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What Works in UN Resident Coordinator-led Conflict Prevention: Lessons from the Field

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Malawi 2011-17

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This case study is part of a broader research project, carried out by the UNU Centre for Policy Research (UNU-CPR) with the support of the UK Mission to the United Nations, on the role of UN Resident Coordinators in Conflict Prevention. The project aimed to extract lessons from case studies of Resident Coordinator-supported preventive action in nine countries (Bolivia 2000-09; Colombia 2012-16; Guinea 2009-15; Guyana 2003-15; Kenya 2008-17; Kyrgyzstan 2010-17; Malawi, 2011-17; Nepal 2007-15; and Tunisia 2011-17). All case studies, and the resulting policy paper synthesizing lessons and findings can be accessed at cpr.unu.edu.

I. INTRODUCTION

In July 2011, Malawi witnessed an outbreak of violence between police and civilians. These events occurred against the background of widespread street protests that were driven by grievances around the suppression of civil liberties and socio-economic deterioration, which triggered a government crackdown. In response to the violence, the UN Secretary-General (SG) decided to engage directly, initiating a mediation process that led to the establishment of a National Dialogue, which culminated in August 2017 in the approval of a National Peace Policy, which helped ease tensions and thereby mitigate conflict risk.

Throughout this period, the UN Resident Coordinator (RC) played a significant role in the UN's broader efforts to defuse the crisis in Malawi and strengthen its resilience. In the immediate aftermath of the crisis, the RC supported the SG's Envoy – and subsequently a UN Facilitator – in facilitating the National Dialogue. Subsequently, the RC played a lead role in the dialogue, and follow-on efforts to establish a peace infrastructure. The RC worked to build trust, rally diverse stakeholders, ensure all involved parties had the space and capacities to engage, make the process inclusive and constructive, and bring the dialogue effort to the regional and district levels. In accompanying this process, the RC relied primarily on the UN Development Programme (UNDP) country office. The rest of the UN Country Team (UNCT) was mainly involved in scenario-building exercises, without leveraging a review of the Common Country Assessment (CCA) and the UN Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF) to make programmes more intentionally “conflict sensitive”.

The RC's role in Malawi is one of the more under-studied aspects of the UN's role in conflict prevention in Malawi. As such, this case study seeks to answer the question: How did the UN Resident Coordinator and the UN Country Team contribute to mitigate conflict risk in Malawi in the years following the 2011 crisis? To do so, the case study explores the origins of the crisis, and the UN's historical role in the country. It provides an overview of the role played by RC Richard Dictus (RC in Malawi from 2009-12) in supporting the SG Envoy and the later UN Facilitator in conflict prevention work in Malawi. It also assesses the support of the UN Department for Political Affairs (DPA), and the UNDP Country Office and Bureau for Conflict Prevention and Recovery (BCPR), for the RC in prevention work in the lead-up to and during the crisis. It then analyses in detail the prevention work of Dictus's successor, RC Mia Seppo (2013-17) in the aftermath of the crisis with a particular focus on how Seppo built on and expanded the work of the UN prior to her arrival in the country.

Through this narrative, this case study will illustrate how RCs can successfully: a) engage in supporting and playing a convening role for a national dialogue process; b) foster relationships of trust among national actors; c) leverage the

right expertise from within the UN system to develop better analytical and consensus building capacities; and d) lead successful efforts in providing capacity development support to national actors, in particular civil society organisations both at the national and local levels to ensure a participatory process towards the establishment of a peace infrastructure.

II. COUNTRY CONTEXT

Causes and overview of the violence

After independence from the British in 1964, Malawi lived through more than 30 years of autocratic one-party rule under President Hastings Kamuzu Banda from the Malawi Congress Party (MCP), which centralised political power and repressed dissent. Only in 1994 did the country conduct its first multiparty elections, bringing to power Bakili Muluzi, leader of the United Democratic Front (UDF). Muluzi immediately freed political prisoners and re-established freedom of speech, and gradually began to address the country's socio-economic challenges. In the 2004 general elections, Muluzi was replaced by Bingu wa Mutharika whose first term – benefiting from a trend of economic growth – was marked by relative stability, investment in agricultural programs, and the attainment of a higher level of food security. As a result of rapid population growth, the country developed a large – and growing – youth bulge. Combined with the impact of the global financial crisis in 2007-8, and the related rise in commodity prices, this demographic shift weighed heavily on the country's socio-economic gains.

A worsening socio-economic situation made Mutharika's second term, which started in 2009, less smooth. His administration responded by undoing some of Malawi's democratic gains, including by re-centralising power to a degree and at times disregarding the rule of law. He banned public demonstrations over fuel shortages, warning citizens they should not be ‘inspired by Egypt’.¹ The government closed Chancellor College following student protests, exerted censorship over critical newspapers, and ordered the cessation of independent radio broadcasts which they accused of propagating anti-government sentiment. The state-owned media, meanwhile, was accused of inciting violence against protest leaders.²

His growing authoritarian tendencies provoked public discontent, which was compounded by rising perceptions that his government was complicit in corruption. The lack of a clear will and effort to address governance shortcomings led some international development partners and donors to suspend assistance. As a result, Mutharika had to adopt austerity measures that reduced the provision of some public services.

Against this backdrop, a series of events escalated tensions and led to the July 2011 demonstrations. After a lecturer allegedly attempted to incite students to protest against the government, protests, strikes and police violence

broke out in February 2011 at the University of Malawi.³ This was accompanied by deteriorating relations between the government and civil society.⁴ Police responded heavily-handedly to rallies and parades, and often engaged in public intimidation. A series of Presidential orders that were perceived to sanction violence as a response to demonstrations exacerbated tensions further.⁵ At the political level, meanwhile, Mutharika's party was trying to marginalise Vice-President Joyce Banda. These moves created friction within the establishment and vis-à-vis the international community.

In the months preceding the violent July 2011 demonstrations, civil society leaders made several attempts to meet the President to discuss popular grievances. However, in the context of shrinking space for lawful political dissent, these efforts failed to generate any meaningful dialogue or action by the authorities.⁶ When civil society met with the President shortly before the demonstrations, the acrimonious discussion 'went nowhere' and ended with President Mutharika saying 'let's meet on the streets!'.⁷

All of these triggers contributed to the outbreak of major demonstrations in July in Blantyre, Karonga, Dowa, Lilongwe, and other districts. On 20 July, security forces used live ammunition and tear gas to disperse thousands of protesters, killing 20 civilians, injuring 58 and arresting 275. The excessive use of force exacerbated public discontent, and fuelled a second day of civil unrest, with looting, property destruction, and violence taking place on 21 July. President Mutharika accused the opposition leaders and rights activists of seeking to stage a coup through the demonstrations, and blamed them for the casualties.⁸ He refused to acknowledge any legitimacy of the protesters' grievances. In a speech to police officers the next day, he singled out six civil society activists by name and warned them, 'If you go back to the streets, I will smoke you out'.⁹

The protests were largely organized by the Human Rights Consultative Committee, which involved 80 human rights and civil society organizations¹⁰ and was chaired by Undule Mwakasungula. The demonstrators sought to peacefully rally and present the government with a 20-point petition, which listed their demands and grievances. The most severe problems included a lack of fuel, shortages of medicines and drugs, and high prices for basic food items.¹¹ Protestors' demands therefore did not solely focus on political rights but equally on socio-economic issues such as living standards and economic mismanagement.¹² The protests were seen as an opportunity to hold the government accountable and express widespread dissatisfaction with its profligate spending, and its perceived disregard for the rule of law.¹³

With the government showing little sign to acknowledge popular grievances and in the face of police brutality in response to the protests, civil society leaders issued an ultimatum, demanding that the government address the demands raised in the 20-point petition within a month, or

face further street protests in the form of a vigil on 17 August. Some more militant civil society leaders threatened to meet state violence with violence of their own, declaring that 'if they kill us, we kill them'.¹⁴

In following days and weeks, the government's and protest leaders' rhetoric grew more inflammatory, and plans for the 17 August vigil raised fears of more violence. "The police chief in Lilongwe urged civil society leaders to cancel the event, warning that the police 'had no capacity to run it peacefully'."¹⁵ Rumors circulated that the government had hired Zimbabwean mercenaries, stoking further tensions. As Shotton has written, "Without external mediation, there was a strong feeling that the August protests were likely to end in conflict, and potentially more violent than the July demonstrations."¹⁶

At the same time, some moderates within the government and civil society tried to promote a message of appeasement to prevent further violence. Among them were many religious leaders who, beyond enjoying a widely recognised moral authority, had played a constructive role in past moments of tension around the time of elections. As reported by the local newspaper Nyasa Times in August 2011, "There was a widespread sense of shock at having witnessed, first hand or through the media, dead and wounded people, which led parts of civil society to advocate for an end to protests due to fear of retributions and violence from the government."¹⁷

The moderates were convinced that another round of mass protests would not lead to the fall of the government nor to progress in addressing the population's grievances. Therefore, in their views, civil society had few realistic options other than to back down. On the other hand, "the hardliners within civil society insisted that trying to talk to Mutharika would have no results and that mass action in the streets was required to bring down the government or at least get the government to take civil society's demands seriously. The militants were prepared to make the ultimate sacrifice."¹⁸ The President's reaction to this situation was: "either you go or I go, and I was democratically elected."¹⁹

III. RC-SUPPORTED PREVENTION INITIATIVES

Context: historical role and perceptions of the UNCT

UN development actors have generally been perceived positively in Malawi, and have a history of having contributed to prevention efforts. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the UNCT worked extensively on strengthening civil society capacities, in particular of the Public Affairs Committee (PAC) - the oldest and best known umbrella organisation for the major faith communities represented in the country - and other local-level organisations promoting dialogue between communities and the government. The aim was to reduce the risk of electoral violence that had been prominent in previous years, and to develop a network of individuals and organizations who could act as agents of social cohesion and peace.

However, after the 2004 elections that brought Mutharika to power and the parallel improvement in the country's economic stability, the UNCT, and in particular UNDP, decreased its focus on strengthening civil society capacities and on the promotion of social stability and peace. In an effort to capitalise on positive economic trends, the UNCT shifted focus during this period primarily toward supporting the government in achieving the Millennium Development Goals. The UNCT's priorities became agricultural development, the education agenda and work around prevention and treatment of HIV and AIDS. During this time, the UNCT was – and was perceived as – working very closely with the government, and investing less time and resources in senior-level engagement with civil society. This unequal distance between the actors would have implications for its ability to play an impartial convener's role further down the line.

During this period, the UN, World Bank and other development partners helped the country achieve important gains, including in terms of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth, human development, and social service delivery. However, they arguably paid insufficient attention to country's fragility and governance issues, and the UN in particular suffered from a lack of institutional memory around the important prevention work it had done in earlier years. As such, these development actors were not able to strengthen the tenets of democratic governance, and they did not anticipate the autocratic turn of Mutharika's second term. As a result of these blind-spots, in the years leading up to the 2011 crisis, foreign aid actually sustained traditional power structures and even positive aid achievements were not leveraged to mitigate conflict risk.

UN Mediation Results in National Dialogue (2011-12)

Following the violent events of July 2011, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon appointed a senior official in the UN Department of Political Affairs (DPA), João Honwana, to serve as his Envoy to that country.²⁰ The Envoy had two key objectives in his mandate: "First, to help lower political tensions in the country and help prevent the repetition, on 17 August, of the violent demonstration of 20 July; and second, to explore a possible UN role in promoting constructive dialogue among Malawian stakeholders."²¹

President Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe reportedly advised Mutharika to reject the SG's diplomatic initiative, fearful it would invite more intrusive UN interventions in the region.²² The President, however, accepted a role for the UN, partly as a result of a personal effort made by Secretary-General Ban, and partly because his lead mediators of choice, the African Union (AU) or the Southern African Development Community (SADC), declined to get involved in the crisis.²³ The fact that the UN – both in country and at headquarters – had not publicly criticised the government's increasing authoritarianism and violations of human rights, including the police shootings,²⁴ might also have helped gain the President's consent for the UN's mediation role.²⁵

Further, the President considered engagement with civil society as a way to improve his public image and "ease tensions with the Western donors on whom Malawi was dependent and who were becoming increasingly critical of corruption and authoritarianism."²⁶ By contrast, a continuation of the violence would have damaged the country's international reputation.²⁷

The Envoy's efforts led to a joint statement on 16 August 2011, in which the government and civil society agreed to participate in a UN-facilitated National Dialogue. The 20-point petition that had been tabled by the demonstrators in July served as the agenda. The Director-General of the UN Office at Nairobi (UNON), Sahle-Work Zewde, was appointed by the SG to serve as the UN Facilitator for the Dialogue.²⁸

Feeling the pressure of expectations created by the foreign presence, government officials engaged constructively in the dialogue, expressing to the UN Envoy a sense of responsibility for the deaths and injuries that had occurred in July and seemingly determined to avoid a recurrence of the violence. Serving as a "de-escalating" forum for both actors in the conflict (civil society and the government) to back down, the dialogue process created space for civil society to coordinate and raise their grievances with the government, helping to de-escalate the crisis. During and after the dialogue, tensions continued but the country was spared major violence. In April 2012, with the death of President Mutharika, the transition of power to Vice-President Joyce Banda, who had a past as a civil society activist, facilitated a further de-escalation of violence.²⁹

The RC's role in the National Dialogue

The UN's work on the National Dialogue was led from September 2011 to March 2012 by Sahle-Work Zewde³⁰, with substantive support from DPA's Mediation Support Unit, and administrative and logistical support from UNDP. Zewde made 8 trips to Malawi over the course of 7 months.³¹ The RC at the time, Richard Dictus, played an important behind-the-scenes role in supporting Zewde's work, and in ensuring continued UN engagement with the main national actors in-between her visits.

The RC grappled with several challenges in taking on this role, including a lack of resources and the asymmetry of the UN's relationships with the government, on the one hand, and civil society, on the other. As the RC acknowledged himself, his role had required him to invest in strong relationships with the government.³² By contrast, he had had fewer opportunities to engage directly and on a regular basis with civil society leaders. The UN Facilitator, for her part, had been unable to establish close relationships with civil society during her intermittent visits to the country. (Ironically, later in the national dialogue process, the government complained that the UN was siding too much with civil society.) Despite these challenges, the RC managed to support other UN actors through information and analysis; facilitate preparatory

meetings between national and international actors, and among the former; mobilise resources for the mediation effort; and sustain the momentum of the National Dialogue after the UN Facilitator's departure.

Information and Analysis

The RC, with the support of his temporary Peace and Development Advisor (PDA), Busi Ncube, provided background information and analysis to the UN Facilitator Zewde and relevant UNHQ offices, in particular DPA. Further, the PDA facilitated a "scenario building" exercise with all UNCT members to assess the implications of different scenarios for programmes and projects. This exercise was not conducted as a fully-fledged "conflict analysis," nor did it lead to a thorough review of the UNDAF. But it did provide the UNCT with the opportunity to discuss how – particularly in the area of social service delivery – the UN could help at least partially address some popular grievances. In this way, RC Dictus helped the UN Country Team (UNCT) to improve the conflict sensitivity of its programming.

Facilitating preparatory meetings for the dialogue

Drawing on his personal relationships with senior government officials and the development community, RC Dictus facilitated several meetings among national and international actors in preparation for the dialogue. Specifically, the RC helped secure the first meeting between the President and UN Facilitator Zewde, whom the government had been somewhat reluctant to engage at the outset as it had initially deemed her too senior and high-profile for the type of "nationally-led" process it had envisaged. Immediately after the unrest, the RC facilitated a series of technical preparatory meetings among national actors from both sides to agree on the composition of the government and civil society negotiating teams, guiding principles, rules of procedure and an agenda for the talks. The RC also brought to Malawi a South African conflict resolution expert, Andries Odendaal from the University of Pretoria, who had previously worked in Malawi and knew some of the key players, to advise on process design.

Resource mobilization

The RC also played an important role in terms of resource mobilisation for the mediation process, helping fill a gap left by the fact that the UN Secretariat had not provided significant financial resources to the effort. The RC, in his capacity as UNDP Resident Representative (RR), re-organised UNDP's project portfolio to bridge the resource gap. This was not an easy task, given that each project had already been signed with relevant government counterparts and that project money was not supposed to be used to cover logistical costs for envoys or facilitators of the Secretary-General. Beyond restructuring UNDP's budget – which led to greater involvement of UNDP's Governance Unit Head, Violet Korsah Baffour, in the process – RC Dictus mobilised some resources (US\$ 100,000) through a UNDP crisis response funds (TRAC 3).

Sustaining momentum after the UN Facilitator's departure

Following the conclusion of the talks, the RC helped keep the momentum of the process up at a time when the risk of it dying down seemed very real. In March 2012, as the UN Facilitator was winding down her role, some in Malawi developed the "impression that the UN was leaving the country."³³ Meanwhile, President Banda, who had assumed power just one month after the talks, required some time to understand how to build on them. Her perceived hesitation was (mis-)interpreted by civil society as a sign of disengagement. In this context, the RC managed to create a holding environment, by nurturing the dialogue with civil society in regular consultative meetings, while providing some advisory services to the government. This work kept civil society constructively engaged, which eventually helped lead to President Banda's direct participation in the Dialogue, following her initial reluctance to be personally exposed.

The RC's approach and role after the dialogue (2013-17)

The National Dialogue succeeded in de-escalating tensions and containing the immediate crisis, but it fell short of addressing the underlying political, social and economic drivers of the conflict.³⁴ It thus fell to the new RC, Mia Seppo, who took up her position in April 2013, to embark on a more sustained prevention initiative. With the support of UNDP, her efforts contributed to the emergence of an infrastructure for peace through the approval of a National Peace Policy.

Context assessment and strategy

Upon her arrival in Malawi, RC Seppo invested in building strong relationships with the key national actors that had been involved in the dialogue, including government officials, civil society leaders and representatives of the international community. She also tasked her newly-arrived PDA, Rebecca Adda-Dottoh, with developing a context analysis to enable her to better understand who the main stakeholders were, what efforts had taken place prior to her arrival, and how the UN might have the most added value in building on those past efforts. Based on this assessment, the RC quickly realized that the most urgent challenge the UN would need to address would be to assist Malawi in ensuring that upcoming Presidential elections, scheduled for May 2014, would not lead to another wave of social tensions. She determined that the mid-term challenge for the UN would be to support the emergence of a national peace infrastructure.

The short-term challenge: elections

In order to address the short-term election-related challenge, the RC invested UNDP resources into training and skills-development of civil society "insider" mediators. These mediators were later deployed to each of the country's regions to help de-escalate local tensions against the backdrop of rising election-related political polarisation. She also put in place a mediation platform and worked with the UNCT to define possible scenarios around the elections that fed into the UN contingency plan. Specific work was undertaken in partnership with UNHCR to ensure the presence of refugees

would not further increase tensions in some districts, not least by addressing potentially inflammatory perceptions of disparities in assistance to the refugees, on the one hand, and the host communities on the other.

To help national actors develop greater awareness of the risks related to electoral violence and possible preventive actions, she promoted a visit of Malawian officials and civil society representatives to Kenya to learn from that country's recent experience (see Kenya case study of this project for details). She also enhanced her senior advisory capacities by recruiting a Chief Technical Adviser (CTA) for the elections who managed the UNDP project, complementing her other key assets, namely the PDA and UNDP Head of the Governance Unit. Both the RC and the CTA worked very closely with UN DPA Electoral Assistance Division (EAD) that was regularly consulted and provided advice all along the process. In the RC's own assessment, these efforts to create greater awareness among political and civil society actors combined with the investment in local mediation and community dialogue capacities helped mitigate underlying tensions and avoid violence during elections.³⁵

When elections were nearing, the RC was concerned that the level of fragmentation of the political scene could lead to an institutional deadlock if results were contested. Therefore, she worked closely with UN DPA, which she had kept informed and involved during the electoral assistance process, to have the Under Secretary-General for political affairs directly engage with the main political leaders. The direct involvement of the USG for political affairs helped persuade the main political leaders to issue the televised Lilongwe Peace Declaration, at a signing ceremony held at a national prayer meeting convened by the PAC.³⁶ At that signing ceremony, all parties committed to a peaceful transition of power based on the respect of the upcoming elections results. That transfer of power happened on 20 May. The strong and public commitment reflected in the Lilongwe Peace Declaration allowed the situation to remain calm even when the results were not announced for one week.

The mid-term challenge: A national peace infrastructure

In order to address the mid-term challenge of helping Malawi establish a national peace infrastructure, the RC encouraged the PAC and Malawian Government to engage in an inclusive consultative process in which "all Malawians... [would] feel part of the map to the future."³⁷ Given the respect the Malawian society had for PAC and particularly the leaders representing faith-based organisations, she chose them as the main civil society interlocutor and also the convener for the other citizens' organisations and groups. Ms. Seppo closely supported government, opposition, and civil society representatives to develop nation-wide consultations through which inputs were collected from the wider population on the peace infrastructure's design. In these consultations, she specifically pushed for the involvement of women at the district and national levels. Within months of her arrival, a multi-stakeholder consultation process was established,

involving representatives from the government, civil society, and the opposition. Representatives from these three groupings would convene in meetings facilitated by the PDA to discuss and determine the parameters of the consultations.

She also encouraged the re-convening of a Civil Society Task Force that had been instituted at the end of the national dialogue process, in 2012. The RC helped build the Task Force's capacity, focusing on imparting knowledge and skills relevant to the participation in the consultation process for the peace infrastructure. Specifically, and on the basis of a robust capacity assessment, she organized trainings on mediation, diplomacy and facilitation as well as learning sessions on countries' experiences with peace infrastructures processes. In organizing these trainings, the RC relied on UNDP's regular programme funding, and drew heavily on expertise and advice from UNDP's Bureau for Crisis Prevention and Recovery (BCPR) and its Regional Centre. These capacity building efforts helped make the participation of the civil society in the process more meaningful, constructive and less confrontational vis-à-vis the national authorities. In turn, these efforts also enhanced the government's willingness to engage with civil society in light of the latter's constructive engagement.

Of course, while the engagement of civil society was crucial, the RC had to balance her outreach to civil society with parallel efforts to appease a government that had initially signalled concern over what it saw as the UN's penchant for according civil society too much of a central role in the entire dialogue process. She therefore invested significant time in cultivating a personal relationship with key government representatives, in particular with the Ministers of Justice and of Interior, and the President's Chief Adviser, which eventually gave her direct access to President Banda at different stages of the process. The direct relationship with the President strengthened the trust in the support the UN was providing to the whole process, reassured President Banda of the impartiality of the UN's role and gave RC Seppo more leverage when interacting with other members of the Cabinet and the international community.

The RC leveraged her wide-ranging relationships to successfully persuade all actors to place the PAC, within which civil society representatives had a prominent role, in the lead role of the national consultations for the peace infrastructure - after initial resistance from the Government and other civil society organisations that did not want to accord that role to the PAC. This required a patient, behind-the-scenes persuasion effort with senior government officials, including President Banda, who would have preferred to assume the leadership role themselves. Eventually, the government relented, accepting the PAC's lead role, and deploying six cabinet ministers for a three-day meeting that forged a basic consensus on the way forward.

Subsequently, the PAC worked on establishing local committees, with the RC working to ensure that these would

be as diverse and representative as possible, which led, for instance, to a 30% increase in women's participation in the process. The role of these local committees was to create a space for dialogue and information sharing about the peace infrastructure process at community level to complement and reinforce the national level efforts. The RC thus played an important role in shaping the playing field on which a nationally-owned process could unfold, with buy-in and long-term commitment from key stakeholders. The RC's ability to build relationships of trust with key players, in a way that was perceived as non-threatening by her counterparts, proved important assets in this context, according to actors interviewed as part of this study.

Combing a low-key approach with careful use of bully pulpit The RC's general approach was to operate discreetly, with a premium placed on behind-the-scenes engagement of key stakeholders. This allowed national actors to remain in the lead and feel a strong sense of ownership of the process, which in RC Seppo's view contributed to lay the foundations for greater sustainability of the effort. In many PAC-chaired meetings she attended during the national consultations, she would often refrain from speaking. Instead, she would later use informal moments – coffee breaks, meals – to ask questions or advise different actors on tricky issues that she or her PDA felt would require some facilitation to overcome. However, at times, she made effective use of her bully pulpit, publicly reminding leaders across the political divide that they had a responsibility to constructively engage in dialogue. In 2015, for instance, during the celebration of the International Peace Day, she told the opposition that “[b]eing in opposition does not always mean opposing all initiatives of government” and urged the government to keep in mind that “government ... is about wielding power with and not over people.”³⁸

Similarly, she took to the public her misgivings about the PAC's reluctance to ensure adequate women's participation in the consultation process, in order to ensure that a relevant and important part of Malawian society - women - would not be left aside of the process. In 2016, she demanded that “[w]omen must be around the table, if not leading the process in peace and security matters,” pointing to Malawi's high levels of sexual and gender-based violence. To sensitize the PAC and the other national actors, she organised a country visit to Uganda, that had faced a similar problem of “gender blindness” in the peace-building process. This visit led to greater openness particularly among the religious leaders within the PAC to enhanced participation of women, as witnessed by the increased number of women involved in the subsequent PAC-convened consultations.

The National Peace Policy

Eventually, the consultations led to the development of a National Peace Policy (NPP) completed in August 2017 and launched at the end of November 2017, that enshrines the newly created infrastructure for peace. The policy provides a national framework for Malawian actors involved in conflict prevention to identify and respond to early warning signs of

potential tensions and conflict, to promote peace education and collaborate. It presents the basic values that Malawians intend to found a peaceful society on, highlighting the need to embrace diversity and promote social justice and equality. Its expected impact is not only preventing violence, but also ensure “the absence of indirect structural violence embedded in social, cultural, economic, religious and political systems that perpetrate exploitation, injustice and inequality”, as mentioned during the launch of the NPP by Ms. Marjorie Chisambo Shema, Director of Cabinet Services in the Office of President and Cabinet.³⁹

Anchored within the Office of President and Cabinet, the national peace architecture had been structured around two pillars: the national-level infrastructure and the work in the districts. At the national level, the operational institution was called the Malawi Peace and Social Cohesion Commission (MPSCC), the mandate of which is “to provide a platform [for] national dialogues on social, economic, political, ethnic and religious challenges” ... travers[ing] the totality of Malawian society from national to regional and to district levels.”⁴⁰

The MPSCC has structures at regional and district levels, where all stakeholders must be represented, with a special reference in the Peace Architecture Policy given to women's participation. These local structures have the responsibility of “engaging [people] in a collaborative manner with other stakeholders in reconciliation and transformative dialogues that foster national cohesion.”⁴¹ In the transition from the 2013 peace architecture to the NPP, the previous pillars evolved in the Malawi Peace Commission (MPC) as “the highest umbrella body and focal point of peace building and conflict prevention, management, resolution and transformation in Malawi”⁴² and the District Peace Committees (DPC), whose role is “to sustain peace and unity within the District, and create and facilitate spaces for dialogue between groups and communities and for the exchange of ideas on issues that may threaten peace and stability within the community.”⁴³ At the time of this case study, the NPP has only been in place for a few months, which does not allow to have any elements about its impact, so far.

IV. OVERALL CONTRIBUTION OF RC AND UNCT ACTIVITIES TO PREVENTION

The UN-facilitated national dialogue provided the parties with a de-escalatory and face-saving approach that would provide a forum for key stakeholders to discuss how to address popular grievances in a non-violent manner. The dialogue, however, could only constitute the starting point of what would necessarily require a longer-term national effort to address the structural causes of the conflict, which was supported, in critical ways, by consecutive Resident Coordinators and which remains a work in progress. The Malawi case thus highlights both the difficulty and importance of linking preventive diplomacy with structural prevention initiatives.

Overall, between 2011 and 2017, consecutive RCs, through patient engagement with government and civil society actors, capacity development initiatives and the establishment of space for dialogue among the main national stakeholders, helped enhance the level of trust within the Malawian society and enable a constructive dialogue between the Government and civil society, helping to reduce conflict risk.

V. LESSONS

Developing relationships of trust with key stakeholders is an important asset for RC-led preventive action: In Malawi, the two consecutive RCs were able to successfully leverage close personal relations with senior government officials in their efforts to generate entry points for prevention initiatives. In 2011, the RC drew on these relations to foster the government's acceptance of the head of the UN Office in Nairobi as facilitator of the political dialogue. In Malawi, balancing and maintaining equidistant impartiality in relations with different categories of stakeholders (Government, opposition, civil society), proved at times challenging for the RC and required careful, continuous and personal engagement of all players by the RC, to ensure everyone would feel equally considered and well informed.

To live up to their full preventive potential, RCs need to leverage all available assets from UN Headquarters: The case of Malawi illustrated how RCs can enhance their preventive role by drawing on and maximizing assets and capacities available to the RCO, including from UN Headquarters. In the case of Malawi, the PDA has a proven particularly useful asset in assisting the two consecutive RCs through context analysis, political advice, scenario planning, engaging the UNCT and external stakeholders. UN DPA also proved a helpful source of guidance on political issues, not least the head of its relevant regional division had served as Envoy to Malawi in the summer of 2011. At critical moments, the RC was able to draw on the political weight of the Undersecretary-General for Political Affairs to put pressure on political leaders. Support from DPA's Electoral Assistance Division has proven crucial during elections. And UNDP HQ, including through its Bureau of Crisis Prevention and Recovery provided both critical funding and expert advice. The RC's institutional link with UNDP allowed her to better

leverage UNDP Governance programme resources to fill the lack of resources for the mediation process.

UN Envoys and RCs can play complementary roles that reinforce both their roles: The appointment, by the UN, of first an Envoy and later a Facilitator provided significant opportunities to the RC to enhance his own political role through "holding the fort" and moving the process forward in between the Envoy's/Facilitator's visits, and by providing entry points and facilitating relationships. To maximise the support role RCs can play in such situations, it is essential that they are kept abreast by the Envoy/Facilitator on relevant developments and not left in the "back-office," which would risk undermining their standing in the eyes of national stakeholders. The most important elements for a successful collaboration between an Envoy and a local RC are a) a common understanding of priorities and overall strategy and b) a well-defined division of labour and roles.

Developing the capacity of civil society to participate in national dialogues and consultations is a productive peacebuilding investment: Bringing all actors into the negotiating space is not enough if they do not feel all equally equipped to meaningfully participate. In Malawi, RC Seppo effectively leveraged UNDP resources to enhance the knowledge and skills in particular of civil society members of the Public Affairs Committee (PAC), which made their participation in the process constructive, as was also eventually recognized by the government. Having a clear capacity development and outreach plan ensured also the participation of members of more peripheral communities (at regional and district level, including a relevant number of women) that otherwise would have not been involved.

The UN should become better and keeping track of its institutional memory: not much was available neither within the country nor at HQ level of the previous peace infrastructure work in Malawi, that could have benefitted all UN actors involved in the process upfront. The RCs who were there over the period covered by this case study would have appreciated some history of the previous efforts in the country; and ii. Examples on the role expected by the RC at different stages of the process in relations to the role of external UN actors.

Endnotes

- Cover Image: Flickr/ Travis Lupick. 20 July 2011. Blantyre, Malawi. The mood begins to sour at formerly-peaceful demonstrations against President Mingu wa Mutharika and the DPP-majority government.
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 - 15 Ibid.
 - 16 Shotton, A., (2014), p. 3
 - 17 Nyasa Times (11.8.2011), 'Malawi NGOs say August 17 'Red army' demos on', <http://www.nyasatimes.com/malawi-ngos-say-august-17-red-army-demos-on/>
 - 18 Nathan, L. (2018), p.64-65
 - 19 Interview with Ambassador Mhura, December 2017, in Nathan (2018), p. 65
 - 20 Nathan, L. (2018), p.64
 - 21 'Mission Report: Visit to Malawi on 14-17 August 2011', prepared by the UNSG Envoy to Malawi, João Honwana, as cited in "UN Preventive Diplomacy and Facilitation of Dialogue in Malawi (2011-12)", by Laurie Nathan, UNU-CPR (2018).
 - 22 Nathan, L. (2018), p.64
 - 23 Nathan, L. (2018), p.64
 - 24 However, the UN raised these concerns privately with President Mutharika. "UN Preventive Diplomacy and Facilitation of Dialogue in Malawi (2011-12)", by Laurie Nathan, UNU-CPR (2018).
 - 25 "UN Preventive Diplomacy and Facilitation of Dialogue in Malawi (2011-12)", by Laurie Nathan, UNU-CPR (2018).
 - 26 Ibid.
 - 27 Ibid.
 - 28 "UN Preventive Diplomacy and Facilitation of Dialogue in Malawi (2011-12)", by Laurie Nathan, UNU-CPR (2018).
 - 29 Op. cit. p.64
 - 30 Even if - as reported in Shotton, A. (2011) Annex 2 - her appointment ended in June 2012 following the presentation of the National Dialogue report.
 - 31 Shotton, A. (2011), Annex 2, pp.1-2
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 - 33 Interview with Richard Dictus, 9 April 2018
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