

Reading the Wind: What makes UN Special Political Missions effective?

Executive Summary

UN Special Political Missions (SPMs) are funded out of the UN's regular budget and do not contain peacekeepers/"blue helmets". As a result, they tend to be smaller in logistical footprint and budgets than peacekeeping missions¹. In recent years, the Security Council has been increasingly inclined to establish Special Political Missions. Over the past decade (2012-2022), the Security Council only established two peacekeeping missions but mandated 11 Special Political Missions. As of April 2022, there are **25 UN Special Political Missions** deployed across the world. This study focused on country-specific missions and regional offices. The author interviewed 12 senior leadership and/or senior substantive mission personnel (of grade P5 – ASG, with a quarter of those interviewed being women) involved with 11 SPMs¹ for this study, to discover what makes a SPM effective. The average UN experience of those interviewed was 18 years.

This study defines Effectiveness of a SPM as the successful delivery of the mission's mandate in the eyes of the host country's population. Guided by faculty of the University of Oxford, responses from the interviews suggested that Effectiveness of SPMs consists of six dimensions: Mission Environment, Mission Leadership, Mission Management, Mission Approach, Mission Communications and Mission Measurement (encompassing the preceding five dimensions).

Mission Environment

Respondents felt that SPMs which engage the diplomatic community in the host country not just bilaterally, but in a multilateral format are more effective. Shaping the external environment of a mission requires engagement, especially through strategic communications, with not just the people of the host country but also the population of regional countries and donor countries.

Mission Leadership

The personality of the individual in the role made a significant difference. Respondents said that the title of Special Envoy is outdated and that the more-comprehensive title of Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG) – which entails having the UN Country Team including all UN Agencies, Funds and Programmes operating in the mission area – was better suited for the Head of a SPM. Respondents suggested that there should be a limit to the number of missions in which an individual can serve as Head of Mission. Lack of adequate engagement between Heads of Mission and the staff deployed in the SPM's field/provincial offices requires particular attention as it is having an impact on staff morale and on the mission's effectiveness.

Mission Management

Respondents voiced concern that the resourcing of SPMs (and its timeliness) is currently falling far short of expectations. SPMs are increasingly taking recourse to soliciting direct funding from Donor countries in the form of "Extra-Budgetary funding" which, on occasion, come with strings attached. Perceptions among UN agencies that a new SPM in their host country will compete for donor

¹ UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), UN Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI), UN Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL), UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process (UNSCO), UN Special Coordinator for Lebanon (UNSCOL), UN Regional Centre for Preventive Diplomacy for Central Asia (UNRCCA), Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Yemen (OESG-Yemen), Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Horn of Africa (OESG-Horn of Africa), UN Integrated Transition Assistance Mission in Sudan (UNITAMS), UN Regional Office for West Africa (UNOWAS), UN Regional Office for Central Africa (UNOCA).

funding has created tensions. The presence of multiple UN peace operations in a country is not only costly but has created political complexities.

Mission Approach

Respondents felt that to be truly effective, SPMs need to focus on the people of the host country and how they judge the SPM's delivery of its mandate. In other words, the people of the host country (and not solely the Security Council) should be considered the main client of the SPM. Also, outreach to regional countries and regional organizations is crucial to effectiveness. The UN needs to invest more in researching electoral systems compatible with national contexts. Respondents felt that SPMs should read the host country's political realities and engage all political actors – including the military in a country. To stay effective, SPMs should not avoid engaging actors/ entities solely because they are under unilateral sanctions by donor countries.

Respondents felt that SPMs need to translate their mandate from the Security Council into a mission concept that involves a focus on *the people* of the host country and their aspirations, and not solely the host government. Respondents felt that elections are inadequate barometers of inclusion in politics and there is need for SPMs to make long-term interventions to seed norms of accountability in a society. There is need for DPPA to invest more in research of electoral systems and constitutionalism. Respondents felt that to be effective, SPMs need to achieve a measure of “negative peace” - absence of violence in host countries before they push for “positive peace” - conditions such as strong rule of law and freedom from fear and want.

Mission Communications

Respondents felt that SPMs need to be better resourced in terms of Strategic Communications. While countering hate narratives is an uphill task, SPMs have the information wherewithal to develop and disseminate positive narratives that eclipse hate.

Mission Measurement

The study suggests that to ensure SPM effectiveness, the method of making a Strategic Assessment Mission (SAM) and the ways in which Results-Based budgeting is reported by SPMs requires reform. Deploying a “Red Team” in every SAM may enable a more comprehensive measurement.

The Unstated benefits of SPMs

The study revealed that UN Special Political Missions bring a range of unspoken benefits to the host country. These include: Keeping international community's attention on the host country; Assuring the host population that the international community is monitoring developments; Mobilizing funding for the host country's humanitarian needs; SPMs can help the international community conduct evidence-based dialogue with national actors; Harmonizing the definition of “civilian” in line with international humanitarian law and raising awareness about international human rights norms among actors in the conflict; Preserving inclusive institutions; Empowering peace catalysts.

Conclusion

Making SPMs effective requires concerted and deliberate decision-making in shaping the environment, deployment of leadership, management of the mission and its strategic approach towards the conflict. Reforming the way SPMs' performance is measured across these dimensions could not only enhance their effectiveness, but help them better meet the expectations from those who should be considered their “main client” - the population of host countries.