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Focal Point for Electoral Assistance Matters
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Policy

UN Support to International Election Observation

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POLICY ON UN Support to International Election Observation

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A. PURPOSE AND RATIONALE

A1. Purpose

1. This policy outlines the general principles and process for the provision of United Nations (UN) support to international election observation, to ensure consistency and coherence across the UN system. It sets out the conditions under which such support can be provided, as well as the guiding principles for officials involved in the provision of support to international election observation. Furthermore, this document outlines the basic management and support arrangements both at headquarters and in the field.

A2. Rationale

2. The UN Focal Point for Electoral Assistance Matters, the Under-Secretary-General for Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (hereafter “the Focal Point”), is the system lead in the development, issuance and dissemination of UN electoral policy. The General Assembly and the Secretary-General have repeatedly highlighted the importance of system-wide coherence and consistency and reaffirmed the leadership role of the focal point in this regard.¹ UN electoral policy is defined as the normative framework and prescriptive guidance that apply to all UN entities providing electoral assistance. This policy has been formulated as part of the efforts of the Focal Point to develop a comprehensive set of UN system-wide electoral policies. It defines the general principles and process for the provision of UN support to international election observation.

B. SCOPE

3. This policy applies to all entities of the UN system that provide, or seek to provide, support to international election observation. The scope of this support may vary depending on the requirements. For this policy, “United Nations” is understood to refer to the entire UN system, that is, all UN departments, funds, agencies, programmes, entities, trust funds,

¹ This includes successive General Assembly resolutions since 1991 (most recently resolution 76/176) and decisions of the Secretary-General, No. 2010/23 (12 October 2010 meeting of the Policy Committee) and No. 2011/23 (10 November 2011 meeting of the Policy Committee).

commissions, peacekeeping missions, special political missions, peacebuilding missions and other bodies.

4. The policy covers the following key areas:
 - The prerequisites and circumstances that may trigger support to international election observation
 - The nature of the support
 - The general principles guiding the activities of staff in the field
 - Reporting requirements
 5. This policy addresses support to *international* election observation, which is considered to be an organized effort undertaken by intergovernmental and international nongovernmental organizations and associations. This policy does not cover any type of support to citizen (national) election observation.²
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C. POLICY

C1. Background

6. While the UN rarely undertakes election observation, it does on occasion provide support to other international organizations that carry out election observation. Typically, on such occasions, the UN presence on the ground is the only practical option for providing this type of support; and international observation is considered an essential contribution to the credibility of the election.
7. Since 1992, the UN has been providing support to international election observation. This type of support was first provided in Ethiopia and Kenya in 1992 and has since been provided in a number of countries, including Niger (1993), Lesotho (1993), Malawi (1993), Tanzania (1995), Armenia (1995), Azerbaijan (1995) Sierra Leone (1996), Liberia (2005), Solomon Islands (2006, and 2010), and Papua New Guinea (2017 and 2019). A mandate from the General Assembly or Security Council is not required to provide such support; however, a request from the Member State is required for a certain type of support to international observation (see below).
8. Based on its long-term experience and cumulative lessons learned in providing this kind of support, the UN Electoral Assistance Division (EAD), on behalf of the Focal Point, has developed this policy to guide future activities in relation to providing support to international observation.
9. Given the political nature of elections and the possibility of misperception of the actual role of the UN while providing this type of support, the decision-making process outlined in this policy should be closely followed and care should be taken to avoid a perception of a conflict of interest where the UN is providing other types of electoral assistance (see below).

C2. Purpose of Providing Support to International Election Observation

10. The primary goal of providing support to international election observation is to contribute to the efficiency and effectiveness of an election observation effort, thereby contributing to

² For details on the types of UN electoral assistance that may be provided to citizen observer groups, see the policy on Principles and Types of UN Electoral Assistance (FP/01/2012, as revised on 1 March 2021).

the credibility of the electoral process and the broader democratic development of the country. An essential feature of this kind of support is that UN involvement is limited to the provision of support and does not entail the actual observation or assessment of an electoral process by the UN.

11. Support to international election observation can be provided to a single organization (in which case the benefit is primarily the actual facilitation of that organization's observation exercise), or to multiple organizations, (in which case there may be more concerted effort to divide up resources and ensure gaps are filled, improving the comprehensiveness of the observation exercise as a whole). Facilitating the sharing of observer information and analysis, as agreed to by those organizations receiving UN support (without the UN itself being part of the observation process, or any statement or report by observers), can also help to improve the quality, accuracy, inclusivity and credibility of observer statements and reports.

C3. Types of Support³

Operational Support

12. An organization undertaking international election observation may request a UN entity to provide logistical and other administrative support to its observation mission. The request to provide this type of support can be made directly to a UN entity or through a competitive bidding process, in which a UN entity participates and is awarded the contract. Operational support is mostly commonly provided to a single international observer organization. Below are some elements that may be involved in providing operational support.
 - Contracting personnel, both international experts and local support staff, (with due consideration for gender balance) and ensuring that back-up support (such as administrative and medical support) is available.
 - Facilitating accreditation for members of the international election observation mission by the relevant electoral authority.
 - Facilitating visas for international observers.
 - Installing fully operational offices for the observer mission's staff.
 - Procuring office facilities, accommodation and logistical items such as vehicles and equipment.
 - Training observers on the use of communication and other equipment (e.g., VHF radios, satellite phones, GPS equipment, vehicle tracking systems).

Coordination of International Observers

13. Coordination of international observers involves a wide range of activities that can include operational support and activities such as briefings, facilitating observer deployment and debriefing. This type of support can be provided to multiple observer groups. In addition to the elements of operational support listed above, the coordination of international observers can include the following activities:
 - a. Developing pre-arrival packages, which may include information regarding health and safety, general travel details, and general information regarding the elections.
 - b. Organizing briefings to provide observers with an understanding of the country and the political and human rights context, the legal and procedural framework of the electoral process, and on the deployment plan, logistical and security arrangements, and codes of conduct (such as for media, political parties, observers).

³ The terminology used here expands on that used in the policy on Principles and Types of UN Electoral Assistance (FP/01/2012, as revised on 1 March 2021).

- c. Organizing briefings by key electoral stakeholders (such as electoral authorities, media, citizen observer groups, security forces, civil society organizations including women's groups, and relevant ministry or other machinery responsible for gender equality) and facilitating liaison between the international mission and these stakeholders.
 - d. Facilitating the development of deployment plans, checklists and reporting procedures to enable an assessment of the electoral process by the observation mission, all of which should include integrating a gender perspective.
 - e. Facilitating sharing of information and analysis generated by observer groups to improve the quality, inclusivity, accuracy and credibility of the observer reports.
 - f. Facilitating post-election de-briefings for observer groups.
14. In both types of support, the observer groups will decide which elements of support they require. This may include some or all of the elements listed in the categories above.

C4. General Principles Governing Support to International Election Observation

15. Due to the risk that the UN might be misperceived as having direct involvement in the actual observation of an electoral process, the following principles should be observed when providing support to international election observation (unless specified otherwise, these apply to both types of support as discussed in this policy):
- a. The UN should only agree to provide *coordination support* to international observers when there is a request from a Member State and from the international observer groups wishing to rely on the UN's coordination effort.
 - b. The request for coordination support must be received within a reasonable timeframe prior to an election to allow for effective and efficient planning and implementation.
 - c. Neither the UN nor the Government will oblige any observer group to participate in the UN's coordination effort.
 - d. The UN should maintain a low profile throughout the support process (*of whichever type discussed in this policy*) and should not authorize the use of the UN logo or name in any materials related to the observation activities (including t-shirts, hats or vehicle decals) or as part of any observer statement or report or any other outreach activity by the observation mission.
 - e. Clearly identifiable UN assets (helicopters, planes, boats, vehicles, etc.) should not be used when providing support to international observers (exceptions will be addressed on a case-by-case basis at the field level).
 - f. Where UN procurement processes are used, the observer organization should be made aware of UN regulations, rules and policies (including deadlines) from the outset to avoid any misunderstanding and to ensure they are adhered to.
 - g. The UN should not render an assessment, opinion, statement or evaluation on the electoral process (in part or overall) or seek to influence observer findings or statements. It should be made clear that any statements of international observation missions, which the UN is supporting, do not represent the views or opinions of the UN.
 - h. The UN should ensure that the institutional independence of both the observer groups and the UN is maintained throughout the UN's provision of support. This principle is applicable in due consideration of the requirement to adhere to UN security rules, if appropriate.
 - i. UN staff should not be accredited as observers and should only be present in polling stations (and other electoral sites) on election day if there is a justified reason, as

decided by the Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG) or Resident Coordinator in consultation with the Focal Point through EAD.⁴

- j. If UN contracts are issued to international observers, UN Department of Safety and Security (UNDSS) approval will be required for deployment plans, pursuant to a security risk assessment. Additionally, any persons on a UN contract must always strictly adhere to the UN security framework and rules and must comply with UNDSS requirements and other UN directives and codes of conduct.
16. The provision of UN support to international electoral observation can take place alongside UN technical electoral assistance; however, caution should be exercised to avoid a perception of a conflict of interest. Where possible, the UN entity providing technical assistance to a Member State should not at the same time provide support to international observers in the same country; another UN entity may, however, assume that role. Where two separate UN entities are providing technical assistance and support to international observers, it is also advisable, where possible, that the two offices are not co-located to minimize any perceived conflict of interest.

C5. Deciding on Requests for the Provision of Support to International Observers

17. The Focal Point decides whether in a given instance the UN should provide operational or coordination support to international observers. Decisions of the Focal Point are final but will always be based on prior consultations with the relevant UN actors. As mentioned above, a positive response from the Focal Point is more likely in cases where there is no other practical alternative to the UN providing this type of support, and international observation is considered an essential contribution to the credibility of the elections. Potential risks associated with UN engagement should be mitigated.
18. The UN can only provide support to organizations that will observe elections with the consent of the Member State concerned, that is, they must be invited and (eventually) accredited by the host government or appropriate authority to observe.
19. Any memorandum of understanding or letter of agreement between a UN entity and an observer group on the provision of operational or coordination support can only be signed after approval by the Focal Point.

Deciding on Requests for Operational Support

20. As mentioned above, either international observer groups make a direct request for support to a UN entity, or the UN entity takes part in a bidding process.
21. If a UN entity is approached to provide operational support to international observers, it should seek Focal Point approval before committing to provide this type of support. Following the notification of the Focal Point, EAD will conduct a needs assessment through a desk review in a timely fashion and submit a recommendation to the Focal Point, who would then make a decision and inform the UN entity concerned.
22. Similarly, a UN entity must obtain approval from the Focal Point prior to the submission of a bid/proposal to provide operational support. Given the time sensitive nature of these activities, the Focal Point will respond within 10 business days of submission of such a request for approval; otherwise the UN entity may proceed. It is advisable that UN entities

⁴ Separate guidance for UN personnel has been developed on how to manage the UN presence in such cases. See the policy on the Conduct of UN personnel in and around electoral sites.

check with UNDSS on the security situation prior to bidding for a contract from an observer organization, particularly if the observers are going to be under a UN contract.

23. Under most circumstances, approval from the Focal Point for this type of support should be expected. Exceptions could be in case the UN has adopted a specific policy decision for the country under consideration or there are serious political sensitivities around the election, including such that could result in significant reputational harm to the Organization.

Deciding on Requests for Coordination of International Observer Organizations

24. A request for UN coordination of international observers can either be made by a Member State or one or more international observer organizations that will be observing the elections at the invitation of the Member State concerned.

Request by a Member State

25. Member States holding elections can directly request the UN to coordinate international observers. The request may be part of a general request for UN electoral assistance, or it may be a specific request for this type of assistance.

26. When the UN receives such a request, the following steps will be taken:

- a. EAD conducts a needs assessment (through a mission or desk review). This includes a consultative process with all international observer groups that would likely be involved in the process to ensure that such services are required by these groups, and that UN support will add value to the electoral process. Consultations will also be held with relevant UN entities to assess the possibilities of providing this support.
- b. Based on the recommendation of EAD, the Focal Point decides whether to provide support. If the response is positive, the Focal Point will also recommend which UN entity is best placed to provide the support following consultation with possible support providers and the SRSG or RC.
- c. The Focal Point informs the Member State of his/her decision, as well the UN entity concerned, so that – in the event of an approval – consultations on funding arrangements and other modalities can commence.

Request by International Observer Organizations

27. International and regional organizations that deploy international election observation missions, such as the European Union, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, the African Union, the Organization of American States, and the Arab League, that have been invited or accredited to observe a particular election, may make a request directly to the UN to provide coordination support to its international observers. When such a request is made, the UN will ask the organization to consult with the government concerned and ensure that a request by the appropriate national authorities is sent to the UN before it can make any commitment to provide this support. The steps outlined in paragraph 26 will then be followed. The UN entity selected to provide the support will communicate the decision of the Focal Point to the requesting organization.

C6. Developing the Support Framework Documentation

28. Prior to commencing support, the UN implementing entity will develop the appropriate project documentation that should be signed with the international organizations and/or the Member State and reflect the parameters of the Focal Point's decision.

C7. Coordination and Reporting Requirements

29. Any UN entity providing support to international observers must keep the SRSG or RC (as the case may be) and EAD informed of progress with implementation and, upon completion, submit a report to the SRSG or RC, and EAD.
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D. REFERENCES

Related Policies

- Policy: Principles and Types of UN Electoral Assistance
 - Guideline: United Nations Electoral Needs Assessments
 - Policy: United Nations Statements and Public Comment around Elections
 - Policy: Conduct of UN personnel in and around electoral sites
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E. MONITORING AND COMPLIANCE

The Focal Point ensures coordination within the UN system with regard to electoral assistance and will therefore help to ensure that the principles outlined in this document are adhered to. Managers of UN electoral assistance programs and projects will also be responsible to ensure compliance with this directive by all UN electoral personnel under their supervision.


F. CONTACT

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G. HISTORY

Drafted by the Policy and Institutional Memory Team, Electoral Assistance Division, Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, on 25 June 2012 and revised in December 2023. Consulted with members of the Inter-Agency Coordination Mechanism for UN Electoral Assistance (ICMEA) prior to adoption and revision.

APPROVAL SIGNATURE:



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