIPs, which can foster trust and contribute to conflict prevention and resolution.

Mission leaders

- **Develop political strategies that are both top-down and bottom-up:** Mission leaders should craft political strategies that clearly articulate how missions will implement the primacy of politics in their context. This strategy should incorporate both national and subnational political efforts and should thus be crafted in partnership with field office representatives. Field offices should tailor these strategies to their context based on a profound understanding of the local conflict dynamics to guide local engagement.
- **Consult regularly with field offices:** Mission leaders should implement mechanisms to regularly hear from field office officials and incorporate local political developments into the mission's national-level strategy. Regular interaction between mission headquarters and field office personnel can help prevent the sort of reactive approaches that occur when mission leaders only become aware of situations at the moment of crisis.
- **Reflect local dynamics in national-level political efforts:** When implementing their good offices or political mandates, SRSGs should incorporate a view of local dynamics and an understanding of how national and subnational political dynamics relate. This may involve regularly interacting with field offices, visiting local areas, or engaging in direct discussions with community members (which can also help build trust in the mission). Mission leaders can draw on the expertise of civil affairs personnel to coordinate these efforts.
- **Ensure coordination between mission components:** Mission leaders should encourage coordination and planning between different mission components to ensure that local efforts are linked to national processes and vice versa, to the extent possible.
- **Promote civil-military coordination:** Mission leaders, including heads of field offices, should promote civil-military coordination frameworks that ensure a shared understanding of objectives, particularly in conflict-sensitive areas of work. Regular joint planning sessions at mission headquarters and in field offices and integrated training programs could mitigate misunderstandings and maximize the effectiveness of both components.

Civil affairs personnel

- **Map stakeholders at all levels:** Civil affairs personnel should systematically undertake a comprehensive mapping of stakeholders at the national and subnational levels to understand how they fit together and how to leverage mission engagement at all levels.
- **Form partnerships to target the drivers of local conflicts:** Civil affairs personnel should map the political economy of local conflicts to understand how they can target the drivers of conflict and facilitate sustainable solutions. Because it will likely be beyond the capacity or scope of the mission to fully address the root causes of conflict, missions should seek to empower and work alongside national and local actors, as well as other UN and non-UN stakeholders who may be better situated to do so.