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Programme questions: evaluation

Evaluation of the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs

Report of the Office of Internal Oversight Services

Summary

The Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) assessed the relevance, efficiency and effectiveness of the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs conflict prevention work in, and in support to, non-mission settings, with a primary focus on the Department's regional divisions, which have key responsibility for its conflict prevention mandate. The evaluation was conducted using surveys, interviews, case studies, on-site visits, direct observation, document reviews, an assessment of 155 Department analytical outputs, an analysis of Department correspondence log data and secondary data analyses.

The Department work programme was well aligned with its conflict prevention mandate; its workplans, activities and staff competencies were highly relevant to its conflict prevention objectives, although it lacked a more proactive and strategic approach to its conflict prevention work. The Department has made effective use of its mediation and preventive diplomacy tools and effectively contributed to conflict prevention when key enabling factors such as strong political will, leadership and cohesive international support were in place. The Department has leveraged its partnerships effectively within the United Nations system to implement its conflict prevention activities, but partnerships with regional organizations and civil society organizations have varied.

* The dates for the substantive session are tentative.

** [E/AC.51/2021/1](#).



The core component of Department conflict prevention work – its political analyses – have been generally timely and of good quality and have contributed to conflict prevention efforts. These analyses have been responsive to user needs and demonstrated a clear understanding of country and regional level contexts. However, their use in supporting decision-making with regard to conflict prevention has been uneven.

Shortcomings in regional division integration, work processes and knowledge management had created challenges to efficient achievement of conflict prevention goals at the time of the evaluation. Integration with the Department of Peace Operations was uneven, but where it had occurred, stronger analyses had been performed. In addition, the Department was challenged by a culture that is perceived as being hierarchical and lacking innovation.

OIOS makes four important recommendations to the Department:

- (a) Strengthen management culture and communications;
- (b) Establish a mechanism for staff to anonymously voice different viewpoints on political analyses;
- (c) Establish a strategy for addressing hindering factors to conflict prevention;
- (d) Strengthen its external partnerships.

Contents

	<i>Page</i>
I. Introduction and objective	4
II. Background	4
III. Methodology	5
IV. Evaluation results	6
A. The work programme of the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs was well aligned with its conflict prevention mandate	6
B. The Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs effectively contributed to conflict prevention, particularly through mediation and preventive diplomacy, when key enabling factors, such as strong political will, leadership and cohesive international support, were in place	8
C. While the political analyses of the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, a core component of its conflict prevention work, have been generally timely and of good quality, their use in supporting decision-making around conflict prevention has been uneven	11
D. Partnerships with United Nations entities have played a positive role in the conflict prevention engagements of the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, while those with regional organizations and civil society have varied	14
E. Shortcomings in regional division integration, work processes and knowledge management have created challenges to the efficient achievement of conflict prevention goals	17
V. Conclusion	20
VI. Recommendations	20
Annex	
Comments received from the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs	22

I. Introduction and objective

1. The overall objective of the evaluation was to determine, as systematically and objectively as possible, the relevance, efficiency and effectiveness of Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs conflict prevention work in, and in support of, non-mission settings, with a primary focus on the Department's regional divisions, which have key responsibility for its conflict prevention mandate. The evaluation did not cover the Decolonization Unit and the Division for Palestinian Rights. The evaluation topic emerged from a scoping process described in the evaluation inception paper (internal Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) report IED-19-011). The evaluation was conducted in conformity with norms and standards for evaluation in the United Nations system.¹

2. OIOS sought the comments of Department management on the draft report, which were taken into account in the final report. The formal response is provided in the annex.

II. Background

Mandate

3. The Department was created in January 2019 as part of the United Nations peace and security reform, endorsed in General Assembly resolution [72/199](#). The Department combines the functions of the former Department of Political Affairs and the Peacebuilding Support Office and shares its regional divisions with the Department of Peace Operations. The direction of the programme is provided in Assembly resolutions and Security Council mandates.

4. The Department mandate is to be responsible for all Secretariat matters related to the prevention, management and resolution of conflicts at the global level ([A/75/6 \(Sect. 3\)](#)). It is the Organization's main entity for good offices, political analysis, mediation, electoral assistance, peacebuilding support and political guidance as they relate to preventive diplomacy, peacemaking, peacebuilding and sustaining peace (*ibid.*).

5. The Department manages and oversees 36 special political missions, including three regional offices: the United Nations Regional Office for Central Africa, the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel and the United Nations Regional Centre for Preventive Diplomacy for Central Asia.

Leadership and resources

6. The Department is headed by an Under-Secretary-General and four Assistant Secretaries-General, three of whom are shared with the Department of Peace Operations: for Africa; for Europe, Central Asia and Americas; and for the Middle East, Asia and the Pacific. The fourth Assistant Secretary-General also heads the Peacebuilding Support Office.

7. The Department falls under the political affairs programme budget of the United Nations regular budget. The total resources for the Department budget in 2019 was \$83,885.2 million, \$46,041.2 million of which was funded by assessed contributions (including \$3,376.9 million for the Peacebuilding Support Office) and \$37,884 were funded by voluntary contributions. While funding for the Department and the former Department of Political Affairs from the regular budget slowly declined in the period

¹ See United Nations Evaluation Group, *Norms and Standards for Evaluation* (New York, 2016).

covered in the present evaluation, 2014–2019, the Department had to rely increasingly on extrabudgetary resources to carry out its mandates.

8. Through its multi-year appeal, the former Department of Political Affairs received \$35.6 million in 2018 in funding from 30 donors to support United Nations capacities and partners at Headquarters and in the field through the deployment of short-term staff and technical expertise. The Peacebuilding Fund, managed by the Peacebuilding Support Office, also mobilizes donor funding and raised and allocated \$928 million to 54 countries since its creation, in 2006. In 2018, the Fund supported 96 projects in 40 countries with \$183 million for the purpose of sustaining peace.²

9. In the period 2018–2019, the Department had 339 posts at Headquarters, 59 funded through extrabudgetary resources. In addition to occupying posts at Headquarters, more than 4,000 staff work in political and peacebuilding missions worldwide.

Conflict prevention

10. Conflict prevention encompasses a wide range of activities to prevent the outbreak, escalation, continuation and recurrence of conflict. Such efforts to sustain peace also include addressing underlying conditions that contribute to conflict. In the present evaluation, the Inspection and Evaluation Division of OIOS assessed the Department's work in conflict prevention within this broad context.

11. The Department's conflict prevention work was defined in the present evaluation as comprising the following:

- *Analysis, early warning and advice*: sustained monitoring and analysis of political developments across the globe, detecting potential crises early on and advising the Secretary-General, who may subsequently bring them to the attention of the Security Council
- *Preventive diplomacy*: engagements under the good offices of the Secretary-General to avert disputes from arising between parties, to stop those disputes from escalating into violence, and to limit their spread when they do
- *Mediation*: advice on mediation and experts deployed to mediation initiatives globally and support to local mediation processes

12. While supporting all the Sustainable Development Goals, the Department contributes to Goal 16 (peaceful and inclusive societies) through its work on inclusive constitutional processes, national dialogues and peaceful elections, and to Goal 5 (gender equality) by increasing support for the inclusion of women in peacemaking, conflict prevention and political participation.

III. Methodology

13. The evaluation covers the period 2017–2019 and employed a mixed-method approach featuring the following qualitative and quantitative data sources:

(a) Interviews: 101 semi-structured interviews with Department staff and partners in field locations and headquarters;

² More information is available at www.un.org/peacebuilding/fund.

(b) Surveys: a web-based survey of all Headquarters and key field Department staff,^{3,4} and a web-based survey of key internal and external partners, including other United Nations entities, resident coordinators, regional organizations and civil society organizations;⁵

(c) Case studies: three country case studies entailing on-site data collection (Burundi, Jordan and Solomon Islands) and three entailing desk reviews (Burkina Faso, Honduras and Madagascar);

(d) Direct observations of 11 meetings, including internal and cross-system meetings;

(e) External expert assessment of 155 Department analytical outputs;

(f) Document reviews of after-action reviews, lessons learned, Department annual reports, workplans, job descriptions, knowledge management products and partnership documents;

(g) Analysis of Department correspondence log data;

(h) Assessment of organizational culture;

(i) Secondary analysis of Department programme data.

14. The evaluation faced the following limitations:

(a) The difficulty of measurement of conflict prevention outcomes and their attribution to the Department or the United Nations system;⁶

(b) The dynamic nature of ongoing reforms in the peace and security and development pillars.

The Inspection and Evaluation Division of OIOS mitigated the limitations by examining the Department's contribution to conflict prevention efforts, using case studies as illustrative examples, and assessing the early results of reform.

15. The Inspection and Evaluation Division wishes to thank the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs for its cooperation throughout the evaluation.

IV. Evaluation results

A. The work programme of the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs was well aligned with its conflict prevention mandate

The Department's workplans, activities and staff competencies were highly relevant to its conflict prevention objectives

16. In the Strategic Plan 2016–2019 of the former Department of Political Affairs, a vision for meeting its conflict prevention mandate was clearly articulated as to promote the search for, and assist countries in reaching, inclusive political solutions as the key to preventing or resolving conflicts and political violence. Accordingly, the

³ Excluding the Division for Palestinian Rights and the Decolonization Unit.

⁴ The staff survey was deployed 9–20 September 2019 and sent to 469 staff members; 184 responded, a 39.2 per cent response rate.

⁵ The partner survey was deployed 4–18 October 2019 and sent to 544 staff; 178 responded, a 32.7 per cent response rate.

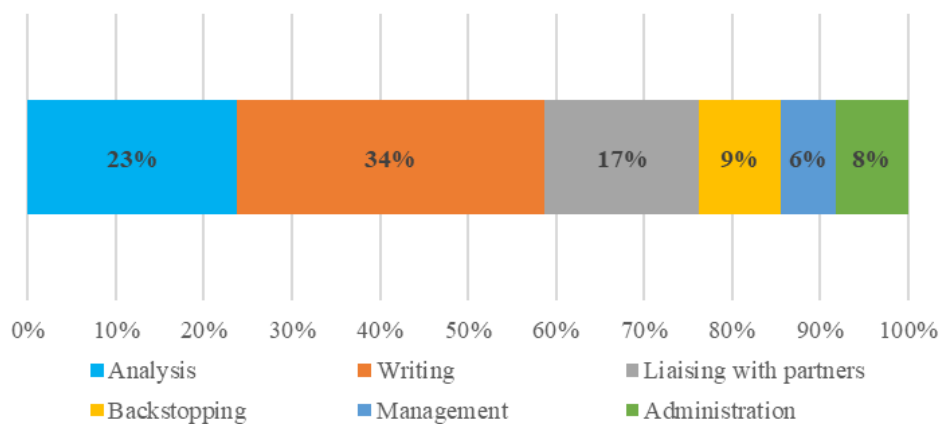
⁶ The evaluation was unable to assess discreet efforts, or “quiet diplomacy”, undertaken during the assessment period.

plan's first strategic goal was strengthening international peace and security through inclusive prevention, mediation and peacebuilding processes.⁷

17. Within the context of the Department's Strategic Plan, its workplans and activities were well aligned with its conflict prevention mandate. An analysis of division workplans indicated several relevant activities, including providing political analysis to senior management; providing technical assistance to Members States; and engaging in early warning activities, such as alerting the Executive Committee, the Peacebuilding Commission and the Security Council to emerging crises.⁸ Regional division staff surveyed reported having spent most of their time (at least 65 per cent) on primary conflict prevention activities, including analysis, writing and backstopping (see figure I). That amount represented an increase from 2006, when, through an OIOS evaluation, it was found that desk officers had devoted less than 45 per cent of their time to similar activities.⁹

Figure I

Department regional division staff reported spending at least 65 per cent of their time on primary conflict prevention activities of analysis, writing and backstopping¹⁰



Source: OIOS survey of Department staff.

18. Department staff also had the necessary skills and competencies to conduct the activities. Department job postings required political affairs officers to have a degree in a field related to conflict prevention and experience with conflict analysis or resolution, and Department job descriptions required staff to regularly collect, coordinate and analyse political information. The overall good quality of Department conflict prevention analyses (discussed in result C) showed that staff had clear understandings of complex contexts and were able to communicate them to users. In

⁷ See Department of Political Affairs, "Strategic Plan 2016–2019", available at https://dppa.un.org/sites/default/files/dpa_strategic_plan_2016-2019.pdf. The Department is developing a plan for 2020–2022.

⁸ This is the principal-level Executive Committee, established to assist the Secretary-General in taking decisions on issues of strategic consequence requiring principal-level attention.

⁹ See E/AC.51/2006/4. The activities included monitoring, research and writing.

¹⁰ The activities include: analysis – monitoring, collecting and analysing data from various sources; writing – preparing and writing background notes, briefings, reports, talking points and memos; and backstopping – supporting special political missions and field presences. Liasing with partners includes time related to conflict prevention.

addition, in internal meetings, staff were observed to knowledgeably engage in complex conflict prevention discussions.

The Department lacked a more proactive and strategic approach to its conflict prevention work

19. The need to address emerging conflict hotspots immediately meant that the Department was often more reactive than proactive. A reactive approach has meant less time for monitoring and early warning; staff surveyed reported less than 12 per cent of their overall time on monitoring. Some partners who had received conflict prevention analysis indicated that the analyses were at times not sufficiently strategic. Furthermore, fewer than half of Department job postings included recommending solutions/possible actions as an expected responsibility, and many positions did not include “early warning” among the responsibilities.

20. Conflict prevention priorities were sometimes unclear. While division workplans were aligned with Department goals and targets, division-specific priorities for contributing to the targets were not clear.

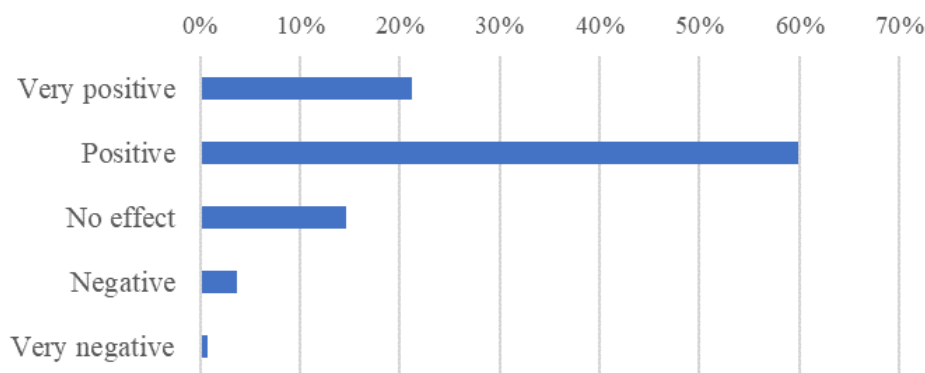
B. The Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs effectively contributed to conflict prevention, particularly through mediation and preventive diplomacy, when key enabling factors, such as strong political will, leadership and cohesive international support, were in place

The Department has contributed effectively to conflict prevention efforts overall

21. Partners have assessed the Department’s overall conflict prevention work positively. Most partners surveyed (81 per cent) reported that the Department had a positive impact on prevention in their respective countries (see figure II), highlighting the Department’s effective contributions through its mediation support, convening power and on-the-ground presence. Partners interviewed also had generally positive assessments of Department contributions to conflict prevention. Several noted the increasingly regional dimension of conflict, and that peace and security reform and the development of several regional strategies in 2018 and 2019 facilitated more cohesive regional approaches.

Figure II

Partners rated Department contributions to conflict prevention in their countries positively

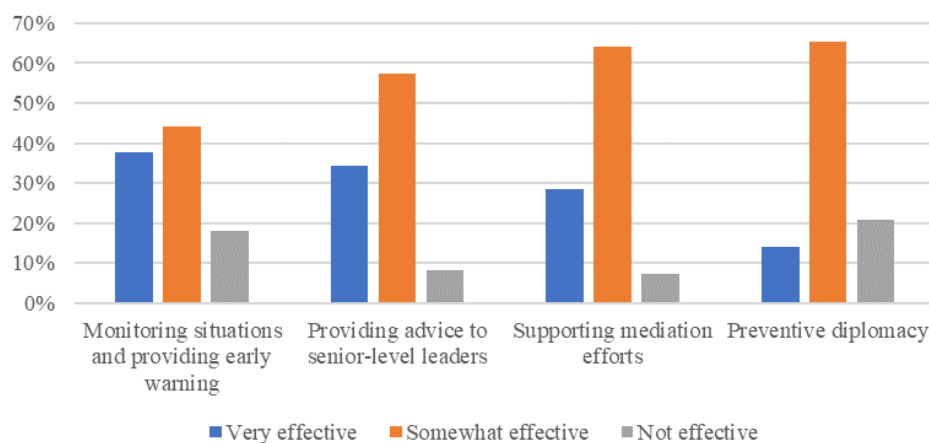


Source: OIOS survey of Department partners.

22. Most staff surveyed (69 per cent) rated the overall quality of the Department's conflict prevention work as excellent or good. Of all the activities assessed, supporting mediation efforts was rated the highest (see figure III).¹¹ Staff surveyed volunteered engagement in 38 specific country situations, including 21 in West Africa, as positive examples of conflict prevention. They most frequently mentioned the Gambia, Madagascar and Papua New Guinea as scenarios in which Department engagement contributed to positive outcomes, corresponding to findings from external assessments noted in paragraph 28 below. Most staff interviewed characterized the overall conflict prevention contributions of the Department positively.

Figure III

Staff assessed the Department positively overall in conflict prevention



Source: OIOS survey of Department staff.

23. Intra-Department partnerships supported the regional divisions with specific technical capacities in conflict prevention. The regional divisions highlighted the Policy and Mediation Division and the Electoral Assistance Division as the two entities with which they worked most regularly on prevention. As illustrated in the case studies for Honduras, Madagascar and Solomon Islands, both divisions played key roles.

The Department made effective use of its mediation and preventive diplomacy tools, in particular to convene conflict prevention actors in numerous contexts

24. The Department contributed effectively in conflict prevention contexts by facilitating dialogue among key conflict actors. In these situations, the Department played a key role in creating a safe and neutral space for different political and rival groups to come together who otherwise may not have done so. In some cases, its presence provided a secure environment within which to arbitrate political differences.

25. Four of the six country case studies demonstrated effective contributions to national dialogue processes and political transitions. In Honduras, the Department supported the Resident Coordinator and deployed a member of the standby team of experts to facilitate a dialogue process between political parties in the wake of an electoral crisis, which ultimately led to reduced violence and a set of

¹¹ While staff reported spending less time on monitoring (see para. 21 of the present report), they rated the effectiveness of the activity as generally positive.

recommendations for future action. In Madagascar, the Special Adviser worked closely with the African Union and the Southern African Development Community to engage with political actors to defuse an electoral crisis, resulting in national dialogue and peaceful presidential and legislative elections in 2019. In Solomon Islands, Peacebuilding Fund projects to support national dialogue brought together ethnic groups whose tensions had been exacerbated by land use disputes and helped to bring marginalized groups, such as women and young people, into the peace process. In Burundi, the Department supported a five-round dialogue process between the government and opposition parties, facilitated by the East African Community.

26. Other recent internal and external assessments¹² highlighted effective Department mediation and preventive diplomacy engagement in Colombia, El Salvador, the Gambia and Papua New Guinea. For example, in Papua New Guinea, the Department supported implementation of the Bougainville Peace Agreement, and in the Gambia, preventive diplomacy efforts facilitated a peaceful political transition. Staff surveyed also highlighted the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel Special Representative of the Secretary-General role as an example of effective good offices.

Conflict prevention efforts have been most effective when enabled by strong political will, strong leadership at the senior level within the Department and the United Nations and cohesive international support

27. The successes noted above have been enabled by several factors. They include the following external factors, over which the Department has less control:

- (a) Political will of host governments and other relevant national and regional actors;
- (b) Cohesion of the Security Council, where applicable.

The factors also include the following internal factors, over which the Department has more control:

- (a) Strong leadership at the senior level within the Department and United Nations;
- (b) Strong partnerships within the United Nations system.

The factors were identified as critical in the country case studies, noted by many staff interviewed and surveyed and highlighted in Department lessons learned and After Action Reviews.

28. Department conflict prevention in more complex conflict prevention scenarios produced mixed outcomes, as illustrated in the case studies for Burkina Faso and Burundi. In Burundi, the Special Envoy supported a dialogue process led by the East African Community, which resulted in five rounds of dialogue between the ruling party and exiled opposition parties. The process was stalled when the ruling party did not participate in the fifth round and took steps to consolidate power. The Special Envoy and his office had little further recourse owing to the subsidiarity principle¹³ and effectively lost access to the government. Stakeholders noted that the presence of the office and the keeping of Burundi on the Security Council agenda helped to mitigate the potential for future conflict. In Burkina Faso, an increase in violent

¹² They include annual reports on, and updates to, the Department's multi-year appeal; the evaluation of the Strategic Plan 2016–2019 of the former Department of Political Affairs; and United Nations University studies on Department preventive diplomacy efforts.

¹³ Stated in this principle is that sustainable peace is more likely if the conflict resolution process is led by actors culturally, geographically or strategically close to the issue. For more information, see http://cmi.fi/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Principle_of_Subsidiarity_ECCAS_CMI_English.pdf.

extremism, fuelled by foreign non-State groups, escalated in 2019. The Department worked to mobilize international community resources to support the government in curtailing escalation and fostering social cohesion.

Staff and partners identified further opportunities for strengthening the Department's conflict prevention work

29. Staff most often pointed to the need to change an organizational culture defined by rigidity and excessive caution as a way to improve the Department's conflict prevention work (discussed further in result E). A key theme emphasized by many staff and partners was a need for bolder engagement with Member States and partners. A partner interviewed shared the view that the Organization could be bolder and more candid when analysing the interests of the regional and big powers and when addressing larger power dynamics. Lastly, many partners and several staff interviewed and surveyed suggested that greater engagement across pillars, and in particular with development actors, would better address structural drivers of conflict and permit more holistic and multipronged approaches to more challenging contexts; some noted that increased work with human rights partners would strengthen early warning. In this regard, the Peacebuilding Fund did support several early warning projects in Burkina Faso, Guinea and the Niger.

C. While the political analyses of the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, a core component of its conflict prevention work, have been generally timely and of good quality, their use in supporting decision-making around conflict prevention has been uneven

The Department produced analyses that were generally timely and responsive to user needs

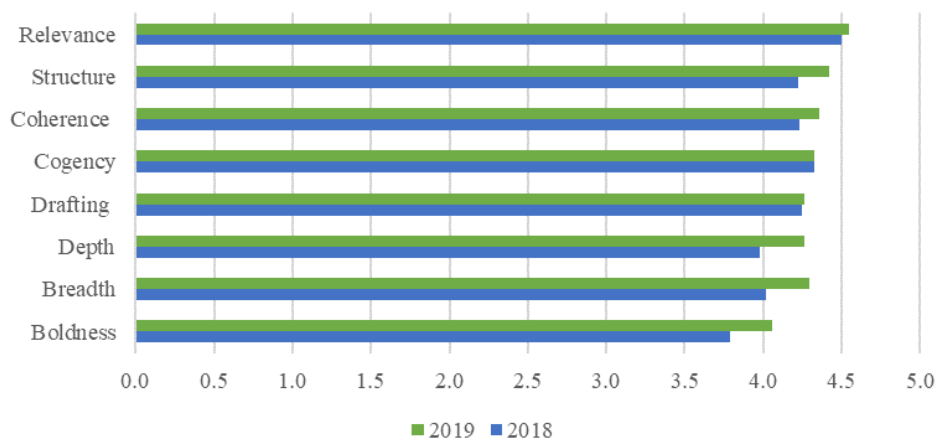
30. Department analyses were produced in a timely manner, often in response to requests or for planned meetings. Partners surveyed gave high ratings of the timeliness of analysis, with 75 per cent rating it as good or excellent. Many partners and most staff interviewed also believed that timeliness was adequate.

31. Analyses were also largely perceived to be responsive to user needs. Twenty-three per cent of partners surveyed responded that their needs had been met to a great extent, while 52 per cent said that their needs had been met to some extent. An analysis of Department correspondence log data showed high responsiveness: 50 per cent of requests were tasked immediately, and 90 per cent were tasked within five minutes. The median amount of time to close or complete requests was 4.6 days.

The Department produced good-quality analyses that demonstrated a clear understanding of country- and regional-level contexts

32. An external expert assessment of a sample of Department analysis documents from 2018 and 2019 showed that the Department produced good-quality products overall, with an average rating of four on a five-point scale. Figure IV shows the average rating for each of the eight assessment criteria. Quality has improved slightly since the pre-reform period in 2018.

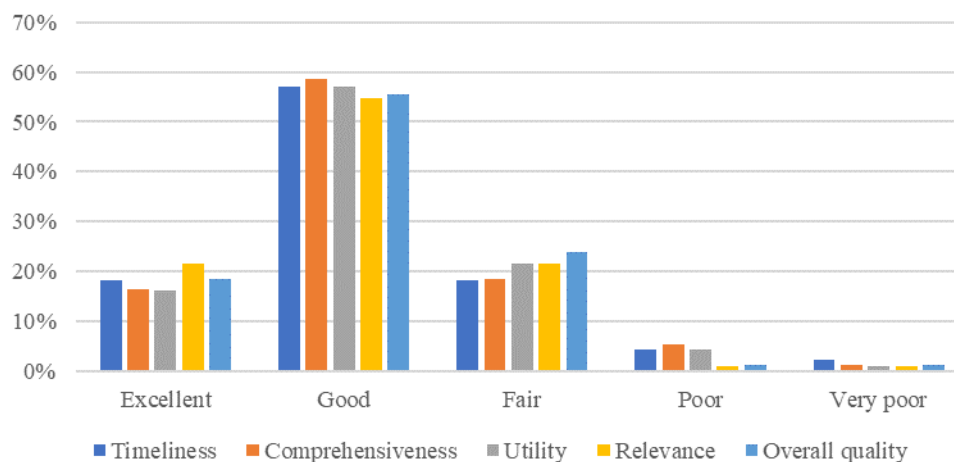
Figure IV
The overall quality of Department analyses in 2018 and 2019 was good



Source: OIOS analysis and assessment of conflict prevention document sample.

33. Staff and partner assessments of analysis quality were largely positive. Seventy-four per cent of partners (see figure V) and 73 per cent of staff surveyed rated analysis quality as good or excellent. Partners rated analyses highest on relevance, and one third noted that analyses had improved following reform.

Figure V
Partners gave positive ratings to the quality of Department analyses



Source: OIOS survey of Department partners.

34. Notwithstanding an overall good rating, boldness¹⁴ was the lowest-ranked of the assessed criteria, in line with staff perceptions as well. Staff interviewed and surveyed commonly expressed frustrations with the limiting effect of political sensitivities and being asked to be less bold in criticizing Member States. The most common improvement that staff suggested for producing more useful and rigorous analyses was for these to have greater boldness and increased visibility, as also noted in

¹⁴ Defined as “noting policy implications, Member State power dynamics and/or client interest”.

paragraph 31 above. However, Department staff also appreciated the need to be cautious in their work, given the political sensitivities noted above. Staff noted the risks of leaks of sensitive information.

Analyses have lacked more integrated assessments

35. The integration of analyses has left room for improvement. Partners surveyed and interviewed noted a need for improved coordination across the system and across pillars to produce more integrated analyses; they highlighted work with the development pillar as an area in which increased collaboration was needed to produce more holistic scenarios of emerging crises. Insufficient linkages with field staff producing analyses were also identified as a risk. In Jordan, for example, Amman-based staff had little to no input in talking points for the visits of United Nations senior-level staff, posing a risk for cohesive messaging with government counterparts. Some staff interviewed noted their frustration with format constraints on their analyses – in particular, a one-page limit and the requirement to include action points – which they believed reduced their ability to provide in-depth analysis. It should be noted, however, that not all one-page analyses contained analysis, and some were intended to serve only informational purposes. While senior Department managers and the Executive Office of the Secretary-General staff expressed their appreciation for the clarity and efficiency resulting from the requirements, staff voiced concerns about their inability, within the constraints, to flag important issues that may not require immediate action but should be on decision makers' radar.

Despite some positive examples of good analyses contributing to conflict prevention, their use for decision-making at senior levels has been mixed and not always clearly understood

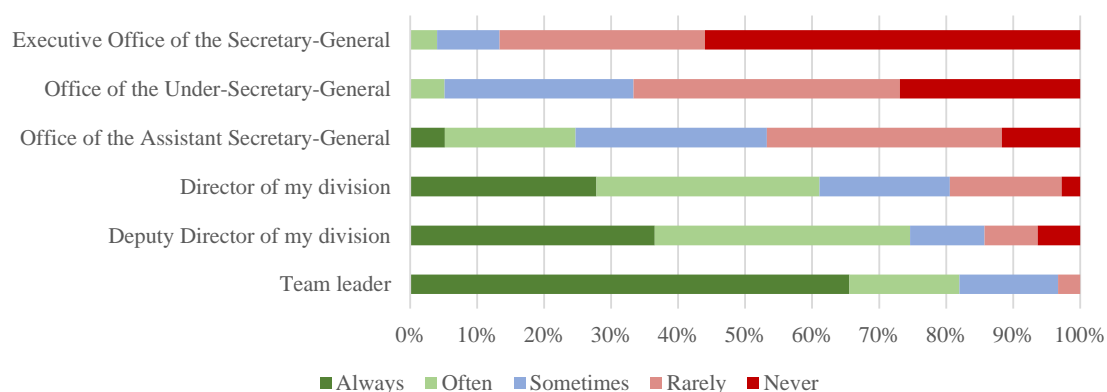
36. Good analyses have contributed to effective conflict prevention engagement in a number of contexts. Observation and interviews with participants confirmed that analyses were used effectively in regional monthly reviews, as well as in meetings of the Executive Committee and the Deputies Committee, the main mechanisms for escalating country-level situations for senior leadership action. Those settings were also examples of cross-pillar collaboration, given that regional monthly reviews were co-chaired by the Department and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and included Headquarters and field partners from humanitarian and human rights system entities. Furthermore, all six case studies provided examples of analyses being used to support conflict prevention engagement. In one example, the work of the Office of the Special Envoy for Burundi formed the basis of Special Envoy briefings to the Security Council. In Honduras, Department political analyses played a primary role in guiding the dialogue effort. In Solomon Islands, a conflict and development analysis and national perceptions survey on peacebuilding provided critical inputs to Peacebuilding Fund projects.

37. Notwithstanding the positive examples provided above, however, some staff interviewed said that the overall large volume of information produced had been underutilized. When asked whether they used Department analyses in decision-making, 72 per cent of partners responded that they did, to some or a great extent. However, in interviews, Executive Office of the Secretary-General staff, who are key users, provided mixed responses on the utility of analyses received from the Department. Their responses corresponded to Department staff perceptions that the Executive Office relied less on the Department than on its own in-house resources for political and prevention analysis and information.

38. A lack of feedback on their analyses contributed to a lack of understanding among Department staff of how their work could best meet the information needs of senior leaders and be the most helpful for decision-making. Most Department staff

interviewed reported that they had received no feedback from their Office of the Under-Secretary-General or the Executive Office of the Secretary-General, and several noted that, during the period under review, they had rarely been invited to join senior-level meetings or to participate in high-level visits, as was the practice in the past, meaning in turn that they did not always understand the context of analysis requests. Staff surveyed reported the same issue; 85 per cent had received little or no feedback from the Executive Office of the Secretary-General, and 65 per cent had received little or no feedback from the Office of the Under-Secretary-General (see figure VI). The lack of feedback and access to high-level meetings, they argued, raised the risk of producing information that was less well tailored to the needs of senior leaders. Senior Department staff noted, however, that not all information could be shared with staff at all levels, given the political sensitivity of the information.

Figure VI
Staff reported rarely or never receiving feedback from senior managers on analyses¹⁵



Source: OIOS survey of Department staff.

D. Partnerships with United Nations entities have played a positive role in the conflict prevention engagements of the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, while those with regional organizations and civil society have varied

The Department effectively leveraged its partnerships within the United Nations system to implement its conflict prevention activities

39. Department strategic documents highlight the importance of partnerships as key to prevention, conflict resolution and peacebuilding,¹⁶ and within the United Nations, these have generally worked well. Overall, Department staff viewed United Nations system partnerships favourably: 98 per cent of staff surveyed said that these partnerships facilitated their conflict prevention work. This sentiment was reciprocated by the Department's United Nations partners surveyed, 70 per cent of whom rated their partnerships with the Department as good or excellent. Partnerships, in particular with United Nations entities, were featured in almost all OIOS-observed meetings.

¹⁵ Responders were asked about the average frequency of feedback provided on all conflict prevention analyses. It was not assumed that all such analyses reached all levels of Department management.

¹⁶ See Department of Political Affairs, "Strategic Plan 2016–2019".

40. United Nations partners surveyed and interviewed indicated several ways in which their partnership with the Department had had a positive impact on conflict prevention. First, the Department provided comprehensive and high-quality analyses: three quarters of United Nations partners reported that it had met their analytical needs in this regard. In addition, the Department had engaged effectively with partners for cohesive engagement at the field level. For example, in Honduras, the Department and the Resident Coordinator worked with the UNDP Resident Representative to facilitate political dialogue, resulting in members of opposing parties speaking to each other for the first time. In Solomon Islands, a strong partnership with the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women facilitated the participation of women in peacebuilding dialogues.

The Joint Programme with the United Nations Development Programme has been a particularly effective United Nations system partnership

41. The Department has established an effective partnership with UNDP through the Joint UNDP-Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs Programme on Building National Capacities for Conflict Prevention. The programme was reconfigured in 2018 to provide a more coherent and strategic approach to conflict prevention, as well as improved knowledge-sharing in the context of peace and security and development reform and ensuring a continuous link to resident coordinators. In 2019, the Joint Programme deployed 49 Peace and Development Advisers to work with Resident Coordinators and United Nations country teams to connect the development and peace and security pillars in-country by providing political and conflict analysis and supporting conflict-sensitive programme design. Staff and partners interviewed expressed near universal praise for the Peace and Development Adviser programme as a key tool for improved analysis, field-level information and strengthened system-wide collaboration. The Joint Programme also contributed to addressing gender issues in conflict prevention: 84 per cent of Peace and Development Advisers surveyed reported supporting the participation of women and youth in their activities.

42. Several case studies provided specific examples of ways in which the Department had leveraged the Joint Programme effectively. In Honduras, it was utilized to build strong relationships with UNDP, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and others to support work on prevention. In Jordan, the Peace and Development Adviser outlined a plan of action for the United Nations country team to undertake coordination for better analysis of risk factors to develop an early warning system and collate conflict risk and responses under a single, Sustainable Development Goal-aligned framework. Peace and Development Advisers were instrumental in identifying the need for and initiating the launch of the Peacebuilding Fund projects in Solomon Islands.

While there is no formal framework for Department and resident coordinator engagement, these partnerships have shown some promise in enhancing the Department's conflict prevention work

43. While development system reform has repositioned the resident coordinator role to represent the Secretary-General at the country level and act on behalf of the entire Organization, there is no formal framework for the Department and resident coordinator engagement and resident coordinator involvement in conflict prevention has been somewhat unclear. Most Resident Coordinators surveyed were uncertain as to how much prevention engagement to undertake with governments and how to utilize Department support most effectively in such engagement. Similarly, some Department staff interviewed indicated uncertainty regarding how much information to share, when and with whom.

44. Resident Coordinators and Department staff reported some success in the context of their new relationship. One third of Resident Coordinators surveyed reported improved relations with the Department since the reform, primarily as a result of better communication and sharing of information. In this regard, Resident Coordinators expressed appreciation for their receipt of more support from Headquarters, and Department staff appreciated having a presence on the ground that contributed to informing their analysis. There were several examples of effective partnerships between the Department and Resident Coordinators. In Honduras, South Sudan and Sri Lanka, the Resident Coordinators' political experience and acumen contributed to a positive relationship with the Department and more effective conflict prevention engagement.

Partnerships with regional organizations have been more mixed in contributing to conflict prevention

45. Although regional and subregional organizations were important prevention partners for the Department, the effectiveness of such partnerships was uneven. The strongest regional partnership for the Department was with the African Union, as codified through the Joint United Nations-African Union Framework for Enhanced Partnership in Peace and Security, the first of its kind. The framework outlined an extensive number of cooperation mechanisms for preventing and mediating conflict, responding to conflict, addressing root causes and reviewing and enhancing partnerships. Staff interviewed most frequently cited the African Union as an effective regional partner. An example of such effectiveness is found in Madagascar, where a cohesive approach of the African Union, the South African Development Community and the United Nations yielded positive outcomes in preventing further electoral and political crises. Staff interviewed noted other regional and subregional organizations, including the Caribbean Community and the Economic Community of West African States, that had worked effectively with the Department on conflict prevention. When the partnerships worked well, the Department was able to leverage the comparative advantages offered by regional and subregional organizations, specifically their field presence, local knowledge, networks and influence.

46. Notwithstanding the positive examples noted above, several constraining factors contributed to overall mixed effectiveness of regional partnerships. One factor was the limited or undefined structure of the partnership: a review of 10 United Nations partnership agreements with regional and subregional organizations found that 7 of them explicitly discussed coordination and cooperation on conflict prevention, but only 3 were specific to the Department. In interviews, some staff expressed that, without a Department-specific memorandum of understanding, they found it difficult to know how to best support or engage with regional organizations. Another factor contributing to mixed effectiveness was a lack of relevant capacity in some regional organizations. In some cases – including those of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, the East African Community and the League of Arab States – the key regional or subregional partner had a primarily economic focus and/or was less operational or equipped for a prevention role. Lastly, not all regional or subregional partners were perceived to be the neutral brokers required for prevention efforts.

Partnerships with civil society organizations have been more ad hoc

47. While the Peacebuilding Support Office has regular engagements with civil society organizations and provided nearly \$12.9 million in Peacebuilding Fund funds for civil society organization conflict prevention work, the Department approach to engagement with civil society organizations has been ad hoc and has lacked a strategic departmental approach, which was illustrated in the varied civil society organization

engagement across the six case studies. In Burundi and Honduras, civil society participation in dialogue and mediation processes was closed or limited, which reduced the possibility that women would participate. In contrast, women's and youth groups were an essential part of the dialogue and mediation that the Department supported in Solomon Islands in 2018, which increased understanding of local conditions and ultimately strengthened the peace dialogue. Several staff interviewed identified enhanced civil society engagement as an area for improvement.

E. Shortcomings in regional division integration, work processes and knowledge management have created challenges to the efficient achievement of conflict prevention goals

Integration with the Department of Peace Operations has been uneven, but where it has occurred, stronger analyses have been produced

48. A primary component of peace and security reform was the combining of the regional divisions of the former Department of Political Affairs and the former Department of Peacekeeping Operations into a shared Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs-Department of Peace Operations regional pillar. Views on the extent to which reform has achieved the integration of those divisions vary, however. Most Department staff interviewed referred to a low or mixed degree of integration, with the lowest level of integration reported in the Central and Southern Africa, Eastern Africa and Western Africa divisions, corresponding to the regions with the highest number of peacekeeping operations. Most Department staff surveyed reported that the integration of the organizational culture of the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs and that of the Department of Peace Operations, an important indicator of effective integration overall, had occurred to only a small extent (39 per cent) or not at all (25 per cent).

49. Several factors contributed to the uneven integration, including higher levels of former Department of Peacekeeping Operations staff in some divisions and slowly changing mindsets. Some Department staff interviewed noted the challenges of having two Under-Secretaries-General and of merging different approaches. During a time of reform in which functions have been merged, more, rather than less, communication with senior leadership is helpful for stronger integration. In 2019, one town hall was held with the Under-Secretary-General of the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs and that of the Department of Peace Operations, and at least three meetings were held with the Under-Secretaries-General, the Assistant Secretaries-General and the Directors, as well as reform retreats that both Under-Secretaries-General attended.

50. While recognizing that not all regional divisions needed to be integrated to the same extent, staff from divisions that were still in transition to full integration gave lower ratings to the positive effect of reform on producing integrated analyses. Staff interviewed often stated that effective integration facilitated a more holistic and cohesive assessment of country situations and greater awareness of cross-cutting themes having an impact on conflict. In addition, the quality of analyses conducted in 2019 (discussed in result C) with regard to breadth, coherence and depth was higher in the divisions that had to integrate less than in those that had to integrate more. Observation of internal staff meetings in divisions in general revealed a good flow of information-sharing among staff in the division.

Work processes have created inefficiencies

51. Some work processes related to key activities of the Department have hindered a more streamlined approach to its work. Through an internal review conducted in

2019, several examples of work process inefficiencies in document production, including the following were identified:

- (a) The same clearance process for all documents, regardless of their priority;
- (b) Multiple clearance layers and duplication of review functions across layers;
- (c) Unclear document review standards;
- (d) Unclear accountability for written documents.

52. It was recommended in the review that document review roles throughout the clearance process be better defined and that different, and shorter, clearance paths be undertaken for documents of higher strategic priority and urgency. Dual reviews by both the Under-Secretary-General and Assistant Secretaries-General were questioned. Some Department staff interviewed questioned the necessity of multiple layers of review within the Department.

53. Furthermore, only half of staff surveyed (54 per cent) agreed that their division focused on being efficient, with several commenting that unclear management roles and accountability and/or lack thereof, slow decision-making and cumbersome travel approval processes reduced efficiency. Some staff surveyed noted that the role of the Executive Office was unclear and that it was therefore not seen as adequately supportive of the Department's substantive work, and that clear and consistent operating procedures were lacking for the new integrated structure. Some directors interviewed noted potential inefficiencies from attending two sets of weekly management meetings for both the Department and the Department of Peace Operations, as opposed to having a single, joint meeting.

Despite impressive efforts, the Department is not taking full advantage of its existing knowledge management systems

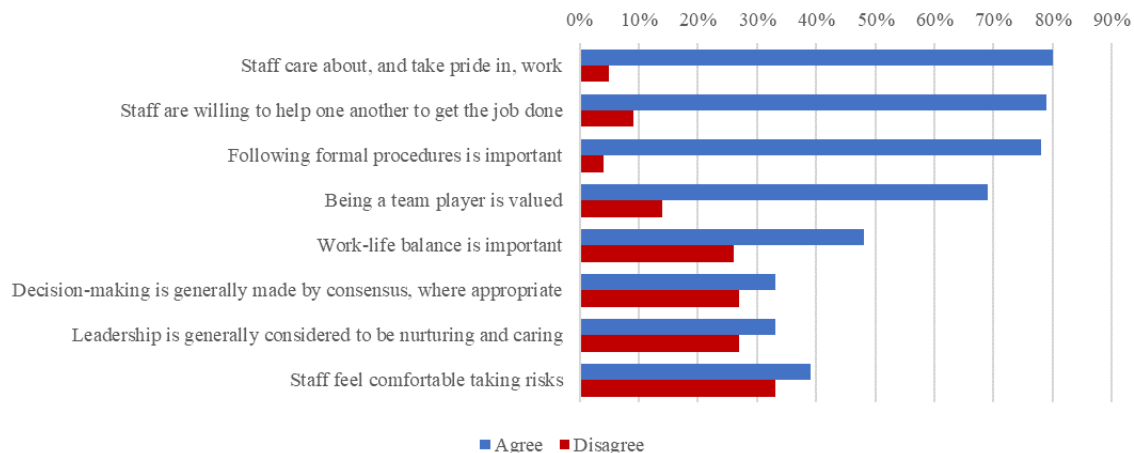
54. The Department has established a solid knowledge management framework. It has a learning and evaluation framework that discusses knowledge management roles and responsibilities, provides a best practices toolkit, disseminates best practices to the field and supports various other learning exercises. Three focal point networks for special political missions, planning and policy have provided further opportunities for sharing experience and knowledge, and the Department is working with the Department of Peace Operations on a joint knowledge management framework.

55. Nevertheless, staff interviewed and surveyed reported that the use of Department knowledge management tools and processes, as well as their impact, has been uneven. This is a result of several factors, including lack of staff awareness of, and training on, their use and lack of implementation. Staff reported some shortcomings with regard to knowledge-sharing, related primarily to it being unsystematic and/or overly personal in nature.

The Department's organizational culture has exacerbated these shortcomings

56. The organizational culture of the Department has elements that both facilitate and hinder the efficient and effective achievement of its goals. The highest-rated and lowest-rated elements of the Department's culture, as reported by staff surveyed, are presented in figure VII.

Figure VII
Department staff gave varied ratings on Department organizational culture



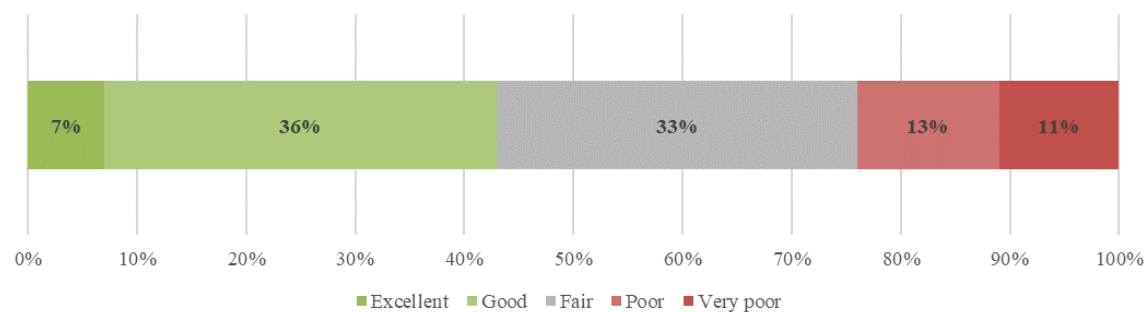
Source: OIOS survey of Department staff.

57. The Department's culture is one in which staff take pride in their work and believe strongly in the core values of the Organization. Staff are perceived as being supportive of one another, committed and team-oriented, all of which contribute to a working environment in which staff come together with positive intentions to achieve common goals. In all the internal Department meetings observed, information and ideas were shared in a professional manner, with different opinions voiced and discussed collegially.

58. At the same time, the Department is challenged by a culture that is perceived as being hierarchical, formalistic and lacking innovation. This is noteworthy in that creativity and thinking outside the box, as well as encouraging and empowering staff at all levels, are all needed to develop and try new solutions for preventing conflict where key enabling factors are missing and an atypical approach may be required.

59. Morale in the Department was mixed. Fewer than half of all staff surveyed who had an opinion (43 per cent) rated morale as excellent or good (see figure VIII). Approximately half (49 per cent) reported that morale had decreased since the reform, 42 per cent indicated that it had remained the same and 9 per cent said that it had improved. Some staff interviewed reported feeling that their work was undervalued, a feeling exacerbated by changes associated with reform, perceived limited career development prospects and a challenging physical work environment.

Figure VIII
Staff gave mixed ratings on Department morale



Source: OIOS survey of Department staff.

V. Conclusion

60. In a world often burdened by discord, the United Nations occupies a unique and invaluable space as a knowledgeable, impartial and objective broker that can anticipate and respond to critical moments when the risk of conflict may be high. While the number of armed conflicts has been trending downwards globally,¹⁷ new and re-emerging tensions also continue to threaten fragile peace agreements in many parts of the world.

61. Within this context, the Department possesses significant experience and expertise acquired through its decades as the main political arm of the Secretariat. It has demonstrated that in the right context, it can play an important role in contributing to effective conflict prevention through its key tools of analysis, early warning, mediation and advice. However, the role has been more uncertain in recent years. Department staff question whether and how their work is used by senior leadership in the Organization, feedback is limited, and the Department is at risk of being underutilized.

62. The peace and security reform introduced in 2019 was intended to position the United Nations to provide more holistic and seamless support to countries and regions either afflicted by, or at risk of, conflict. Along the continuum from conflict to peace, solutions incorporating the full range of United Nations tools and mechanisms have the greatest opportunity for success. The Department must therefore take on a more integrated approach to its work and be more innovative in considering new solutions in those situations where a more traditional approach has not worked. With an organizational culture perceived as being hierarchical and formalistic, the task will be particularly challenging.

63. The Department must be cognizant of morale among its staff. The changes introduced with reform, workspace constraints and new procedures have made the past year a demanding time of transition. Those factors make it imperative that attention be paid to bolstering morale and fully harnessing the Department's valuable human resource assets.

64. It is not possible to speak candidly about conflict prevention without acknowledging the critical role played by Member States themselves, at Headquarters and at the regional and national levels. The Department needs to provide Member States with honest and open assessments of conflict.

VI. Recommendations

65. The Inspection and Evaluation Division of OIOS makes four important recommendations to the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs.

Recommendation 1 (results A, B, C and E)

66. The Department should strengthen management culture and communication through:

- Enhancing management communication practice, including conducting regular Division staff meetings
- Ensuring that internal feedback is given on analyses, and exploring the use of relevant platforms (e.g. Microsoft Teams or SharePoint) to do so

¹⁷ For more information, see www.prio.org/Data/Armed-Conflict/?id=348.

- Proactively seeking external feedback from senior clients, including the Executive Office of the Secretary-General
- Responding to issues raised in the Staff Engagement Survey of 2019
- Strengthening knowledge management to better share and disseminate case study information and lessons learned around conflict prevention

Indicators of achievement: regular division meetings; regular internal feedback given as part of analysis review process; action plan to address issues from Staff Engagement Survey

Recommendation 2 (results B, C and E)

67. The Department should establish a mechanism for staff to anonymously voice different viewpoints on political analyses and to encourage greater boldness in those analyses. In establishing this mechanism, the Department may want to review and adapt existing models of dissent channels that are used in various national foreign ministries.

Indicator of achievement: mechanism established and in use

Recommendation 3 (results B, C and E)

68. The Department should establish a strategy for addressing hindering factors to conflict prevention. This could be developed through an internal process that would consider new approaches for addressing these hindering factors, as well as strategies for more complex situations, to feed into senior decision-making.

Indicator of achievement: strategy established and applied

Recommendation 4 (result D)

69. The Department should strengthen its external partnerships through:

- Proactively identifying a greater number of relevant external partners for strengthening conflict prevention work
- Developing an overall partnership strategy to identify goals, objectives, types and complimentary capacities of external partners
- Better leveraging existing partnerships in the development system to improve coordination with the Development Cooperation Office, the resident coordinator system and other development partners

Indicators of achievement: increase in number of external partnerships; partnerships strategy developed; plan for increased coordination with development partners in place

(Signed) Fatoumata **Ndiaye**
Under-Secretary-General for Internal Oversight Services
March 2021

Annex*

Comments received from the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs

I refer to your memorandum (OIOS-2020-00250), transmitting the draft report of the Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) on the evaluation of the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs.

Thank you for undertaking a consultative process and for incorporating most of my team's initial comments into the report.

I welcome your openness to work with our team to amend the language on conflict prevention in paragraph 10. As you know, our approach to and understanding of conflict prevention has evolved over time. We see it as encompassing a wide range of activities to prevent the outbreak, escalation, continuation and recurrence of conflict. We do not draw a clear distinction between structural prevention and other forms of prevention; we also do not see sustaining peace as part of one of these two categories. Rather, "sustaining peace" also helps capture the holistic nature of the dimensions of conflict prevention. We further believe that it would be incorrect to indicate that addressing underlying conditions that contribute to conflict do not necessarily correspond to the Department's scope, mandate and activities.

Having reviewed the assessment, we are pleased to inform you that we will be accepting the recommendations of OIOS set forth in the draft report. We are confident that this evaluation and its recommendations will further strengthen our conflict prevention efforts. Accordingly, we have completed a recommendation action plan highlighting the key steps that we intend to focus on in the coming years.

* In the present annex, the Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) sets out the full text of comments received from the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs. The practice has been instituted in line with General Assembly resolution [64/263](#), following the recommendation of the Independent Audit Advisory Committee. OIOS has made changes to paragraph 10 of the report to address the Department's comments.