

Department of Political Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat and the United Nations Development Programme: note of guidance on electoral assistance

Overview

1. Recognizing the need for strengthened system-wide coordination and implementation of electoral assistance activities, the present note is intended to clarify respective roles and standard procedures for the Department of Political Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in the provision of electoral assistance to Member States and replaces all previous guidelines.

2. The United Nations system is engaged in a wide range of development assistance activities that are intended to support the efforts of Member States to promote democratic electoral processes and build sustainable capacity to manage electoral systems and processes. Member States most often request advice and assistance on the legal, institutional, technical and administrative aspects of organizing and conducting democratic elections or seek the Organization's assistance in supporting the international or domestic observation of electoral processes.

Objectives

3. The objectives of United Nations electoral assistance are two-fold:

(a) To assist Member States in their efforts to hold credible and legitimate elections in accordance with internationally recognized criteria;

(b) To contribute to building, in the recipient country, a sustainable institutional capacity to organize democratic elections that are genuine and periodic and have the full confidence of the contending parties and the electorate.

Roles and responsibilities within the United Nations system

4. In view of the increasing demand for electoral assistance and in order to ensure consistency in the handling of requests of Member States which were organizing elections, the General Assembly, in resolution 46/137 of 17 December 1991, took steps to

create an institutional framework to support activities in this area and recognized and affirmed the role of each of the main United Nations electoral assistance actors:

(a) **Focal point for electoral assistance activities.** In accordance with Assembly resolution 46/137, the Secretary-General, in 1992 appointed a focal point for electoral assistance activities "to ensure consistency in the handling of requests of Member States organizing elections ... to channel requests for electoral assistance to the appropriate office or programme ... to build on experience gained to develop an institutional memory, to develop and maintain a roster of international experts ... and to maintain contact with regional and other intergovernmental organizations to ensure appropriate working arrangements with them and the avoidance of duplication of efforts". The Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs serves as the United Nations focal point for electoral assistance;

(b) **Electoral Assistance Division.** The Electoral Assistance Division of the Department of Political Affairs was established in 1992, initially as the Electoral Assistance Unit, to provide technical support to the focal point in carrying out his functions. The main role of the Division is to evaluate requests for electoral assistance, to identify and maintain United Nations electoral standards, to undertake needs-assessment missions, to assist the organizations of the United Nations system and other organizations in the design of electoral assistance project activities, to develop operational strategies for electoral components of peacekeeping operations, to maintain a roster of electoral experts, to facilitate the international observation of elections and to serve as the institutional memory of the United Nations in the electoral field;

(c) **United Nations Development Programme.** The Assembly, by resolution 46/137, recognized the role of UNDP in the provision of technical assistance for electoral activities and underscored the importance of collaboration among actors in the United Nations system. At the country level, UNDP plays a lead role in the provision of policy advice and programmes to strengthen sustainable democratic institutions and

processes (e.g., electoral bodies, parliaments, judiciaries etc.). The emphasis of its role and interventions in the electoral area is on long-term capacity-building of electoral institutions and processes, including civil society awareness and participation. UNDP also plays a key role at the country level in the coordination of electoral assistance among donors and national and international actors. This includes both financial coordination involving the channelling of donor funds for electoral support as well as the coordination of electoral support through meetings and donor coordination forums. In most cases, when United Nations electoral assistance is provided to a country, the resident coordinator/resident representative represents the United Nations system in such an undertaking. At UNDP headquarters, the Bureau for Development Policy teams up with the regional bureau concerned to provide support for the priorities and needs identified at the country level, in close liaison with the Electoral Assistance Division.

Procedures for providing electoral assistance

5. Before the United Nations system can provide any type of electoral assistance, directly or on behalf of a third party such as a regional organization or other multilateral organization, the Organization must first carefully assess the pre-electoral conditions in the requesting country. It is essential to undertake such an assessment prior to any type of project commitment in order to ensure involvement only in settings in which legitimate elections are likely to be carried out. With this in mind, the procedure for obtaining United Nations electoral assistance is as follows:

(a) The Government or electoral authorities must send an official request for assistance to the United Nations focal point for electoral assistance at least four months prior to the scheduled election to allow for meaningful involvement. More lead time (6-8 months) would, however, reduce the costs and risks involved and provide for more thorough assistance, of better quality. The usual sources of requests are the national electoral authorities, the Office of the President or the Ministry of Foreign Affairs;

(b) The Electoral Assistance Division will consult with the resident coordinator/resident representative concerned, and the relevant divisions of the Department of Political Affairs and UNDP

headquarters, among others, about whether pre-electoral conditions in the requesting country satisfy the established criteria for United Nations electoral assistance;

(c) If the focal point determines that a more thorough, on-site needs assessment is required before deciding whether to provide assistance, the Electoral Assistance Division, in cooperation with UNDP, will dispatch an assessment mission to evaluate the political, material and institutional situation in the requesting country. The mission will also assess the appropriateness, necessity and potential impact of United Nations assistance and ascertain whether the main contesting political parties and representatives of civil society support United Nations involvement;

(d) In the event the resident coordinator/resident representative deems it necessary and appropriate, prior to or following a formal request from the Government, he or she may request the Electoral Assistance Division to provide internal advice by dispatching an expert advisory mission. These are typically small, low-profile missions intended to provide early intervention and expert advice on coordination and operations of electoral assistance projects. An accurate and adequate assessment of the pre-electoral environment in countries seeking assistance will reduce the risk of associating the United Nations with elections whose organization and conduct do not adhere to internationally recognized criteria. It is, therefore, a critical factor in upholding the reputation of the United Nations as a credible, standard-setting institution in this field;

(e) Based on the above, the focal point will either approve or deem inappropriate a request for assistance. In the case of a positive decision, the Electoral Assistance Division will work in close collaboration with UNDP in preparing an appropriate electoral assistance project. Once drafted and reviewed by UNDP and the Division, the approval and implementation of a technical electoral assistance project is governed by the normal procedures laid out in the programming manual of UNDP. Medium-term and long-term capacity development of electoral institutions is an integral aspect of the governance activities of UNDP through the country cooperation framework. The Electoral Assistance Division must be consulted at the earliest possible stage with regard to the political and technical aspects of the proposed project, since these aspects can have a bearing on

subsequent elections. The Division will respond with any input or advice within 10 working days after receipt of the documents. If no response is received by UNDP within that time period, the project development can proceed. Approval and implementation should follow standard procedures for all activities undertaken within the country cooperation framework. Given the political and often sensitive nature of the electoral environment, however, special caution should be exercised in the national execution of electoral assistance projects. This modality should be limited to cases in which there has been full consultation and there is consensus as regards the impartiality and capacity of the executing agent. For assistance in identifying specialized expertise, the Electoral Assistance Division will provide qualified technical consultants from its roster of electoral experts, as required;

(f) If a Government requests United Nations assistance in the observation of elections, the Electoral Assistance Division will take the lead role in the design, staffing and implementation of such activities, in cooperation with the UNDP resident representative. Often, a separate project is established to provide the operational and legal framework for these activities. Consistent with the nature and purpose of observation, a project to support these activities should normally be independent of any project support provided to the electoral process, systems or institutions;

(g) UNDP resident coordinators/resident representatives will maintain a clear position as regards United Nations impartiality. As such, in supporting an international or national mission, the independent observer group may issue a statement on the election but the United Nations plays only a facilitative role and does not itself express a view on the process or outcome. Resident coordinators/resident representatives should refrain from making political statements to the press, unless specifically authorized by the focal point;

(h) In order to keep the focal point apprised of the political and technical status of electoral assistance projects, the resident representative will submit on a regular basis status reports, including reports from project personnel, to the Electoral Assistance Division. These project reports will form the basis of the report that the Secretary-General is mandated to submit to the General Assembly every two years;

(i) At the conclusion of each project the Electoral Assistance Division, the Bureau for Development Policy of UNDP, and the UNDP regional bureau concerned shall receive a final project report from the resident representative. As appropriate, the Electoral Assistance Division will support the UNDP country office in undertaking independent technical evaluation missions of electoral assistance projects;

(j) Upon the completion of the assignment, or on an annual basis in the case of long-term experts, the resident coordinator/resident representative will be requested to submit to the contracting agency an assessment of the performance of the consultants and/or experts on the roster of the Electoral Assistance Division. This assessment will serve to enhance the effectiveness of the assistance provided and enable the Division to improve future performance and to better anticipate future country needs.

Coordination of electoral assistance among donors

6. Effective coordination of technical assistance is crucial in situations in which several bilateral and multilateral donors, specialized institutions, non-governmental organizations and the United Nations are providing electoral assistance to a country. In the case of countries in which there is a resident special representative of the Secretary-General, the special representative is responsible for overall political coordination. Where there is no resident special representative, UNDP plays the lead United Nations role at the country level as a coordinating mechanism for donor assistance and as a forum for coordination of the activities of a broader range of international and national actors. This coordination role can be exercised through a trust fund or cost-sharing modality, and is essential for maximizing impact and for avoiding potential difficulties, such as duplication or overlapping of assistance, competition among organizations in certain fields of assistance, overburdening national counterparts, or over-funding some aspects of the electoral process to the detriment of others. As required, the Electoral Assistance Division may be called upon to assist in this coordination role.

Further contact

7. The Electoral Assistance Division of the Department of Political Affairs, United Nations Secretariat, may be contacted at:

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