

“A Shared Vision” – Integration and UN Special Political Missions

In a Policy Committee decision of June 2008, the UN Secretary General reaffirmed 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. The aim of the integrated approach for field missions is to develop a shared vision among all UN actors on the ground, maximizing the UN's efficiency and effectiveness by linking the various elements of peace operations, such as political tasks, development work, humanitarian assistance, human rights and the rule of law. However, the principle does not apply to missions mandated with strict military tasks, or to regional political offices, such as in Central Asia and West Africa.

Integration is by no means limited to one specific set up, but can take different structural forms depending on the specific country context. Generally, the more stable a country is, the more structurally integrated a mission can become. As of early 2010, only two missions, UNIPSIL and BINUB, are fully structurally integrated. Both missions are 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), which are responsible for the coordination and harmonization of the UN development and humanitarian actors, namely the UN Country Teams (UNCTs), on the ground.

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 integrated missions, the SRSG provides the overall leadership and political guidance, while the Deputy is charged with coordination of the UNCTs. Current examples of such missions include UNAMA and UNAMI. In a third model of minimally integrated field presences, for example in the case of UNMIN and UNPOS, the missions are under the leadership of the SRSG but the RC/HC functions are filled outside the mission structure by the Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator, who is institutionally attached to the UN Development Programme (UNDP) and receives support from local offices of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA).

Independent from the level of integration, all integrated field missions should have shared analytical and planning capacities as well as integrated strategic frameworks that should facilitate joint planning and shared objectives, divide responsibilities between the various actors and decide on mechanisms for monitoring and evaluation. At headquarters level, task forces consisting of relevant Secretariat departments and offices, agencies, funds and programs, provide support and policy guidance to the integrated missions. Missions in countries that are on the agenda of the UN Peacebuilding Commission (PBC), receive additional support through the PBC's Support Office.

It is important to note that the integrated approach does not seek to incorporate one UN entity into another – while the function of the RC/HC is structurally integrated, the UNCTs maintain their institutional independence from the mission. As the various UN actors operate according to their own management systems, accountability and report structures, funding lines and budget cycles, integration implementation can be challenging. In addition, there continues to be a lack of basic guidelines for senior mission management as to how to carry out integration in field missions. Both elements can lead to ambiguities about the process and place heavy reliance on the mission leadership to get the task done.

Some actors in the humanitarian sphere voice concerns that the integrated approach diminishes the impartiality of the humanitarians, as they are perceived as intrinsically linked with the role of the mission in a country's political transition process. Others argue that the set up in fully structurally integrated missions, where the ERSG also acts as the RC/HC, is an impediment to a more robust political role, because the mission leadership is not solely perceived as an impartial political mediator.

At the same time, while a political mission can not be perceived as partial to any party to a conflict, its good offices and mediation role can be instrumentalized to create the necessary conditions for successful conduct of humanitarian and development functions, that otherwise could not be achieved (as Ian Johnstone argues in his essay in Section II of this volume). While integration in this context does not come without challenges, it provides an important step toward a UN system that works in unison across institutional differences.