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In association with Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the United Nations Transition Project.

Report

Improving UN transitions

Wednesday 9 – Friday 11 October 2019 | WP1719



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Executive summary

- United Nations (UN) transitions are inherently political processes in which the UN presence is reconfigured to best support peacebuilding as well as to provide a continuing political, normative and technical accompaniment to a country's broader transition in order to avoid conflict relapse. Earlier transition planning can help align the peace operation and the UN Country Team (UNCT) around a common strategy and enable a division of responsibility based on comparative advantage. More flexible planning and budgeting processes would enable the UN to more seamlessly transition between peacekeeping missions, special political missions, and UNCTs in response to national priorities. National ownership should be understood to encompass a diverse range of stakeholders, not just the state.
- Peace operations are an effective means of enabling political processes, protecting civilians, and creating the minimum security conditions for a gradual shift from humanitarian to longer term development assistance. They are rarely effective at addressing underlying drivers of conflict. The UN Security Council (UNSC) should focus on shorter term, more achievable objectives, and acknowledge that the main drivers of change will always be domestic.
- Security Council benchmarks are used to assess progress towards the end state of a mission. They should be further refined to more clearly distinguish between core benchmarks used to evaluate the mission's progress towards a desired transition point, contextual benchmarks that inform the Council's analysis of the broader country context, and minimum conditions or redlines that help the Council determine when it may be necessary to adjust or suspend a transition process.
- To improve the quality of information flowing to the Security Council, the use of independent assessments is an increasing practice that can guide decisions on realistic and appropriate benchmarks and enable course corrections. As recent instances demonstrate wide variability in scope and composition, a review of recent experience could provide greater consistency and focus. Improved gender and political economic analysis would enable the Council and missions to better understand opportunities and obstacles to reform and mitigate risks of backsliding during transition.
- Partnership with regional and sub-regional organisations, international financial institutions (IFIs) and bilateral donors are critical to effective transitions. These institutions have different comparative advantages, from sustaining political engagement to mobilising donor funding. Earlier, and more institutionalised engagement by the UN could strengthen the normative, political and operational support these entities provide to transitioning countries.
- The closure of a peace operation and waning international attention can create a "financial cliff" for transition countries. The UN has become a critical source

of flexible, risk tolerant funding, but given the scale of requirements other sources of risk-tolerant financing by donors and IFIs are also required. Earlier planning on transition financing would help ensure greater predictability for peacebuilding priorities, and should anticipate potential economic shocks to national budgets at the time of a planned withdrawal. An assessment of the comparative advantage of the UN, bilateral donors, the World Bank and other sources of financing could help identify where alternative delivery models might be more appropriate.

Introduction

- Wilton Park organized a three-day closed conference in partnership with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the United Nations Transitions Project with the aim of identifying realistic policy and practical options that could contribute to smoother and more sustainable transitions.
- United Nations (UN) peace operations are going through a renewed and accelerated period of drawdown and reconfiguration. Since 2017, longstanding peacekeeping missions closed in Côte d'Ivoire, Liberia and Haiti, where a special political mission has been established. The Security Council has also mandated the transition of the mission in Darfur amid Sudan's broader political changes, and the drawdown of the peacebuilding mission in Guinea-Bissau. Looking ahead, Security Council attention is beginning to shift to other missions, including the mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, while elsewhere the UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has requested missions to engage in transition planning processes.
- While previous transitions took place in environments where peace operations supported the achievement of relative stability and peaceful democratic transitions of power, the next generation of transitions are likely to grapple with unfinished political settlements, ongoing protection challenges, expansive geographic territories with often limited state presence, and, at times, sensitivities from host states regarding a strong, continued political role by the United Nations. At the same time, recent UN reforms, including of the peace and security architecture and the development system, as well as member state support for the Secretary-General's sustaining peace agenda and Action for Peacekeeping initiative have created opportunities to strengthen transition processes with the aim of ensuring sustainability and avoid conflict relapse.
- The intention of the Wilton Park meeting was to draw on lessons learned from previous transitions in order to identify recurrent challenges and key issues in transition processes; to explore options for collaboration and partnership between the UN and other organisations and partners in transition settings (e.g., member states, international financial institutions, regional organisations, civil society and local stakeholders); and to identify practical measures that the UN, host governments and other stakeholders could take to enhance political and development outcomes, as well as optimise the use of resources in future transition contexts.
- Participants in the discussions included some 70 experts on peace operations from UN headquarters and field presences, government officials from both permanent and elected members of the Security Council and countries hosting peace operations, as well as academics and researchers on peace operations and transitions. This report reflects the consensus and general conclusions from these discussions.

Key Issues in Transition Processes

Conceptualizing Transitions

1. Over the last two decades, Security Council and the UN Secretariat have shifted how they understand, design and implement transitions. Initially regarded as technical processes during which peacekeeping missions “handed over” responsibility for key tasks to the national government and the UNCT, transitions are increasingly understood as inherently political processes in which the UN presence is reconfigured to best support peacebuilding, providing ongoing political, normative and technical accompaniment to a country’s broader transition in order to avoid conflict relapse. UN transitions should be viewed as part of the larger transition of the country from conflict to peace, where the overall measure of success is moving away from the need for UN security and development engagement.
2. Significant residual issues, notably political inclusion, reconciliation, and fragile governance structures, often remain following the departure of a peacekeeping mission. Since Resident Coordinators (RCs) do not have a political mandate they typically experience a loss of political capacity with the departure of a peace operation, although this has been somewhat mitigated by the creation of the new enhanced RC offices (RCOs). The resulting decrease in political engagement can pose a significant risk to lasting stability and peace in a country, jeopardizing years of political and financial investment.
3. As the situation in a country changes, the UN needs to adapt and tailor its engagement to support evolving national priorities, for example, maintaining political engagement, scaling up peacebuilding and development programming and advice to national stakeholders, or drawing down uniformed components. In some cases a follow-on special political mission can support UNCT programming, while maintaining access to assessed funding and good offices. When transitioning directly to the UNCT, ongoing political support can be provided by a UN regional office or regional organisation.
4. Transitioning from one type of UN presence to another currently requires closing down and liquidating a mission, often with loss of institutional memory, political relationships, and continuity of programming and support to national stakeholders. The Secretary-General’s peace and security, management, and development system reforms are intended to enable improved “whole-of-UN” approaches. More flexible planning and budgeting processes could help facilitate a spectrum of peacekeeping missions, special political missions, and UNCTs tailored to country contexts, so that form follows function rather than different funding streams. However, it was recognized that member states’ budgetary concerns, especially around accountability and transparency, would need to be taken into account.
5. UN strategic communication around transitions should emphasize that the UN is not leaving with the closure of a peace operation. National stakeholders often do not distinguish between one aspect of the UN presence and another. Such efforts can help sustain and build trust in the UN, particularly in communities that will be most affected by the transition, by clearly articulating that its focus is evolving to promote nationally led priorities and policies.

National ownership

6. The main goal of a transition is to shift the full responsibility for peacebuilding and security from the UN to national actors. National ownership is essential for ensuring that this process is sustainable and should be understood to encompass a diverse range of stakeholders, including government and other national actors, for example, opposition parties, civil society organisations, traditional and religious leaders, women, youth, and marginalised groups.

7. Transition planning should align with and support national priorities. Peace operations should develop and maintain relationships with government and political leaders, including opposition parties prior to transition to encourage political buy-in. They should reach a common understanding of underlying grievances, and develop a shared vision of the desired end state. Such regular engagement can help sustain political and operational support for the transition.
8. Differences of vision and priority between the Security Council and host governments pose a particular challenge for transitions. At times, “bottom up” national-level transition planning has been at odds with Security Council priorities around specific timetables and results. The Council itself is increasingly divided on its approach to transitions, for example, on the degree to which progress on human rights and good governance should be benchmarked.
9. As more countries successfully manage the closure of a peacekeeping mission, there are growing opportunities for countries undergoing transitions to learn from one another. Exchanging experiences, lessons, and best practices among national stakeholders is also relevant as more peace operations begin early transition planning in line with the Secretary-General’s 2019 planning directive on transitions.
10. National ownership also has implications for the proximity of elections to major transition milestones. Elections are often treated as a final step before the exit of a mission, marking a “new beginning.” Yet, a newly elected government may not feel obligated to follow through with a transition plan in which it was not involved. While ongoing engagement with political figures outside of government can help mitigate this risk, sufficient time should be built into transition timelines to permit the new government to commit to the transition plan.
11. To operationalise national ownership, the UN and donors have looked to where and how to start working through government, including enabling local level administration to address critical peacebuilding tasks such as conflict resolution, disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR), and provision of justice and policing. The UN, notably the Peacebuilding Fund (PBF), as well as several donors have also looked to ease administrative procedures for providing funding to civil society, including women’s and youth organisations, to facilitate their participation in transition processes.
12. During drawdown, there is a need to better safeguard and enhance gains on women, peace and security (WPS) and gender equality. Strengthened accountability of UN leadership at headquarters and country-level could better ensure that WPS commitments are fulfilled in transition processes. Funding targets and section criteria based on gender sensitive conflict analysis for resource mechanisms (as in the PBF) can support capacities to address gender-specific triggers to instability and conflict relapse.

Defining and measuring progress towards realistic end states

13. In response to a crisis, peacekeeping missions are a means of enabling a political process and creating the minimum necessary security conditions, including for protection of civilians (PoC). Over the last two decades, the Security Council has increased its expectations of what a mission should achieve. Most mandates include a range of complex, long-term tasks like security sector and judicial reform and extension of state authority.
14. Yet, peace operations are rarely effective at addressing underlying drivers of conflict during their long deployment. Most conflict drivers – identify and political exclusion, inequality, competition over land and resources – are issues over which the international community has limited influence, and which are often long-term if not generational processes of transformation.

15. Instead, there is a need for greater clarity on the minimum conditions that a host society should achieve, and on the role of a peace operation in supporting those objectives prior to its withdrawal. The Council may need to focus on shorter term, more achievable objectives that help sustain a country on the right track, while recognising that the main drivers of change need to come from within society.
16. The Security Council's practice of benchmarking emerged as way to gauge progress towards the end state of a mission, and rapidly became standard practice. While specific benchmarks differ, they tend to focus on security, including PoC; political progress, including elections; human rights and rule of law; socio-economic recovery; and, at times, the humanitarian situation. However, it is often unclear whether benchmarks are preconditions for mission departure or guidance for decision-making.
17. The Council has begun distinguishing between core and contextual benchmarks – those that fall within a mission's purview, versus those that rely on factors beyond the mission's control. Nonetheless, the Council has not always required all core benchmarks to be achieved prior to transition. Indeed, many Council members acknowledge that government-led reform processes, like security sector reform (SSR), are unlikely to be achieved prior to the departure of the mission. Hence, benchmarks often do not help the Council determine whether a situation still requires a peace operation.
18. To further refine benchmarking, the Secretariat could work with the Security Council to more clearly identify core benchmarks that will be used to evaluate the mission's progress towards a desired transition point, contextual benchmarks that would inform the Council's analysis of the broader country context, and a theory of change that links the core and context benchmarks. Additionally, identification of potential minimum conditions or redlines would help the Council determine when it may be necessary to adjust or suspend a transition process, as well as provide the Council with leverage by requiring progress on issues like governance or human rights as a condition of transition.¹
19. In the past, Council attention to the UNCT and its role in addressing peacebuilding priorities has come back into focus only once the mission is preparing to leave. Earlier transition planning can help align the peace operation and the UNCT around a common strategy and enable a division of responsibility based on comparative advantage. For example, while any formal transition process in Mali remains on the distant horizon, early planning should enable the mission to learn lessons from other transitions, e.g., regarding integration of the UNCT in the planning process and engagement with national stakeholders. Recognising the critical role of the UNCT, the Secretary-General's recent directive on transition planning invests the Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary General (DSRSG)/Humanitarian Coordinators (HCs)/Resident Coordinators (RCs) with responsibility to lead the planning process.
20. The quality of information flowing to the Security Council is a longstanding issue – particularly where it may have been tailored for political purposes. Strategic assessments provide situational analysis to the Security Council, guide decisions on realistic and appropriate benchmarks, and enable course corrections. Such input can be particularly valuable in helping the Council reach consensus on its approach. The use of independent assessments is an increasing practice, though recent instances demonstrate wide variability in scope and composition. A review of recent experience could provide greater consistency and focus.
21. Improved political economy analysis would enable missions to better understand opportunities and obstacles to reform, while challenging assumptions about whether objectives are mutually reinforcing. Reporting and analysis on transition risks should

¹ Adam Day, "Missions in Transition: Improving Security Council Practice," Background paper for the Wilton Park meeting on Improving UN Transitions.

include gender-specific triggers of violence and conflict. Women, peace and security commitments by national actors can be leveraged to ensure that gains are maintained.

International and regional partnerships

22. Successful transitions require addressing complex political, financial and operational issues. Increasingly, this complexity has required UN peace operations and the Security Council to work more closely with a range of partners, including the UN country team and regional political offices, regional and sub-regional organisations, the Peacebuilding Commission (PBC) and PBF, international financial institutions (IFIs) and bilateral donors. All of these entities bring different comparative advantages to the table, from sustaining political engagement to mobilising donor funding.
23. UN regional offices have provided ongoing political engagement following the departure of a peacekeeping mission, as in Cote d'Ivoire and Liberia. They have worked with governments and their neighbours to establish regional policies and programs in response to cross-border challenges. They have also coordinated messaging across regional and sub-regional organisations and engaged national political leaders to diffuse political tensions, for example around elections. At the same time, such offices are unable to provide the same level of political analysis as a country-based mission or other dedicated in-country capacity due to limited country-specific expertise, staffing and resources.
24. Regional and sub-regional organisations, including smaller, technical entities, have closer proximity to transition countries, and, due to the direct interests of neighbouring countries, often a greater stake in remaining involved post-transition. Where the relationship between the host government and the UN is marked by sensitivities, regional and sub-regional organisations can also complement UN involvement by offering additional entry points. Early engagement by the UN with regional organisations would strengthen their ability to provide normative, political and, in some cases, operational support to transitioning countries.² Better understanding is needed of how these organisations envision their potential engagement in transition countries.
25. There have been important efforts in recent years to systematise or institutionalise these partnerships, including framework agreements between UN and African Union, and cooperation between their respective councils. These partnerships have tended to work best at the strategic level, with a clear division of labour. Nonetheless, differences between regional entities and the UN on conflict analysis and overall strategy can hinder coherent responses, requiring significant effort to develop and maintain a shared approach.
26. The Peacebuilding Commission is increasingly recognised by transition states and at least some members of the Security Council as a forum to help generate and maintain political and financial attention on longer-term peacebuilding issues. The PBC provides a platform for dialogue among diverse stakeholders, including regional organisations and IFIs. Utilising the political leverage of the PBC early in the transition process could facilitate better support and visibility on countries' priorities during and post transition. The Security Council has increasingly become more open to advice from the PBC, particularly in the form of targeted, tailored input with

² See Daniel Forti and Lesley Connelly, "Pivoting from Crisis to Development: Preparing for the Next Wave of UN Peace Operations Transitions," International Peace Institute, July 2019, available via https://www.ipinst.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/1907_Pivoting-from-Crisis.pdf

concrete and actionable recommendations.

27. The PBC's advisory role does have limitations. Not all countries want to be on the PBC agenda, though increased flexibility in modalities for PBC engagement (e.g., other than country-configurations) may help mitigate these concerns. And while the PBC is well placed to highlight peacebuilding priorities and financial gaps, it is not operational and therefore is better placed to complement others in supporting transitions.

Risk tolerant transition financing

28. Transition environments typically have significant financial needs for peacebuilding priorities, addressing residual humanitarian needs, as well as longer term development. The closure of a peace operation, accompanied by waning international attention, can create a “financial cliff” for countries undergoing transition. There is a risk that economic downturn or stagnation, combined with high levels of employed youth, could lead to instability.
29. While donor fatigue in transitions may be overstated – Liberia and Haiti have not seen significant reductions in bilateral aid following the departure of peacekeeping missions – there is a need for flexible, risk-tolerant funding for peacebuilding priorities like DDR, SSR, and political reconciliation. Transition countries usually have limited budgets to deliver a peace dividend to their citizens, and are often unable to compensate for services, like security and justice, provided by peacekeeping missions outside of major urban centres. Such unmet expectations can have potential destabilising effects.
30. The UN has become a critical source of peacebuilding funding through mechanisms like the PBF and use of joint programmatic funding, which can help to partially mitigate the so called “financial cliff” caused by the departure of a peace operation with access to assessed funding:
- The PBF has been used to provide catalytic funding for immediate peacebuilding needs, helping ensure that the UNCT has a minimal delivery capacity for peace and stability programming during transition, while providing space for the UNCT to seek out other financing opportunities. The PBF has been used to fund core functions of the RC Office, the Office of the High Commission for Human Rights, and other UN peacebuilding activities in transition countries. The fund's gender and youth funding targets increasingly provide funding for civil society organisations to actively participate in transition-related peacebuilding, and address gender-specific triggers to instability and conflict relapse.
 - Joint programmatic funding enables a peace operation to support peacebuilding activities with the UN country team using its assessed budget, particularly on peacebuilding activities like reconciliation or rule of law capacity building. The mechanism, first used in Timor-Leste, is now a key dimension of the transition strategy in Darfur, where, in close cooperation with local authorities it supports “state liaison functions” under the programmatic lead of the UNCT to mitigate the risk of conflict relapse. Nonetheless, the use of assessed contributions for these purposes can be controversial for some member states.
31. At the same time, the PBF and joint programmatic funding remain very small compared with overall requirements in transition environments. Implementation of the Secretary-General's recommendations on innovative financing (aimed at increasing the availability of flexible, catalytic funding for peacebuilding) is an area where more progress is needed. To expand and deepen its donor pool, the PBF should continue to strengthen how it demonstrates its impact. Modalities for agreeing memoranda of understanding between peacekeeping missions and the UNCT for programmatic funding should be further streamlined. UNCT's should also engage at an early stage

with a wider set of options for innovative and sustainable funding and preferably in close collaboration with the national government. Sustainable financing modalities are also required for RCOs, which have struggled to maintain needed staff capacities following transition, for example on political analysis.

32. Given the scale of requirements in transition environments, other sources of risk-tolerant financing are required.
 - The World Bank is becoming an important source of financing for crisis prevention. In mid-2020, International Development Association 19 (IDA19) will include a new window for “turnaround” contexts. As the bank prioritizes transition contexts moving forward, strengthened analysis and planning on the expected economic impact of the closure of peacekeeping missions is needed.
 - There is also a need for increased risk tolerance by donors. Only a few have dedicated funding for transition environments. To maximise the comparative advantage of different financial instruments, including the PBF, the World Bank and UN agencies at different points in time, donors should look at how to increase coherence across their respective executive boards and think through the sequencing of these instruments.
 - Transition environments are risky environments for the private sector. Yet the withdrawal of a peacekeeping operation should be seen as an indication of international confidence in a country’s peace and stability. To facilitate foreign direct investment, increased access to credit and timely reform of administration and legislative processes is necessary.
33. There is not yet a shared understanding between bilateral donors and UN partners as to how key stability programmes will be financed going forward. Earlier planning on transition financing would help ensure greater predictability and anticipate likely gaps on peacebuilding priorities. This process should also look at the wider national budget, including the potential impact of structural adjustment and debt relief, as well the risk of potential economic shocks at the time of a planned withdrawal.
34. An assessment of the comparative advantage of different entities – the UN, bilateral donors, the World Bank – could help identify where alternative delivery models might be more appropriate, as well as areas more usefully served by compacts or alliances between bilateral and multilateral actors on key peace and stability areas.

Conclusion

As the ongoing transition in Darfur demonstrates, upcoming UN transitions are likely to be even more complex and challenging than those that have been recently undertaken. Yet, previous experience has identified recurring challenges and practical lessons that should enable the UN – in partnership with regional organisations, international financial institutions, bilateral donors and other stakeholders – to provide ongoing, tailored support to host governments and other national stakeholders in order to prevent the recurrence of violence, and to sustainably undertake peacebuilding and development.

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