



REFLECTIONS

Insights from Resident Coordinators on generating entry points for UN engagement in complex political situations

Issue 2

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JOINT UNDP-DPA PROGRAMME ON BUILDING NATIONAL CAPACITIES FOR CONFLICT PREVENTION



Introduction	03
Background on Joint UNDP-DPA Programme on Building National Capacities for Conflict Prevention	05
Reflections from Jamie McGoldrick, former Resident Coordinator in Georgia and current Resident Coordinator in Nepal	06
Reflections from Ruby Sandhu-Rojon, current Resident Coordinator in Ghana	11
Reflections from Yoriko Yasukawa, former Resident Coordinator in Bolivia and current Resident Coordinator in Costa Rica	14
Reflections from Knut Ostby, former Resident Coordinator in Fiji and current Resident Coordinator in Timor-Leste	18



*Inguri Bridge, the crossing point between Georgia and Abkhazia.
Photo: Stan Veitsman*

INTRODUCTION

Building on the first edition of 'Reflections' published earlier this year, this second edition seeks to continue to share insights from Resident Coordinators with regard to their experiences in complex political situations. This edition includes interviews with current and former Resident Coordinators in countries as varied as Bolivia, Fiji, Georgia, and Ghana.

Many Resident Coordinators and others within the UN system shared positive feedback in response to the first edition, recognising its modest contribution to efforts to increase awareness about the types of roles Resident Coordinators can play in leading UN responses in supporting national stakeholders sustain peace and address conflict. The examples in this edition cover a broad spectrum of national contexts and challenges pertaining to the nexus of development and politics, ranging from the mediation surrounding the Constitutional drafting process in Bolivia, the development of an infrastructure for peace in Ghana, the challenges associated with navigating political sensitivities while focusing on addressing the needs of populations in Georgia and Abkhazia, and the delicacy associated with the UN's role in supporting dialogue in a polarised and closed environment such as Fiji. The reflections included in this edition echo many of the lessons identified in the first edition of 'Reflections', and include:

- Recognizing that politics and development are intrinsically connected;
- Using development and humanitarian entry points to engage with national stakeholders;
- New and catalytic approaches are needed at the country level to address the drivers of conflict and violence;

- It is critical for the UN to remain neutral, open, and maintain core values;
- The UN should not 'impose' solutions;
- Resources within the UN system should be leveraged to provide consistent and complementary support;
- RC's need support to develop capacities to engage at a political level;
- There are tremendous opportunities for the UN system through the RC to support national stakeholders build consensus on how to address their challenges. These opportunities are often not recognized or exploited.

The 'Reflections' series is intended to portray the variety of country contexts in which the UN works and the types of situations that RCs and UNCTs are required to manage. In turn, they shed light on how support to RCs and UNCTs can be improved in order to adequately equip the UN to support countries address the emerging challenges of the 21st century, all of which require national capacities for dialogue, mediation, consensus building and the peaceful resolution of conflicts.

BACKGROUND ON THE JOINT UNDP-DPA PROGRAMME ON BUILDING NATIONAL CAPACITIES FOR CONFLICT PREVENTION

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the United Nations Department of Political Affairs (DPA) have collaborated on the development and implementation of conflict prevention initiatives in the field through the Joint UNDP-DPA Programme on Building National Capacities for Conflict Prevention (Joint Programme) for almost a decade. First launched in 2004 and extended in 2006 and 2008 through 2011, and reformulated in 2012, the programme is executed by UNDP's Bureau for Crisis Prevention and Recovery (BCPR) on behalf of UNDP and DPA. The programme provides catalytic seed funding to emerging and ongoing conflict prevention initiatives in various countries.

Over the past nine years, support from the Joint Programme has made a contribution to strengthening conflict prevention capacities at national and local level, and supporting national architectures for peace, mediation, and dialogue. The Joint Programme has worked to mitigate tensions around elections and referenda in countries as diverse as Benin, Cyprus, Ecuador, Fiji, Georgia, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Guyana, Ghana, Kenya, Kyrgyzstan, Lesotho, Malawi, Maldives, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, the Solomon Islands, Togo, or Ukraine. In these countries, concrete support was provided through UNDP conflict prevention programmes and Peace and Development Advisers, who also provided political support and conflict analysis to United Nations Resident Coordinators and Country Teams. This approach opened entry points for conflict prevention work and ensured the integration of a conflict-sensitive perspective into development programming.

While the experiences shared in this note aren't exclusively related to the Joint Programme, the purpose of this series is to raise awareness about the types of roles Resident Coordinators and UN Country Teams can play in engaging political and development actors in country. While the Joint Programme does not represent the sole means of such support, bringing together the institutional capacities and comparative advantages of DPA and UNDP represents a significant added-value in this regard. In many country contexts, as illustrated in the interviews that follow, the importance of drawing on consistent, coordinated, and complementary support from DPA, UNDP, and across the UN system is critical in allowing the UN to effectively operate in complex political situations. As some of the experiences described in this note attest, the ability to provide consistent and coherent support through the Joint Programme represents a critical mechanism of support to Resident Coordinators and UN Country Teams in their efforts to traverse the nexus of politics and development.

JAMIE MCGOLDRICK, UN RESIDENT COORDINATOR IN NEPAL (FORMER RESIDENT COORDINATOR IN GEORGIA)

Prior to being appointed as UN Resident Coordinator and UNDP Resident Representative in Nepal in July 2013, Mr. McGoldrick served as UN Resident Coordinator and UNDP Resident Representative in Georgia from 2009 to 2013. Prior to this assignment, Mr.



McGoldrick held a number of positions with OCHA. Prior to joining the UN, Mr. McGoldrick worked with the International Federation of the Red Cross in Liberia and in Central Bosnia. He also worked with Save the Children Fund (UK), UNV, and with the Voluntary Service Overseas. Mr. McGoldrick holds a BA in Political and Social Sciences from Glasgow Caledonia University, Scotland, UK and an MA in Political Science from the University of North Carolina, USA.

How did you perceive the political situation in Georgia when you arrived as Resident Coordinator?

When I first came, it was just one year after the conflict between Russia and Georgia in South Ossetia. The UN mission had just withdrawn, as had the OSCE mission. There was a different role for the UN in that regard. The UNCT and RC office had some contact with the 'occupied territories' as they are called, South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and I saw there was an opportunity for us to do more given the gap that was created by the absence of the UN and others. The Geneva Process that was established under the 2008 post-war plan was accompanied by the six point plan to address peace and security. There was also an EU monitoring mission. The DPKO mission had become a DPA Special Political Mission, and there was a Special Representative appointed by the Secretary-General. Based in Geneva, the Special Representative had an office in Georgia and would travel there frequently. Domestically, everyone was waiting for change, though it was an extremely polarised situation. No opposition of any kind was able to score any points as they all lacked a platform. The government at the time had fantastic machinery of propaganda and oppression. This created a very polarised, politically charged environment which was ideologically driven, and quite Western-leaning in a Russian context. The UN's role at that time was more focused on technical assistance. That was how I found it and I wanted to try and change that.

How did you develop entry points for the UN in the 'occupied territories'?

I went as quickly as I could to Abkhazia. I met with the appropriate ministry in Georgia beforehand to get their take on the situation. They were putting out an action plan for the occupied territories, essentially aiming to bring them back in again. I went to Sukhmi, coming from Georgia, and the suspicion was that we, as the international community, were trying to enact that process whereby Georgia and Abkhazia would become one again. As such, they were very hostile towards the UN. My first meeting started off with the de-facto Prime Minister asking us to sign a Memorandum of Understanding in order to continue and expand our work in Abkhazia. The third point in the MoU called for the UN to recognise Abkhazia as a country. I asked if we could have some time to work on it, and get back to them with something. I also asked the Foreign Minister to come to our offices. We then drafted a framework agreement and we put down a set of humanitarian principles and operational parameters. On the basis of that, we would use it as a document for partnership and for collaboration. That would give them, an acknowledgment that we were working there, while also pushing back on the issue of recognition. We pushed back saying that the recognition of sovereignty was not something the UN could do, that the UN family can't do that on the ground. So that was the starting point. After that it was about being in a listening mode. We heard that all they ever got from the international community was people telling them that "the future lies in Georgia". Then there was recognition by Russia and some other countries of the two territories being independent, which clearly goes against the grain for the UN and international community. It was used on the basis of the Kosovo model. We were working on the basis of humanitarian law in occupied territories, which prohibited our work except for a very narrow stream of emergency/ humanitarian work. That's not what the Abkhaz wanted; they wanted a different type of support from us. It was up to us to create a different conversation about what types of support we could offer in response to their needs. Moving to a needs-based approach would require a shift away from the approach that Georgia had put out there. It should also be said that the international community, the big donors, were in support of this action plan presented by the Georgian government, which was fundamentally built on bringing Georgia and Abkhazia back together again.

Was there tension between the UN's role and what the donors prioritised?

That was one of the things we had to do, to convince the donors we had to collaborate. So, interestingly, that summer there was a new piece of legislation put forward outlining modalities for working in occupied territories. I spent a lot of time asking the UN, non-UN, donors, and the international community what they needed in terms of coordination mechanisms. There were a few around, but I created one that would bring them together on an operational level, and a second one that would bring them together on a strategic level. Through the strategic level we engaged a few of the influential donors who engaged with, and funded work in,

Abkhazia to get them to rally behind and push back on these modalities. It was a fantastic result from our side, as it resulted in no changes despite the legislation and at the same time put us in a much more consolidated position and showed the government we could mobilise around issues that weren't being objectively addressed. That also resonated quite well with the Abkhaz, as they could see there were challenges to the set-view, and that challenge was based on recognition of the needs on the ground. Control over our work was another issue where I got the international community, in particular the EU and the US, to support the view that they should not be dictated to by any government about how they, as donors, wish to spend their money and give their aid. As a result of that, there was a very strong, consolidated approach to push back on government. I think it also put the international community much more coherently in place. We used it for other issues that came up along the way. I used it very much for protecting the UN and the RC position, as we had exposed ourselves in taking the lead on many of these issues.

How did this affect the relationship with the Georgian government? How did they respond?

I had a word with them on this and said "we are working together on this, we are not working for you, we are not working against you, and we are working for the needs of the people on the ground". It was a very old fashioned humanitarian approach. Neutrality, independence, and impartiality were the guiding principles we were always emphasizing in our conversations with everyone. They asked me what I thought about the liaison mechanism which was part of the action plan. I said to them that I think it's a good idea for facilitating the movement of material across the ABL and suggested that it should also have an element of political dialogue where messages could be brought from each side by some neutral individual who would be seen by both parties. I said that I'm willing to take that on, but only if you get a letter from both parties inviting me to do that on behalf of both parties. So, the de-facto deputy foreign minister in Abkhazia sent a letter to me through the Ministry of Re-integration down in Georgia, asking me, as UNDP, to set this mechanism in place. That was the cover that allowed us to set it up, and it's been running almost since I got here. It has two levels. It's got a level whereby we transport medicine and materials, for which we get permission, but also for messages. The Prime Minister here gets messages from the de-facto President there through this mechanism. It's done under UNDP, which reinforces this idea of the UN as a neutral broker. It's done in a manner where we are seen to be pragmatic, operational providers, but at the same time politically linked for partners to use us as the UN to bring messages back and forth. It's known as the liaison mechanism down here because that's what the action plan says and in Abkhazia it's known as the dialogue project. The recent changes in political leadership on both sides had momentarily affected the way these mechanisms, and these relationships, worked but I think we have it back on track now. I recently met with the new Prime Minister who praised the use of the mechanism, as did the de-facto minister of foreign affairs in Abkhazia. It's quite discreet, but everyone know it's there.

"I said to the Georgian Government that we are working together on this, we are not working for you, we are not working against you, we are working for the needs of the people on the ground. It was a very old fashioned humanitarian approach. Neutrality, independence, and impartiality were the guiding principles we were always emphasizing in our conversations with everyone"

- JAMIE MCGOLDRICK

How do you measure positive results in such a context? What are some examples?

Another result would be the COBERM mechanism, a funding mechanism that has a strategic dimension to it as well. It seeks to connect people inside Abkhazia and inside Georgia and ultimately across the ABL, providing support to women's groups, to teachers, to archives, to students, to sports events. It is a practical outreach tool though sometimes gets caught in the political climate so it doesn't always work the way it should and sometimes it gets put in a very difficult position because of the politics. But it is a mechanism where we can provide funding and capacity building to new NGOs and new civil society actors and allow them at

some point to connect with each other. It's based around the concept of human security defined in terms of peoples' livelihoods, peoples' activities. This then provides grants up to \$100,000 over a number of years and is funded by the EU. It has led to some really important results, allowing us to facilitate conversations around real, practical issues, while at the same time allowing conversations to take place in Yerevan or Kiev to get people to think about peacebuilding. That is a way we have connected inside communities, by coming in at a different level and allowing those people to connect with themselves using this fund we have established. At the same time we have tried to connect these projects to those of the wider UN family so as to help with sustainability.

We first started working in Abkhazia only in the Georgian ethnic area, and I think that led to some incorrect perceptions amongst the rest of the community in Abkhazia. We managed to convince them to allow us to move out of the Georgian-concentrated area to work in the whole of Abkhazia. I think that was well appreciated by civil society as well as the authorities. We've also supported some practical measures on the ground. Working with local institutions to provide practical support that is not politically charged.

For those reasons, the UN is seen as a neutral partner, not like the other donors who are seen to be pushing the issue of territorial integrity all the time. We are able to set apart the political and the humanitarian/ development elements. The UN is engaging politically through our collaboration with the Special Political Mission, Ambassador Turnin, as well as through the Geneva discussions. There are two tracks, a working group one track on peace and security, and a working group two track on humanitarian and development issues. The Ambassador is in one, and I am in the other. It just reinforces this idea of separation, distinct and different but at the same time connected through the UN family.

Has there been clarity between the Resident Coordinator role and that of Special Political Mission?

There has been some confusion at some points particularly in light of the new government. DPA were interested in coming in and speaking with the new government and I understand the reasons for that, to understand the foreign policy agenda, but there was some straying into domestic matters. But this is the remit of the UNCT. We work very closely and collaborate with them on domestic issues, an example of that being the parliamentary elections in October 2012. It was a very frozen period in the lead up to the elections, so we decided to work together to develop a scenario, working very closely with different parts of the UN in HQ and locally. We developed a paper identifying the risk management issues we may have to deal with. At the same time we produced a paper that suggested guideposts on how to manage any potential overlaps or tensions with the SPM in a logical and chronological way. Each scenario had a response plan about what the UN could do locally and what we could ask HQ to do, all the way through to the Secretary-General's level, if required. Every Friday we would have telephone calls with DPA, UNDP/BCPR, UNHCR, and the UNCT as well as the Special Political Mission. We would reflect on the scenarios, mark that out on where we are in the chronology and the scenarios, and assess whether we needed to change our scenarios and our actions. We frequently adjusted our scenarios to reflect our menu of options. That proved a very effective way of bringing Geneva, New York, and those here closer together.

To what extent did you feel empowered to engage in risks?

I think UNDP is kind of wary of political development, rather than economic development. Thankfully we had a very good Deputy of the Regional Bureau, Jans Wandel, who was in Bratislava at the time. He was in close quarters, so I could run things by him. He has been in UNDP for a long time, so he understands the internal dynamics much more than I do. The Bureau Chief was a little bit wary of the politics but I was able to convince her of the calculated risks we were taking. They were all measured risks, and the audits have shown that. The new Bureau head is from the region and knows the issues well. Gaining the Bureau's trust, together with DPA, and by performing with a team structure and at the same time taking the lead on in-country activities, having the support of the international community, the understanding of the key donors, afforded us protection in the face of the government and the opposition at the time, which is now the government. We were seen to play a fair role. We had this Ambassadorial Working Group that brings Ambassadors together around the issue of elections. We had these meetings daily in the lead up to the elections, which allowed us to put together joint statements on behalf of the international community, we could dispatch small groups of Ambassadors to meet with key interlocutors to communicate the concerns of the international community. This was effective as an advocacy tool but also as an output, and an effective way of making sure we were all on the same page. Getting those messages back to the capital cities helped keep the landscape 'litter free'. Having the PDA, and the local knowledge, allowed us to pitch information, analysis, and projection, which people largely bought into. This served to reinforce the UN's leadership.

How did the PDA capacity support your role as Resident Coordinator?

The PDA is very experienced in this part of the world, having previously worked with UNOMIG. So he understands the cast of characters, he knows them well, and knows the dynamics very well. So already you have a capacity, a knowledge base that was ready to go from the very first day. At the same time, he is very politically attuned and very smart at networking. At that time I was struggling in being the person who had to do all that myself. Having a person do all the analysis, build his own network, which then formed in the Joint Consultative Forum that mirrors the AWG. The information is shaped there and then transferred through the other coordination mechanisms. This becomes a sub-working group of the AWG, helps shape the political agenda from below, and gains insight from the information available from the missions. The PDA, from the RCs point of view, has been a godsend. He has a local PDA supporting him, and because of the local dimension, it basically provides a complement to his understanding and knowledge. Through having that local PDA we avoid creating that degree of fear amongst other portfolios, especially the UN's work in governance. At first they saw the PDA moving in domestic issues, which they saw as theirs. Now there is a recognition that the PDA is there to collaborate with them, and having a national PDA to help fuse these issues together and link to the PDA's work has really enhanced that collaboration.

What are the links between the PDA and the programmatic side of UNDP relating to governance, elections, and so on?

When the PDA came on board there was a great degree of scepticism. The fact that he reports directly to me as Resident Coordinator put him in a very odd position in terms of what he was and what he did. There was also some suspicion because he was this guy who came with an extraordinary amount of experience as a foreigner in a Georgian context. So he was seen as a bit of a threat. The cooperation had not been so effective at the beginning. But through being here, and with the local PDA, they have been able to support programmes become more conflict sensitive. The PDA provides a service of analysis above and beyond what I've expected, that is drawn on from the UN and the international community. And it's not because they don't say controversial things, they do, but in a diplomatic way. The PDA team is very effective and very valued.

How can Resident Coordinators and UNCTs be better supported?

RCs and UNCTs need to recognise what the problem is and be able to communicate that problem back to HQ for support. We have tried to build cross-collaboration between UNDP, DPA and others, to get an understanding of the context, our needs, and what we can need from them. Sometimes all we need is the space to do it from the political side of things. And people from UNDP in HQ perhaps understand it a bit better but sometimes the connections between UNDP/BCPR and the rest of UNDP aren't always what they should be. The link between BCPR and the field shouldn't be seen as an extractive relationship but rather as a supporting relationship. To be there when required, not to be there when they think they're required.

I also think RCs need to be given a better understanding of what this type of work entails. What does it mean to be politically savvy? What does it mean to be sensitive to, and understand these issues? Understanding through case studies, understanding through exposure, is really valuable and allows people to see that it is not as big an issue as people think it is. It shouldn't be feared. There are ways to protect yourself and ways to get the support you need and the direction you need. To give you that space to put the UN and the UNCT to take the gamble, and not the RC, you need to know that the support is there, and for when the time is right. That is what people have to learn to believe. We also need to move beyond the culture of thinking that you can work in any environment and not be political, thinking that development or economic development are not political processes. These are the issues that need to be understood from the get go. I meet colleagues who are RCs who say "it's alright for you, you know these things". But no one knows these things, it's what you go through and learn yourself, and what you pick up from what you do and learn as you go along. A lot of people don't want to go near it as people think it'll put you in a position whereby you'll end up in conflict with a government or an authority. This certainly does happen but you can help manage it by taking calculated risks.

What are some other ways Resident Coordinators can be supported to strengthen and apply their political acumen?

These Montreux processes¹ have been very useful by providing exposure to other country scenarios that similar to my own. For example, Kosovo vis-à-vis Georgia and Abkhazia, as well as Nagorno-Karabakh. Exposing individuals to these examples is a key way of learning. Not necessarily to the precise details but more so to the issues and the process involved in dealing with these issues. I've invited the coordinator of Kosovo to come here, the PDAs have come together, and we've all broken it down and looked at the similar scenarios, examining what has worked and what hasn't worked. The RC in Armenia is visiting too, to see what could be done in Nagorno-Karabakh when the time is right. We also worked with the UNDP/Bratislava office to see how we could work with authorities in Abkhazia to provide other types of support.

The PDA capacity is critical, I just wish we could get a much more secured funding base. Beyond the one-year funding cycle to ensure the PDA's don't go running off and so they feel secure in their positions. We also need to build more career opportunities for PDAs. They are a serious resource when you have the right person in the right place.

¹ The Montreux processes refer to a series of meetings held in Montreux, Switzerland, where the UN system has come together to discuss how to strengthen support to Resident Coordinators and UN Country Teams working in complex political situations. The first meeting, dubbed 'Montreux I', was held in 2009 with 'Montreux II' held in April 2012. Thirty Resident Coordinators participated in the workshop, along with high-level representatives from UNDP, DPA, DOCO, OCHA, OHCHR, PBSO, UNICEF, and UNWomen as well as from the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation. Three key recommendations emanated from 'Montreux II', namely: i) Deepen understanding of complex political situations and the UN's role, including the respective role of different agencies and departments; ii) Improve analysis, coherence, cross agency coordination and abilities for rapid and appropriate response; iii) Improve support and opportunities for experience sharing amongst RCs and PDAs.

RUBY SANDHU-ROJON, CURRENT RESIDENT COORDINATOR IN GHANA



Ruby Sandhu-Rojon was appointed as the UN Resident Coordinator for Ghana in 2010. Prior to serving as Resident Coordinator in Ghana, Ms. Sandhu-Rojon was the UNDP Country Director in Burkina Faso. Earlier in her career, Ms. Sandhu-Rojon was posted in Germany as Chief of the African Section of UN Volunteers (UNV), served as Deputy Resident Representative of UNDP Madagascar, and worked as the Special Assistant to the Administrator of UNDP from 1997 to 1999 having begun her career with UNIFEM. Ms. Sandhu-Rojon is from the United States of America and holds an MSC in Russian Politics from the London School of Economics, and a BA in Political Science specializing in International Economics and Politics from Bryn Mawr College, US.

How do you perceive the current political situation in Ghana, particularly in the aftermath of last year's election?

The fact they decided to take the electoral dispute through the court system instead of going to the streets already shows that there is a respect for the rule of law². So I think that, as it stands today, with the court case still ongoing, the country is still stable. All parties respect the rule of law and respect the courts.

How do these trends affect the UN's support both to political actors and the country's broader peace and development?

Stability allows support to continue. We need to look beyond the political situation as the country is facing other challenges that we need to keep in mind. They have a very difficult macro-economic situation. This will affect the amount of support the government can give in certain development areas which in turn has implications for the UN. There are also a number of socio-economic situations which are quite critical that require more attention. One of these includes the ongoing regional disparity – there is very much a north/south divide in terms of income as well as gender inequality.

With regard to the political situation, and with the court case ongoing, the government was sworn in despite the court case ongoing. The National Peace Council, supported by UNDP, has initiated a number of dialogues and begun meeting with the different partners. There is going to be a summit held by the NPC, bringing together the different groups of society: the media, youth, different political parties and to really start talking about how we need to start accepting the result. There is a conscious effort for dialogue.

What's your experience in developing entry points with political actors, building on those that had been developed by the previous Resident Coordinator?

It is important to meet with all the political parties. Ghana is very much a bi-partisan country; there is the National Democratic Congress (NDC) and the New Patriotic Party (NPP). It is important to show that we are not just meeting with these two political parties but with all the political parties, including those that have come on board more recently. UNDP has been a supporter for a long time. We always say that we support the people of Ghana. So we will work with whatever government is in place to support the people of Ghana. We have used various development themes to develop entry points to engage with political parties. For example, during the elections we used the issue of women's political participation to bring together different political parties to say "well, how can we increase the number of female candidates in your parties?"

A second important aspect to keep in mind is the issue of neutrality. By meeting with all parties, you are saying that you don't belong to any one particular party. This message is also communicated through working with the electoral commission and their Inter-Party Advisory Committee (IPAC). Our role was to consistently advocate with the electoral commission to encourage the IPAC to meet on a regular basis. That was important, it showed we were promoting a forum for all the parties to participate.

² Following Presidential elections that took place on 7 December 2012, the Electoral Commission announced on 9 December that John Mahama of the NDC won with 50.7 percent of the vote, narrowly avoiding a run-off against his closest rival Nana Adda Dankwa Akufo-Addo of the New Patriotic Party (NPP), who took 47.7 percent. Citing irregularities in the new biometric voting system, the NPP requested the Supreme Court to nullify the results. A verdict was reached in August, 2013, validating John Mahama's victory at the polls.

With the NPC now institutionalized, what opportunities and challenges do you foresee for national efforts to further Ghana's Infrastructure for Peace? What role can the UN play?

It is critical that the NPC has government support. We need to recognize that the government has a commitment, that all political parties have a commitment to the NPC because it passed unanimously through parliament and is established through legislation. To ensure government support there has to be a dedicated budget to support their work. This is where we hope to see government support extended. However, if the government is facing economic constraints then the NPC could be one of the first ones to be cut. The UN has a key advocacy role to ensure the government's attention remains on this important vehicle. Cohesion within the NPC is also critical. There needs to be unity in thinking and we need to build the capacity of the NPC in areas like mediation. Members of the NPC come from all walks of life but may not be at the same level or have the same capacities, including in critical areas like mediation skills. This is where the UN can provide valuable support. Providing lessons learned from other countries, supporting with advocacy to demonstrate that in a country like Ghana we still need to give attention to peace. International advocacy and helping with visibility also creates opportunities to support.

What changed in the NPC's role from 2008 and 2012 and what are the lessons learned that came from that?

The law that formally established the NPC was introduced in 2011, so there was a formal mandate and legitimacy with regard to their role in 2012. Because of that legitimacy the NPC played the role as a convenor. It had a much more visible, active role compared with the role played in 2008. It was not simply a group of people that banded together. They were mandated by government, by society as a whole, as they represented society as a whole. We need to ensure their continued involvement and engagement. They should not just be involved in elections but also in other areas – chieftancy, land disputes, ownership disputes. The NPC can also have a valuable role in these areas. It would be useful to map where NPC think they can engage, outside of the elections.

More than promoting a peaceful dialogue, we also need to work with parties to look at the weaknesses of this election. We need to start addressing the weaknesses in the system, for example the results reporting and the results monitoring. That's where the NPC can come in and encourage the issue to be addressed in a non-partisan way. The NPC can also examine the credibility of institutions like the Electoral Commission. The NPC needs to consider how they can use the ongoing constitutional review process to encourage the government to look at the credibility of the Electoral Commission and other institutions.

As Resident Coordinator, have you felt empowered to take calculated risks? Have you had the appropriate support from UNDP, DPA, and the PDA to engage in these politically sensitive areas?

There was always a dialogue. That was very helpful. There were times when we said "we have this particular problem, what do you suggest?" It was also helpful that we had a very good relationship with the UNDP Regional Bureau, with DPA, and with UNDP/BCPR. Where there were issues where we couldn't do something here due to political sensitivities, we could link together with DPA. For instance, if we knew the President was going to be in New York for the General Assembly, we worked with DPA to make sure that there are certain talking points prepared when the Secretary-General meets with the President.

What are some key opportunities for RCs in complex political situations?

A Resident Coordinator needs to identify opportunities in country and understand that everything is political. As the Resident Coordinator, you are the representative of the Secretary-General. That already gives you some sort of legitimacy. Secondly, the RC needs to be aware of the entry points available through the various agencies at the sectoral level. Third, be cognizant of the sorts of partnerships you can build, not just with political parties, but with civil society organizations. That's where it's important to remember that your network is not a limited network, in terms of government, but really that it is broad based. The UN can use that to pass certain messages and draw on these capacities. The example of WANEP in Ghana is a case in point. It is not a government body or a political party. But it is an organization that has worked a lot in mediation and does have valid support and credibility in the region. As an RC you need to know that you can call on these diverse partnerships to work with you.

Could you describe the relationship between yourself as Resident Coordinator and the PDA?

I feel that the PDA has been a critical part of my role as an RC, especially in a country that is undergoing elections. What is important is to understand the support and the advice that the PDA can provide to you as the RC and to understand how the PDA can be used to create partnerships and improve the work of the UN system in moving forward on certain issues. The PDA has also played a central role in shaping UNDP's programmes and shaping how the programmes can help provide the support the RC needs to broach certain issues. The PDA's experience, particularly in elections, was very appropriate given we were gearing up to provide support in

that area. It was critical for him to be able to work at the technical level and facilitate the links for me to engage with the various Chairmen of the political parties. It positioned the UN system, particularly amongst development partners, because it demonstrated that we have an expertise. We are not just flying in and flying out. We are here because we have an expertise in the Country Office. As an RC you're called upon to intervene in so many different forums on so many different issues, having a PDA as a 'right hand person' for what is happening politically is key. The fact that we have sought funding for the position from the UNDP Country Office shows that we have a commitment to having this type of advisor role, that it is a key function. Both the PDAs I have had have been excellent and it's important to recognize that.

“What is helpful is to learn from existing, real-life situations, for example the Sri Lanka example. There are many contemporary contexts where RCs are in challenging environments, and we need to learn from these... Getting some feedback from RCs that were engaged in real-life situations are helpful, and we need more of it.”

- RUBY SANDHU-ROJON

Did the training/ induction programmes prepare you for the politically related tasks you have faced as Resident Coordinator in Ghana? What suggestions would you have to see them further improved?

This is a key area. I did the RC induction course more than three years ago, so things may have changed. What I found useful was our meeting with DPA but we need to go beyond that. We need to have a specific session, and perhaps through grouping countries together that face similar political and development challenges. Having that sort of sensitization is important. There was one part on the UNCT coordination and leadership looked at political acumen but that wasn't enough. That type of training or sensitization would be very good. What is helpful is to learn from existing, real-life situations, for example the Sri Lanka issue. There are many contemporary contexts where RCs are in challenging environments and we need to learn from these. We are still facing issues in DRC, how do you deal with sexual crimes, for instance, We need to look at current issues and challenges within the system. Getting some feedback from RCs that were engaged in real-life situations is helpful and we need more of it. Getting analytical information to us is central. The PDA prepares these reports and sends them off but sometimes you get the feeling that it is going into a black hole. I think it's also important to have some analysis on what is happening in the region supporting our work in-country. Linking to debates at HQ level, discussions that are ongoing in New York, are critical and provide information.

YORIKO YASUKAWA, FORMER RESIDENT COORDINATOR IN BOLIVIA AND CURRENT RESIDENT COORDINATOR IN COSTA RICA



Ms. Yasukawa is currently UN Resident Coordinator and UNDP Resident Representative in Costa Rica. Prior to this, she occupied this same post in Bolivia from 2008 to 2012. Before joining UNDP, Ms. Yasukawa worked in UNICEF where she was Associate Director for Policy, Advocacy and Knowledge Management prior to taking up the UNRC post in Bolivia. She has also worked as UNICEF Representative in Mexico and Ecuador. Ms. Yasukawa is a Japanese national and has a BA in General Studies from Harvard University.

How did you perceive the political situation in Bolivia when you first arrived as Resident Coordinator?

Very polarised. There was very violent and aggressive rhetoric, essentially an ideological conflict between the government and opposition political forces that had been basically concentrated among the opposition political parties and the regional parties.

In the publication [‘It was not how we imagined it’](#), you noted that the options for dialogue seemed almost impossible. In such a polarised context, what made you think dialogue was actually a possibility? Why did you view it as so important?

I didn’t know whether it would be possible or not. It was something that we mentioned when we presented the [It was not how we imagined it](#) publication in New York. We called for dialogue and we called for a peaceful solution to the problem because it was our obligation to do so, regardless of whether or not the prospect was realistic. It was our obligation as the United Nations to do whatever we could to promote peaceful resolution to the conflict. That is part of our mission.

How did you engage the various parties in terms of engaging their interest and blessings to engage in the dialogue? What was the process?

We didn’t start out aiming to be part of the dialogue. The first step was to call for the actors to sit down and talk. At that point we had no idea whether that was possible or where that would lead. One thing that really struck me when I was there was that we had this project called PAPEP³. As part of PAPEP, UNDP was helping to conduct monthly opinion surveys. When I got there, we had just received the results from July 2008 and the results was that something like 72 percent of those polled said that they felt the political actors should sit down and talk. These polls were done in the nine principle cities of Bolivia, in all the Departmental capitals, including those locations that were the centre of the opposition. It was particularly interesting that the polls noted that in those cities in the western side of the country, which were largely pro-government, the issue of contention was the constitution. On the Western, pro-government side where the official rhetoric was that they weren’t going to change even a comma in the text that came from the constituent assembly, the people polled were saying they would be willing to negotiate the constitution if it meant the whole country would be in agreement. On the opposition side, their area of focus was on the autonomy statutes and the people polled there were saying they were also willing to negotiate the autonomy statutes if that means coming to agreement with the other side. These results were then put to me and I remember saying that “well, we are obviously going to publish these results” and my colleague said to me “well, we haven’t actually published these results before and we normally just show them to a few government officials”. I thought that the report would be an ideal tool for advocating for dialogue and so, in the end, we published the results. There was a lot of coverage, it was interesting to the media, and it led to the dialogue. It was the first step.

Following the release of these results and tracking to the dialogue process, what stages did you go through in terms of identifying the role the UN could play in supporting the process, getting various elements or parties that could be resistant to the dialogue involved?

Publishing the results and generating media coverage helped to create an atmosphere conducive to dialogue and the sense that there is a public demand for it. Politicians will always pay attention to polling. It also helped to create a public profile for the UN which had previously played a low-key role up to that point. There had not been an RC for almost a year or so. It had been difficult for the UN system to exercise political leadership without an RC, so it was important from that perspective. I first went to see the government authority, including the Prime Minister, the Minister of the Presidency who at that time was known to be very hard-line. I tried to figure out his interest. He then encouraged me to go and speak with the opposition, implying that I should basically go

³ PAPEP’s work involves the production of substantive knowledge products (applied research and analysis, including conflict analysis and short and medium term prospective political scenarios) to fostering dialogue and consensus building for decision-making on strategic issues in national development processes.

and see how awful they are. This was permission in a way, which was one thing that I had been unsure of when I first arrived. I visited the Governor of Santa Cruz, who was one of the main opposition leaders. Initially he was reluctant to see me. The message they were sending was that if the UN isn't willing to mediate a dialogue then there was no point in talking. Of course at that point I couldn't commit to the UN playing any kind of role. I insisted on this, but said I could at least begin talking and hear whatever they had to say and then communicate that to the government. He eventually said yes. I think I met with him twice before he finally decided to sit down and have a dialogue. At the first meeting, the man barely talked. He was there with one of his main advisors, and I was with a UN consultant. His advisor was texting to our consultant "this is pure blah blah... offer something". We didn't really get to anything concrete at that first meeting. I remember that his first sign of warmth was towards the end of the meeting. I was just about to leave, and he asked me whether I was Japanese. I said "yes" and it had turned out that he gone on a JICA course to Japan.

I then had a second meeting. That was an important contact I had made before the dialogue began. But what really got people to decide that they finally had to sit down and talk was September 11, actually. In one of the Departments, there was a clash between pro-Government people. Something like 11 people were killed in that clash. And that really shocked people. In Bolivia, the political rhetoric is aggressive and violent but people tend not to be physically violent. The fact that so many people died was a wake-up call to both sides. A day after that, one of the opposition members went to the Department, and sat down to talk with some of the top authorities, including the Vice-President. And there they agreed to sit down and begin talks between the Government and all the Opposition. After that decision was taken, it was decided to request international observers to the talks. We understood that the government initially wanted the OAS and UNASUR. At that time, South American governments played a more prominent role. The government did not want the UN or the EU, but the opposition insisted on having the EU and the UN. So in the end, the government extended an invitation to the UN, the OAS, the EU, UNASUR, and the Churches to be observers. And that's how we got into the dialogue.

“One way that RCs can be supported is to be encouraged to play a role. My impression from other countries is that there is still some uncertainty over whether we should get involved in such situations. To me, whether it is realistic to expect a peaceful resolution of conflict to dialogue, the UN has an obligation to advocate for peace and to advocate for non-violence and for dialogue. I think it's important for RCs to be reminded of that and that RCs are given the skills to do so.”

- YORIKO YASUKAWA

To what extent has the dialogue helped address the ideological, social, geographical, ethnic, and other divides in the country that the constitutional process seemed to stir? What more needs to be done, and do you think there is a role for the UN to support continued dialogue?

The dialogue addressed a number of very important issues. There were two stages, the first between the President, the Vice President and four or five Ministers of the Opposition Government. That took place for four or five weeks. And the second part took place in the Congress. That was between parliamentarians, the pro-government and anti-government parliamentarians. It was presided over by someone who was at that time the Minister for Rural Development, who is now the Minister of the Interior. The part with the Governors was really more to vent on both sides. They began then, these two working groups, one was on the constitutional text, the other was focused on the issue of tax/ rents from hydrocarbons. That phase ended without any concrete agreements and moved to congress.

It was in congress that the nitty-gritty of the text of the constitution was negotiated. In that negotiation, the government really conceded a lot. Until then, they had said that there would be no autonomy whatsoever. The opposition had called for the autonomy issue to be incorporated into the constitution. Ultimately the issue was incorporated in the constitution at the level of the Department, which are like provinces or states, and at the municipal government level, where they have a regional grouping, and indigenous groups. A lot of other issues that the opposition called for were also incorporated. In the end they came to agreement on a text, which was then voted on by the whole congress and adopted by popular vote in a referendum. It was approved by over 60

percent of the voters. In that negotiation, a lot of these issues were in fact resolved or agreed on. A big part of the population voted 'no' on the constitution anyway, but there were key areas of agreement. And that really took a lot of the momentum away from the ideological confrontation. Bolivia continues to have a very polarising political environment. There continues to be a lot of conflict, sometimes violent. But now it's not a monolithic ideological conflict, but a collection of many different social, regional, ethnic and ideological conflicts. It's very destructive in the sense that even when it doesn't become violent the government is required to dedicate a lot of time and effort to managing these conflicts. This takes away from their day-to-day job of public administration and development. It paralyses decision making, it makes it very difficult for the country to reach agreement on issues critical to the nation's development, and in general creates a very bad atmosphere for peaceful and harmonious coexistence. It continues to be a difficult situation, and I certainly see a continued role for the UN. Our participation in advocacy for the peaceful resolution of conflict and the adoption of dialogue didn't stop with the constitutional issue; we continued to play a very active role. In general, the UN needs to continue calling for discussion on all issues and encouraging respect for differences which remains a crucial issue in Bolivia. We spent a lot of time talking to people and making public appeals to encourage people to engage in dialogue to overcome differences.

Issues did arise when the government promoted judicial processes against opposition members, on issues of corruption or another pretext. One of our advocacy issues was to say that any legal process against anybody should be substantiated, should comply with due process, that it should be transparent, and so on, especially against public political figures.

In reflecting on your time as Resident Coordinator in Bolivia, did you feel empowered to take calculated risks? Did you feel supported as an RC to engage in these types of areas?

It didn't occur to me to seek support or permission. I have been in the UN system for quite a while. I started out in UNICEF. That is where I have spent most of my career. And UNICEF, as UNDP, is a very decentralized organisation. I wasn't used to asking for permission or prior support to do whatever I felt needed to be done. To me it was obvious. The priority at that moment for the UN system was to do whatever it could to promote peaceful resolution to this conflict. The experience with the constitutional crisis proved that we did have an important and constructive role to play. People appreciated the role we had to play, including the government, the opposition, as well as the general public. There was an opinion poll that PAPEP did shortly after the constitutional crisis was resolved where there was a positive view on the role the UN played in the resolution of conflict, in calling for dialogue, and the kinds of advocacy that we had undertaken. That whole experience showed us that there was political space for the UN to play this kind of role and that it was seen to be useful by all actors. So that to me was more important.

With that said, once we were in this process I remember we discussed with DPA the possibility of them finding some high-level person to represent the UN in this dialogue. They never really got around to finding somebody. And somebody had to be there, and we were there. But I think in general that both UNDP and DPA were supportive. Rebecca Gynspan, who was Regional Director at that time called me a couple of times to express her support and to see what was going on. And from DPA, it wasn't high-level political support but it was very crucial on a number of occasions, including when the dialogue came to agreement. It was key that the desk officer at that time helped us to get a statement issued from the Secretary-General. The day that the dialogue came to an agreement and the congress had approved the text, we got the Secretary-General's office to issue a statement congratulating the actors involved in the dialogue in reaching this agreement. That was very important. Every statement coming out of the office of the Secretary-General is important. But it was also important for our office in the sense that the message was that it wasn't just our office doing whatever occurred to us to do, but rather something that we did with broader support. So in that sense the support from HQ was valuable.

What types of support were forthcoming in terms of supporting the UNCT or your capacities in terms of engaging with the dialogue?

In a country-level activity, one crucial area of support was the financial support. Without that funding we couldn't have done what we did. In the constitutional dialogue process and in general, it was crucial to have the advice of Armando Ortuno, the PAPEP advisor and his team. He is an extraordinary person in many ways. In such a polarized context like Bolivia, he is an excellent analyst but also has always been able to maintain a balanced view on things. He advised me in ways that were indispensable in terms of the political role of RC.

How can Resident Coordinators and UNCTs be better supported in complex political situations?

One way that they can be supported is for Resident Coordinators to be encouraged to play a role. My impression from other countries is that there is still a lot of uncertainty over whether we should get involved in such situations. To me, as I said in the beginning, whether it is realistic to expect a peaceful resolution of conflict or dialogue, the UN has an obligation to advocate for peace and to advocate for non-violence and for dialogue. I think it's important for RCs to be reminded of that and that RCs are given the skills to do so. As the UN we have a normative role to play and people expect us to play that role. There is great power to our name and the fact that we are the UN, and that being the UN represents the nations of the world. It is a capital that the UN has that nobody else has and I think people underestimate that. We as RCs have that great deal of moral authority that people tend to forget. I think it's good that RCs be reminded of that authority and at the same time the responsibility to promote peace and democracy and to be told that they'll be supported to do so.

Did the Resident Coordinator induction or training process that adequately prepared you for the kinds of tasks that you were required to face?

Actually I never went, because the first induction took place in October when we were in the middle of the facilitation process. Though supporting the RCs on conflict prevention and dialogue is certainly something that the UN needs to think about. Especially for RCs going to countries like Bolivia, where there are frequent political crises. One thing that did prepare me was in fact my experience working in UNICEF. Despite the fact that the mandate is very different from UNDP, in the end I came to the conclusion that the most important role that UNICEF could play was to promote political and public consensus and dialogue around key areas of policy to do with children's health. This also provides an opportunity to bring together a very diverse range of actors. In the end it's a similar negotiation process. The main lesson is that the UN has got a lot more and can do a lot more than we think we can, and we should be ambitious in what we aim for.

KNUT OSTBY, FORMER RESIDENT COORDINATOR IN FIJI AND CURRENT RESIDENT COORDINATOR IN TIMOR-LESTE



Appointed as UN Resident Coordinator and UNDP Resident Representative for the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste in June 2013, Mr. Ostby previously served as UN Resident Coordinator and UNDP Resident Representative in Fiji (2009 to 2013) and Iran (2006 to 2009). During 2005, he was on detailed assignment as Recovery Manager for UNDP in the Maldives and from 2003 to 2005 served with the Evaluation Office. Mr. Ostby was Senior Deputy Resident Representative in Afghanistan (1999 to 2003), Deputy Resident Representative in Kazakhstan (1996 to 1999) and Assistant Resident Representative in Afghanistan (1992 to 1996). He began his career with UNDP in Denmark and went on to be a Junior Professional Office in Malaysia. Before joining UNDP, Mr. Ostby worked in Norway as an Engineer, having graduated from the Norwegian Institute of Technology.

How do you perceive the current political situation in Fiji?

We need to keep in mind that there have been four coups since Independence. The last coup was in 2006 and in 2008/2009 they had an event that some people call 'coup number four and a half', where the same coup makers started to rule by decree. That has continued and the military is backing the decree and is united. There is full control of government by them. The government has taken on some of the traditional non-government institutions that have been powerbrokers in the past, such as trade unions, great council of chiefs, the Methodist church, and they have been seen to have "won" that game in every instance. There seems to be no question of their position of power, there doesn't seem to be any sign of a split within the military (which would be the only reason for a counter coup). There have been a number of criticisms against oppressive behaviour, against lack of freedom of speech, and a few people have been subject to military brutality. I've spoken a number of times with OHCHR and they do not see an increasing trend in human rights violations. The military is relatively frequently in the media making statements on political issues, saying they support this, are against that, and think that the constitution should be like this, and so on. That has not come with a threat of violence but it is obvious that the military is getting more involved.

The constitution making process is finished. There was a relatively well-recognised process of drafting the constitution. However this was set aside by the government because it was unhappy with certain clauses. So before the draft went to the Constituent Assembly it was withdrawn and has been redrafted by the government lawyers. The Constituent Assembly was appointed by the Prime Minister. This version has since been passed into law. There are elections being planned by September 2014, the climate seems to suggest that elections might happen sooner. The way the constitution has been handled, with the reduced space for alternative opinions, makes one suspect that the elections will also be managed. To an extent, it's already happened through a political party decree that has made it very difficult for the political parties to re-register, so you will probably have a limited set of political actors going into the elections. It's too early to say whether the elections will be rigged or not, so that's an open question. There have been requests for the UN to support the election preparations. The request went to DPA and there has been a mission to Fiji, followed by about six months of discussion at the New York level between various UN offices. This ultimately ended up with a letter from DPA being written to the Government saying that decision regarding the requested support will be dependent on how the constitution making process goes, and if there is an independent elections body appointed.

Fiji's position in the region and internationally, at first after the coup had weakened, but it now seems to be strengthening. They were subject to sanctions by Australia, NZ, and partly from the United States. They were suspended by the Commonwealth and the Pacific Islands Forum. They responded to that by seeking alternative alliances, which seems to have succeeded in a certain extent. They have a strong relationship with China and recently announced military cooperation with Russia. They have become the chair of the G77 and recently joined the non-aligned movement, they are the chair of the International Sugar Cooperation, and were vice-president of the previous General Assembly and a number of international organisations. They have reached out sub-regionally to the Melanesian group, taken over the chairmanship and strengthened the organisation. They have constantly been criticised by Australia and NZ, to some extent the EU, Japan, the US, but the criticism from Australia and NZ has become less confrontational in the last year or two. There is a recent initiative from Australia, NZ, and Fiji to exchange high commissioners again after Australia and NZ High-Commissioners were kicked out not once but twice several times a couple of years ago.

What space is there for the UN to engage on domestic political issues? How have you done so?

In 2008, there was a formal mediation initiative where the UN and the Commonwealth had been asked and agreed to provide formal mediation support to the country. That was put on hold in April 2009 when the constitution was abrogated, the official comments for putting it on hold from the UN Secretary-General was that they could no longer be sure that it could be an inclusive process for avoiding a pre-determined result. In parallel to that, there was always going to be a Track 2 process with NGOs, civil society, and so on, to feed into this formal mediation process. The Track 2 work was never suspended or put on hold and DPA was fully supportive of the idea to continue to work on some informal Track 2. We had an ongoing regional project on peace and development, with activities in several countries. There was already a process, with a group of government and non-government people who went out of the country in 2008 to have a dialogue on how to engage better together. That same group, and in particular one of the key government interlocutors, were talking with us for as much as two years until he could get to the point

where we brought them together in some preliminary meetings. There were some preliminary meetings in 2010 where we talked about the possibility of talking and then we were able to launch the roundtable process in 2011 on that basis.

Could you describe the roundtable process in more detail?

The roundtable process, in short, is not the only dialogue process in the country but it is the only one that brings together government and NGO officials at a high level and in an atmosphere where they can speak freely. We put a strong emphasis on a safe space. They should be able to speak out and be able to criticise each other. And they do. We have been able to create an atmosphere where they do that, without becoming too defensive. A little bit of defensiveness is unavoidable but the basic idea is to encourage people to say “I hear you, I don’t agree, but I hear you and I have another point to say”. It’s also important to note that this has not been an attempt to make another mediation effort. There is no formal outcome document, though we have normally written down a few points. It is important that they speak their mind and are not too conscious of being recorded.

It’s also important that we’ve kept it out of the media. After the second and third roundtable we began to convene personalities at certain level that if the media had seen all these personalities at the same place and the same time, there would have been a lot of scrutiny. The media would have made it a big event that they did meet. Because we had people there who had been extremely critical to government and with people who had been seen in the media to officially defend the government position. So, the fact that they met, and met repeatedly, would have created a media event and we had worked hard to keep it out of the media to allow a dialogue to go on. These had been only a small number of meetings, but have had a very high impact when they have happened. In between, there have been a number of smaller group meetings. This group is typically 45 people. The smaller groups have been somewhere between 10 and 15. They have met frequently over lunch or dinner and had the same type of discussion, but of course the discussions have been a bit different because of the number of people involved. The impact of all of this is that people have been able to understand the other side, that people have been able to trigger discussions both within constituencies (within trade unions, within NGO community, or within government) and between some members of each constituency. Some people hadn’t spoken to each other for many years, though they have now begun to talk with each other outside of this group. To create a democracy is a long process. As I said, the political process is now not looking quite as positive as a year ago. To address these issues you have to think many years ahead. The next elections are not so far away, and there will certainly be issues remaining. We believe that this process will help resolve those issues that will remain contentious beyond those elections.

What has your relationship been between yourself and the PDA?

Probably the most important thing was to get the PDA in the first place. That was done by my predecessor. PDAs do different jobs in different countries. In Fiji, the PDA’s most important role has been to facilitate this dialogue process. In other countries, the PDA might formally be helping manage projects, or conducting analytical reporting, or a mixture of both. The PDA has done some of this, but his most important role has been to facilitate these informal contacts with people from all works of life who would participate in this dialogue. It’s a very informal type of work and it is very difficult to measure.

My role as the RC has been to facilitate the PDA’s work. To make sure he has the space to do this, the guidance. We frequently talk about the direction of the dialogue; to prioritise next steps, discuss timing, sequencing, and participation. This strategic direction is important from the RC. The RC also has a role in providing support and helping to manage the at times difficult dynamic between the PDA and other actors, or between the PDA and other UNDP people. Sometimes people wonder, “who is this strange person sitting in the corner doing something that none of us are doing?”. That dynamic needs to be managed carefully. If it’s managed poorly, the PDA could be isolated or could be undermined by others within the UN system, or we could have had difficulties around confidentiality of the whole process. All this requires a very keen sense of how to position this work, and how to manage this work and when to reach out to others in the UN system and when not to reach out. It’s something that you need to have a very keen sense, there is no prescription, and you have to know the situation.

As the Resident Coordinator, what has your role been?

One very important role of the RC is to provide an institutional platform, to ensure things happen in the name of the RC. This gives some protection to non-governmental organisations. We have used this actively and to great success. There are two dimensions to that. One is the protection, to provide a platform where participants feel there is a safe space. There is another dimension and that is the role of the UN as a neutral broker. Not only so participants feel safe in a space, but also so they feel that they are being facilitated by a party that doesn’t take sides. So that’s equally important, and they are inter-related.

What risks have been associated with these roles?

The risks have not been as high perhaps in Fiji as they would have been in other places I have worked but there are still risks. The risks have been obvious, as they are to some extent the opposite of our comparative advantages. The risks would be if we talked too much to one side and were seen to be taking sides. That's probably the biggest risk: the consequences for being seen to have taken sides. We have to talk separately to NGOs, to the government, and then make efforts to bring the sides together. While doing so, if we are perceived to have taken just one side then we will be dead in the water. We would risk, on one hand, being seen by the NGOs or opposition parties to be too government friendly. Then they will lose interest in the process. They will see it just as another meeting organised by the government with the help of some outside facilitators. They will not engage in the process. The other side of the risk with the government is if we are seen to be talking too much to the NGOs. The government then sees as having taken sides against the government. The same thing would happen, the government would lose interest in the process, and they would not engage seriously, they would no longer meaningfully participate. That has been the most difficult dimension so far. The ultimate risk on that is that we could have been kicked out, or our activities formally restricted. If we are seen as working too much with the wrong people we could be seen as interfering with internal affairs, from a political perspective we could be accused of trying incite a counter-coup or something like that. One of the risks we do encounter, is that there is a constant suspicion amongst some government counterparts that we are too NGO friendly. That is, we have not been able to totally avoid that perception with some government interlocutors but then we have many interlocutors in government that trust us fully.

“To create a democracy is a long process. The political process is not looking quite as positive as a year ago. But this is a long term process. To address these issues you have to think many years ahead. The next elections are not so far away, and there will certainly be issues remaining. We believe that the dialogue process supported by the UN will help resolve those issues that remain contentious beyond those elections...”

- KNUT OSTBY

In your capacity as Resident Coordinator, what's been the nature of your interaction with the various stakeholders? How has the PDA complemented this engagement?

Most of the time the PDA has identified or picked up contacts, picked up on political developments, and we have been able to decide when it would be appropriate for us to take a step in this direction or that direction. The PDA has typically made the initial contacts, and then we have followed up from my side to have more formal, institutionalised engagements. Very rarely has it been the other way around that I have made the initial contacts. When we organise smaller group meetings, I make sure that I am present. Institutionally, it is important. I also participate in the meetings. While we try to have a facilitated dialogue with the Fijian actors, and try to say less ourselves. I do try and help framing the conversation and create a safe atmosphere. These are the roles I have played, as an RC.

How can Resident Coordinators be better supported to play these types of roles?

The support from UNDP/BCPR's conflict prevention team has been very unique, they have engaged directly. They have participated at some of the in-country events and have been very good dialogue partners to help us brainstorm on key issues. DPA has also been good partners in this regard. It has worked well. I have been bothered sometimes by the lack of active collaboration between the mainstream UNDP and DPA. UNDP has many different bureaux. It seems to me that overall, we would benefit from a stronger dialogue between UNDP and DPA at large. That's easier said than done, because in some countries (not in Fiji) UNDP and DPA, there is competition within the UN, sometimes for funds, sometimes for attention of the actors. In our case, we have been able to have a unified approach. This has happened through frequent discussions about options available, and through working together. There have been a couple of cases where there has been a statement delivered by the Secretary-General and drafted by DPA where we were not duly informed in time. That should not happen, we should be consulted. While this hasn't led to backlash at a national level, it easily could have been. Similarly, when UNDP tries to do programming or politically oriented activities, it is important that UNDP take the time to consult DPA.

How can Resident Coordinators be better supported, whether it be through the induction or through mentoring?

The RCs go through an induction course, though I do not recall whether DPA were present. I think it is important to have them do that. The problem with the RC induction is that the RC is supposed to do everything, but you cannot cover all the issues in one or two weeks. So, there have been some events where BCPR, BDP, or DPA have convened countries in special situations, where RCs have discussed how to deal with countries where there are no political missions. These events have been very good. The problem is that they are very expensive to organise. So I haven't been to one of those for a long time. But that is one of the only realistic ways of bringing RCs together and encouraging learning. You cannot do it fully by induction, or fully through email correspondence. You have to do it through face-to-face workshops. There are two types: one has been specifically organised around the PDA process, there are many good resource persons within that group. There has also been gatherings organised through UNDP/BDP, who have convened countries in complicated governance situations, and I think that is also very important. The different angle is that the RC/PDA meetings are more practical. The BDP gatherings have been more analytical, how do we focus on what's working, what's not working, and so on. We do need both, and that has been one of my thoughts for a long time. But it is important to have everyone involved, and that the RCs are then linked up with them. These are issues with no ready-made solution, we need to continue discussing them and sharing experiences.

Do you think mentoring or peer-to-peer support could also be useful?

Yes, I think that's a good idea. When I want advice on a very tricky problem I would often contact another RC or somebody who has been an RC for advice. I think I could predictably find practical advice. I would seek other kinds of advice through more formal mechanisms. There is a lot of this going on, we have regional meetings annually when the RCs meet with each other annually and exchange experiences, and so on. But we need to find ways of building on this, and it's not through formal, email list-servs and things like this. We have so many of those already. We are bombarded by information and emails all the time. But we can probably do a little bit more than what we do, but I wouldn't expect it to solve all the problems, but rather be a contribution.

Generally speaking, what role do you think the UN, and Resident Coordinators in particular, can have in complex political situations?

It is important to be familiar with the local context and have a network of important contacts, with both the government and civil society. We need to be invited to play a central role in conflict resolution, by all the parties involved, and this invitation will only come if we have an established track record as a competent partner who can be trusted with such a sensitive task. Depending on the circumstances and the requirements expressed by the parties, we could be participating as observers, facilitators, mediators and advisors. The RC can offer the range of competencies and resources available through the UN country team and coordinate UN assistance to better achieve the expected results.

Contact Information:

Coordinator, Technical Committee of the Joint UNDP-DPA Programme on Building National Capacities for Conflict Prevention.

UNDP/ Bureau for Crisis Prevention and Recovery (BCPR),

New York, NY 10017

Email: bcpr.jp@undp.org

