



No helmets, just suits

Political missions as an instrument of the UN Security Council for civilian conflict management

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- The work of political missions often goes undetected by international media coverage. But political missions that can be deployed at various stages of a conflict's cycle, from prevention to mediation to post-conflict settings, are an extremely versatile and inexpensive tool for the UN Security Council to maintain international peace and security.
- Political missions face budgetary constraints that limit their ability to react to crises quickly and operational obstacles, especially in terms of staffing. UN member states should address these impediments by lending their full support to initiatives such as the UN's *Global Field Support Strategy* and the *Civilian Capacity Review* and by backing steps to improve funding and general support to political missions.
- As many peacekeeping missions will cease their operations over the next couple of years, political missions are likely to take on a more prominent role in maintaining peace and security. However, political missions are unlikely to replace peacekeeping operations and should not be seen as a panacea to conflict resolution.
- To ensure more effective responses to security challenges on a larger scale the international community should strengthen the UN's political missions while also enhancing the capabilities of and cooperation with regional organizations, such as the OSCE, ECOWAS and the AU, which deploy similar missions.
- Civilian personnel in political missions is disproportionately composed of staffers from northern countries. The UN and its member states should strive for more diverse representation to encourage the input of countries from the global South in the work of political missions. The increased presence of emerging powers in the current composition of the Security Council offers an opportunity for these actors to play a stronger role in shaping political missions.



Contents

1. Introduction	2
2. A Fine Line: All Peace Missions Are Political	2
2.1 The Role of the UN Security Council	3
2.2 Types of Political Missions	3
2.3 Mixed Experiences	4
2.4 Other Mandating Organisations	5
3. Functional Elements of UN Political Missions and the New York-Field Nexus	5
3.1 DFS – Technical Anchor in New York	5
3.2 DPA, DPKO and the PBC – Political and Strategic Guidance for the Field	6
3.3 Integration at the Field Level	6
3.4 The Centrality of the SRSG	6
4. Challenges for Political Missions and Ways to Overcome Them	7
5. Outlook	8

1. Introduction

In order to exercise its core function of maintaining world peace and security, the United Nations Security Council has a host of options at its disposal. Perhaps the most visible are military peacekeeping operations, staffed by the so-called blue helmets. However, the UN can also deploy an array of less prominent civilian operations, known as political missions. With a wide range of mandated tasks and functions, as well as geographic foci, these missions are extremely versatile. They can be employed at various stages of a conflict's cycle, from prevention to mediation and from ongoing conflict to post-conflict settings, and appear in various shapes and sizes, ranging from a single envoy to field missions with staff in the thousands. Although Envoys and Special Advisors to the UN Secretary-General belong to the category of political missions, this paper focuses primarily on field-based missions.¹

2. A Fine Line: All Peace Missions Are Political

In a broad sense all peace operations are inherently political and military peacekeeping operations are as much political instruments as their civilian counterparts. In fulfilling their mandates peacekeeping operations work to secure non-violent, political solutions to conflicts. In addition to various military and developmental responsibilities they also contribute to political tasks, such as reform of the security and judicial sector and good governance. Additionally, very much like civilian missions, the success of peacekeeping operations also depends on effective political processes and frameworks.

What differentiates civilian political missions from peacekeeping and other peace operations, such as electoral observer and human rights monitoring missions, is that the former have political engagement in the form of good offices, mediation or facilitation at their very core. The majority of political missions are specifically mandated to conduct this kind of work, including for example the UN Missions in Afghanistan and Iraq. Other missions, such as the UN Mission in Nepal that ceased its

operations in January 2011 and the UN Regional Centre for Preventive Diplomacy for Central Asia, lack an explicit political mandate. However, it is widely understood that as representatives of the UN Secretary-General the missions' leaderships have an inherent power to engage in good offices.

Although not specified in the UN Charter, good offices and mediation to prevent international disputes from arising, escalating or spreading are among the main functions of the UN Secretary-General who, under Article 99 of the Charter, is authorized to take initiatives in matters that in his or her opinion »may threaten the maintenance of international peace and security«. Dag Hammarskjöld and Javier Pérez de Cuéllar, the second and fifth Secretaries-General of the UN, did much to establish the good office role under Article 99. Early examples of the use of this function include Hammarskjöld's political engagement during the 1956 Suez Canal Crisis and de Cuéllar's mediation efforts during the Falkland Crisis in 1982. Other Secretaries-General – including Boutros Boutros Ghali, Kofi Annan and, to a somewhat lesser extent, Ban Ki Moon – continued to build on this foundation. The good office function extends to missions established at the request of the Secretary-General, the General Assembly and those mandated directly by the Security Council, which constitute the vast majority of political missions.

Even with the good office role at its disposal to move peace processes forward, the extent of a mission's political engagement is ultimately determined by the stage of a country's conflict cycle. Very few missions play a purely preventative role in terms of preventing violent conflict where it has not yet occurred. One reason for this shortcoming is that parties involved in a conflict are keen not to »internationalize« the problem by involving the UN, fearing increased international scrutiny and Security Council repercussions, such as sanctions. But once a conflict has erupted, political missions can be instrumental in assisting its resolution by pursuing robust diplomacy and mediation efforts. Once a conflict resolution has been agreed by the conflicting parties field missions then continue to play an important role by engaging in a host of activities that prevent conflicts from re-occurring or escalating, and by building national and regional preventive capacities for the immediate and long term.

1. Many of the ideas advanced in this paper originate from essays by Richard Gowan, Ian Johnstone, Ian Martin and Teresa Whitfield available in the Center on International Cooperation's Review of Political Missions 2010, www.cic.nyu.edu. The author would also like to thank Richard Gowan and Sara Batmanglich for their comments on previous drafts.

2.1 The Role of the UN Security Council

The bulk of UN political missions are mandated through the organization's primary decision-making and executive body, the Security Council. Exceptions are those missions that have been established either through the General Assembly or at the initiative of the Secretary-General through an exchange of letters with the President of the Security Council, as was the case with the UN Regional Office in Central Asia. In mandating a mission, the Council typically asks the Secretary-General to prepare a strategic work plan laying out the mission's general composition, organizational structure and proposed budget. Where circumstances allow, the Secretary-General is also expected to approach the parties to the conflict in order to draft a mutually acceptable and enforceable mandate to be approved by the Council.

Relying solely on political persuasion for their success, the international legitimacy that the Council's authorization provides is the principal source of leverage for political missions. It is thus all the more important that the parties to the conflict, the host nation, or in some cases even influential regional actors, consent to the mission and are willing to cooperate with it. In this sense, missions based on a regional framework may have an advantage over those with a country focus because member states may be more inclined to accept a mission with a broader regional mandate than a presence that deals with country-specific issues.

Either way, eagerness to achieve consensus among key actors can sometimes lead to mandates with a somewhat limited scope, as was the case with the UN Mission in Nepal where India opposed an overly political role for the UN and contributed to a narrowly defined mandate that proved increasingly restrictive. Other missions suffer from mandates that are too broad and loosely defined which do not match their capacities or financial resources. The UN Office for West Africa, for example – which with 27 staffers is the smallest political mission in West Africa despite its regional scope – has seen a steady extension of its mandated tasks and functions without an accompanying increase in resources.

Mandates are typically granted for a six-month period and the Council reviews their continuation, termination or possible modification twice a year. The decision-making process is aided by regular situation analysis reports

by the Secretary-General, who also provides recommendations on continuation of a mission or alterations to its mandated tasks for the Council's consideration. In addition, the Council receives regular briefings by the respective mission's leadership. The Security Council thus plays an active role in the follow-up and review of the mission's success in implementing its mandated tasks.

Because political progress is difficult to measure, particularly within set timelines, determining a mission's expiration date and deciding when it has achieved its set goals is a complicated matter. But political missions need to have exit strategies so that they do not extend beyond the window of opportunity where effective contributions can be made; a fate that has befallen several political presences in the Balkans that have been part of their host countries' political landscape for over a decade. In order to provide missions with exit strategies, the Security Council may decide on benchmarks to determine priority areas and to measure progress towards their mandated tasks. Although the problem of measuring political progress persists, benchmarks that are realistically devised and tailored to the mandate can help to identify progression or regression from a mission's goals, and inform Security Council action accordingly. In laying out what a mission can and cannot achieve, benchmarks may also help to manage any unreasonable host country expectations.

2.2 Types of Political Missions

Political engagement is a broad definition for political missions that work on an array of tasks tailored to the specific country contexts they engage in. The following missions – which roughly fall into four groupings – illustrate the breadth of this kind of work:

- **Governance assistance missions:** large-scale, high profile operations that work in close cooperation with governing entities to improve critical areas including security, governance, economic development and regional cooperation.

In 2010, the UN Mission in Afghanistan and the UN Mission in Iraq – which belong to this grouping – made headway in these areas by successfully supporting electoral processes and continue to play an important role in facilitating political dialogue between the respective governments and other actors.

- **Missions in support of peace processes:** medium to small-scale missions that assist countries in the implementation of peace processes and aid the promotion of peace and stability more generally.

Missions in this cluster include the UN Special Coordinator Office for the Middle East Peace Process and the UN Political Office for Somalia that support their host countries' political reconciliation processes with varying levels of success, while aiming to preserve their stance as credible interlocutors for all parties.

- **Peacebuilding offices:** missions that are deployed in countries that concluded a peace accord and have entered the post-conflict phase. These missions assist governments in peacebuilding efforts, often through coordinating strategy and programs of UN humanitarian and development actors on the ground.

The UN Peacebuilding Office in Sierra Leone and the UN Integrated Peacebuilding Office in Guinea-Bissau, for example, both work jointly with the UN Peacebuilding Commission (PBC)² to channel peacebuilding efforts through their offices in order to reduce the burden on host governments arising from the need to deal with multiple UN development and humanitarian entities.

- **Regional offices:** missions that not only address cross-border security challenges, such as drug trafficking and organized crime, but also assist countries in finding political solutions for issues that could spark wider conflicts, both internally and cross-border.

The UN Office for West Africa, for example, is credited for its efforts (along with those of the Economic Community of West African States) to preventing an explosive situation in Guinea from deteriorating, eventually paving the way for the country's first democratic presidential elections held in late 2010. Similarly, following the outbreak of violence in Kyrgyzstan, the UN Regional Centre for Central Asia played a key role in the international response to the ensuing humanitarian crisis by facilitating dialogue and exchange among regional organizations and humanitarian actors on the ground.

2. The PBC is an inter-governmental forum bringing together key actors and stakeholders to develop and consolidate integrated strategies towards recovery and peacebuilding.

2.3 Mixed Experiences

Given the widely different country contexts that political missions work in, experiences tend to be mixed. Political missions are likely to make great gains in specific aspects of their work, but may fall behind in implementing others. This especially holds true for those missions operating amid uncertain political environments and precarious security situations that hamper their engagement and effectiveness. In mid-2010, the Special Coordinator Office for the Middle East Peace Process, for example, saw some breakthroughs in negotiating improved humanitarian and material access into Gaza. However, as an advisor to the conflict's parties and in working with the Middle East Quartet it proved less successful in influencing political processes and encouraging progress towards a peaceful resolution of the conflict.

Political missions across the spectrum achieve the best results when they are recognized as neutral and can work closely with relevant political actors. This is the case with the UN regional center for Central Asia, where the mission leadership has emerged as a credible partner for the political leaders of its respective member states and the mission functions as a medium for dialogue between governments that do not have a history of engaging in bilateral discussions on issues of common concern. Similarly, the political mission in Iraq has made important contributions to the country's political processes, particularly in mediating Arab-Kurdish relations, due to its good standing with various government entities. Alternatively, the lack of a functioning working relationship between the mission and the government was evident in Burundi, where in late 2009 the government asked for the mission leadership to be replaced, because it was seen as overly critical of the authorities. That mission has now been downsized at the government's request.

Ideally, good working relationships are further supported by a strong political framework that guides transition processes forward and by a united stance on the part of the international community behind a mission's efforts. This is the case with the mission in Sierra Leone, which cooperates closely with the government and has aligned its own guiding framework with the government's Agenda for Change. Widely acknowledged as successfully supporting the country's relatively stable peace consolidation process, the mission also enjoys the joint support of the international com-

munity although this has yet to translate into an increase in financial resources to enhance the mission's capacity and strengthen its engagement. At the other end of the spectrum, political processes supported by the political mission in Somalia largely fail to bring results due to a lack of necessary political buy-in from key actors and varying and often counterproductive approaches on the part of members of the international community.

2.4 Other Mandating Organizations

It is important to note that political missions are not new – they have been deployed since the early 1990s – and are not unique to the UN system. Other multilateral organizations – such as the EU, OSCE, AU, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the Organization of American States (OAS) – also employ field presences and special representatives that focus on good offices.

In 2010, the EU and the OSCE together employed over 22 such missions, primarily in the Balkans but also in Central Asia. In Africa, the AU and ECOWAS operate several presences that engage in prevention and early warning, mediation and supporting post-conflict peace consolidation efforts. These include the AU's Panel of Eminent African Personalities and its Coordination and Liaison Office, that began its work in the aftermath of Kenya's contested 2007 elections; the four sub-regional offices of ECOWAS's Early Warning and Response Network; and ECOWAS's special representative offices in Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia and Togo. In Latin America and the Caribbean, the OAS maintains missions that support the peace process in Columbia, overseeing the adjacency zone between Belize and Guatemala, and promote confidence-building measures between Columbia and Ecuador.

Similar to the UN's political missions, these operations work on a multitude of tasks from development to humanitarian assistance, but focus on political engagement through their support of political processes. In addition, they too are mandated by their respective multilateral decision-making bodies – the EU Council, the OSCE's Permanent Council and the AU's Peace and Security Council – affording the missions leverage through international legitimization.

3. Functional Elements of UN Political Missions and the New York-Field Nexus

Effective political engagement in volatile situations requires appropriate resource allocation in funding, staffing and logistical support that enables the mission to perform its functions. The dedicated entity at the UN providing substantial support to field missions (both political and peacekeeping) in all of these areas is the Department of Field Support (DFS).

3.1 DFS: Technical Anchor in New York

In terms of mission funding, DFS advises and provides strategic direction to political missions in preparing budgets that include financing for staffing levels; operational costs, including transport, communications, supplies and services; and program costs, such as public information and training programs. At headquarters, DFS also represents political missions' interests in the various intergovernmental budgetary committees. Last year, the total UN budget for its 19 political missions (including five non-field based special envoys) was \$US 600 million, the costliest being the two large-scale operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. Compared to peacekeeping missions that cost \$US 7.9 billion in 2009–2010, political missions operate on a shoestring budget but face certain budgetary challenges that will be further discussed in the final section.

Another vital area in which DFS assists political missions is the provision of guidance for recruiting field staff and support for the selection process with regard to leadership appointments – an important service, as country situations can change rapidly and staff needs have to be adjusted accordingly. As work in political missions goes beyond the purely political it requires well-trained staff with diverse skill sets, who also have cultural adaptability and a willingness to work in precarious security situations. Last year, 1,020 international civilian staffers were employed in over 24 occupational groups across the 19 political missions, in areas such as political affairs, public information, general administration, logistics, social and economic affairs, electoral affairs and rule of law-related activities. Lastly, DFS provides the necessary logistical support to political missions, enabling day-to-day communications and transport, as well as ensuring the delivery of supplies and other essentials.

3.2 DPA, DPKO and the PBC – Political and Strategic Guidance for the Field

Meanwhile, overall supervision, policy guidance and support to the majority of political missions lies with the UN Department for Political Affairs (DPA). Only one political mission – the UN Assistance Mission to Afghanistan – is led by the Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO) which, as the name implies, generally oversees peacekeeping operations. Until recently the two departments' responsibilities were strictly separated. While DPA, for example, would lead mediation efforts during a conflict, it would pull out once the peace process was completed (taking its knowledge and political oversight along with it) and in many cases peacekeeping operations would take over in assisting implementation of the achieved agreements. With the increase of multidimensional mandates for peacekeeping operations which, in addition to military and policing responsibilities, include political and peacebuilding tasks, came the growing recognition that peacemaking, peacekeeping and peacebuilding should not be seen as separate, sequential processes. Instead, the UN strives for a more comprehensive approach, linking the various processes. Institutionally, it is the aforementioned PBC that is intended to support this comprehensive approach by marshaling resources for peacebuilding activities, providing advice on integrated strategies for peacebuilding and recovery and by keeping attention directed towards post-conflict countries. In practice, the PBC has had somewhat limited success in delivering on this vision, not least because it currently has only five countries on its agenda (four of which host political missions). A 2010 strategic review of the PBC's first five years in operation provides guidance for the PBC in realizing its goals and assisting a more diverse range of countries.

3.3 Integration at the Field Level

At the field level, the comprehensive approach has translated into integration as the guiding principle for all conflict and post-conflict situations where the UN has Country Teams (consisting of UN agencies, funds and programs), a multi-dimensional peacekeeping operation or a political mission. Aimed at maximizing the UN's efficiency and effectiveness, the integrated approach strives to link the various elements of peace operations – such as political tasks, development work,

humanitarian assistance, human rights and the rule of law. Generally, the more stable a country is, the more structurally integrated a mission can become. In 2010, only two political missions – Sierra Leone and Burundi – were fully structurally integrated and under the leadership of an Executive Representative of the Secretary-General (ERSG). The ERSG position is »triple-hatted«, because it combines the functions of the mission leadership with that of the Resident Coordinator (RC) and Humanitarian Coordinator (HC), who are responsible for the coordination and harmonization of the UN Country Teams (UNCTs). In other cases, the roles of the RC and the HC are combined under the Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary-General (DSRSG). In these less integrated missions, the SRSRSG provides the overall leadership and political guidance, while the Deputy is charged with coordination of the UNCTs. In a third model of minimally integrated field presences – such as in Somalia – missions are under the leadership of the SRSRSG or RSG but the RC/HC functions are fulfilled outside the mission structure by the Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator, who is institutionally attached to the UN Development Programme (UNDP) and receives additional support through the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.

3.4 The Centrality of the SRSRSG

Regardless of the degree of integration of a mission – with the grade of Assistant-Secretary-General or even Under-Secretary-General – the SRSRSG (or ERSG/RSG) is the highest UN authority in the field and thus has considerable leverage and executive powers. The SRSRSG is responsible for the management of all mission components, implementing the mission's mandate and ensuring the mission's functioning. He or she must further develop a clear analysis of the situation on the ground, provide guidance for the mission's objectives and strategy, report on the mission's progress to the Security Council and make recommendations for action. As with mission staff, the SRSRSG must have skill-sets beyond the essential political negotiation and mediation expertise and should possess managerial capabilities to oversee a mission's culturally diverse staff, which rotates frequently. Effective leadership is a key component of a successful mission and a leader's ability and character can heavily influence the course of action. In general, SRSRSGs work closely with dedicated support staff at UN headquarters, who advise

on the mission's strategic direction, provide operational guidance and monitor progress. Precisely how close the field/New York inter-play turns out to be depends on a number of factors, including the available resources for support staff at headquarters and, to some degree, how far the SRSG chooses to engage with New York. This may vary greatly from mission to mission; some are in contact with DPA on a daily basis and others communicate irregularly and have a more distant relationship to headquarters.

4. Challenges for Political Missions and Ways to Overcome Them

Political missions face an array of budgetary and operational obstacles, with financial woes most prominent among them. Contrary to peacekeeping operations that have their own, separate funding mechanisms that allow for a flexible and timely allocation of funds, funding for political missions comes from the UN's regular budget. Assessed on a bi-annual basis this budgetary track lacks a dedicated support account for political missions and is thus less capable of reacting to the fast-changing environments in which political missions operate. For many of their operational and backstopping activities the missions must therefore rely on extra-budgetary means, which in turn depend on successful fundraising activities by the Secretary-General or the missions' respective leaderships. This reality limits their ability to react to crises in a timely manner and translates into low numbers of headquarters staff providing political analysis, guidance and general support to the missions.

Problems with staffing also extend to the field, although they are not always of a financial nature but also stem from managerial difficulties and inadequate recruitment practices. Finding candidates that meet the diverse skill requirements is challenging and further compounded by hiring structures that in most cases react too slowly to the fast-changing needs on the ground. Practitioners also charge that, in its current structure, DFS is better suited to meet staffing needs for large-scale peacekeeping missions than for political missions' more unique niche requirements. Due to these combined shortcomings, some missions have had vacancy rates of up to 40 per cent, severely affecting their ability to perform assigned tasks. Senior postings are affected also, which was most dramatically illustrated by the six-month vacancy of the

Deputy SRSG post in Afghanistan in 2009–2010. An additional issue is the lack of robust accountability and feedback mechanisms for senior leaders in the field that arguably can affect overall performance. To its credit, the UN has launched initiatives to address these issues, such as the *Global Field Support Strategy*, which received preliminary endorsement from the General Assembly in July 2010, and the *Civilian Capacity Review*, to be completed in early 2011.

On a larger scale, despite widespread recognition that conflict prevention, peacemaking and peacekeeping are not sequential or linear processes, the international community continues to struggle with effectively combining these activities, critically affecting international response to crises.

To make it easier to overcome these hindrances and to strengthen political missions in the future, UN member states should take steps to:

- Strengthen institutional oversight of political missions and enhance the UN's peacemaking, peacekeeping and peacebuilding roles by establishing better coordination and cooperation between the PBC and the Security Council. Member states should further consolidate the role of the former by supporting the recommendations advanced in its 2010 review that would enable the PBC to extend its reach to assist more countries, as well as by fully committing to efforts in countries currently on the PBC's agenda.
- Provide full support to UN initiatives such as the aforementioned *Global Field Support Strategy* and *Civilian Capacity Review*, assuring their swift implementation. Member states should also agree to change funding arrangements for political missions, ideally by moving their financing outside the UN's regular budget, which would allow for more flexible budgetary approaches. A new initiative by DPA and DFS that is looking into improvements in the funding of and support to political missions represents an opportunity for member states to take a step in the right direction.
- Diversify the range of »suit contributing countries«³ with regard to political missions. The majority of civi-

3. The author borrows this term from a DPA official, who coined it at a meeting at UN headquarters in October 2010.

lian personnel among the top ten countries represented in political missions come from the North, with the US and the UK occupying the top two positions and only one African country – Kenya – represented among them at all. Given that the number of political missions in Africa is likely to increase over the coming years, missions there would benefit from more personnel with specific regional knowledge who share cultural and linguistic ties with their host countries. A more diverse representation on the part of emerging powers among civilian staffers – in early 2010, Brazil was represented by only four staffers, China by only one – may also encourage their interest and input in the activities of political missions. The current composition of the Security Council – with Brazil and South Africa among its members – provides a good opening for emerging powers to play a stronger role in shaping political missions.

5. Outlook

The UN enjoys legitimacy as an impartial, international organization which, in combination with its experience and expertise in conflict prevention and management, makes it an important player in the peaceful resolution of conflicts. The authority derived from its multilateral mandates provides a kind of leverage that other players in the crowded field of conflict management – such as non-governmental organizations or individual states – which operate on a bilateral basis lack. As a result, the UN can handle situations in which other actors cannot get involved due to geopolitical or other underlying factors. Given the right resources, the UN can also unite its development, human rights and humanitarian machinery behind its efforts to engage in long-term peacebuilding activities, providing another unique advantage.

The UN sometimes pitches political missions as cost-effective alternatives to peacekeeping operations. And indeed, in some cases – as with the UN Mission in Nepal which had an arms monitoring component and the OSCE's monitoring mission in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict – civilian political missions have proven their ability to take on tasks that traditionally would have been the responsibility of military peace operations. A review of missions currently in the field, however, suggests that political missions are most likely to work alongside peacekeeping operations or replace them after a cer-

tain level of security is established, acting as adjuncts to military operations rather than substitutes. However, as many peacekeeping operations – particularly in Africa – will draw down over the next couple of years, political missions are likely to take on a more prominent role in maintaining peace and security.

However, as we have seen, the UN and its political missions also face distinct challenges and to view these missions as the solution to international conflict response and prevention would be a mistake. Instead, they should be seen as one – albeit multifaceted – tool with which the Security Council can maintain international peace and security. In addition to strengthening UN political missions, it is thus equally important to enhance the capabilities of and cooperation with regional organizations, such as the OSCE, ECOWAS and the AU, to ensure more effective response to security challenges on a broader scale. One option for combining these approaches may be to strengthen regional offices which, in addressing cross-border threats, collaborate closely with and enhance response mechanisms of member countries, regional organizations, and development and UN actors alike. The success of the newly established UN Office for Central Africa – the UN's third office with a regional focus – will be an important indicator in this direction for the future.



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