

UN-UNDP History

Article 21 of the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights provides the legal and moral justification for electoral assistance. Since the Declaration's adoption and proclamation in 1948, the notion of international electoral assistance has undergone various transformations and been interpreted in various different ways. Nevertheless, it has always been firmly rooted within the wider domain of 'democracy assistance' efforts. The UN's involvement with electoral activities began in earnest in the 1960s and 1970s, when the Trusteeship Council assisted with the observation or supervision of some 30 plebiscites, referenda or elections in various regions of the world. By the late 1980s, UNDP had financed several small-sized projects that provided some form of assistance on specific technical aspects of electoral processes and on the establishment of the related infrastructure necessary to conduct elections. Also at the end of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s, the UN had begun to engage in major electoral missions of three kinds – the organisation and conduct of elections (such as through the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia through UNTAC in 1993); the supervision and control of elections (such as in Namibia through UNTAG in 1989); and the verification of electoral processes (such as in El Salvador through ONUSAL in 1994). These activities, along with rising demand from Member States for technical assistance by the UN, led to the introduction in December 1991 of a General Assembly (GA) Resolution 46/137 on 'Enhancing the Effectiveness of the Principle of Periodic and Genuine Elections'. Since then, the Secretary-General has reported biannually to the GA on 'appropriate ways and means of enhancing the effectiveness of the principle of periodic and genuine elections, in the context of full respect of the sovereignty of Member States'. GA resolution 46/137 also called for the UN to designate a senior official to act as a Focal Point for electoral assistance activities inter alia to ensure consistency in the handling of requests of Member States organising elections, to assist the Secretary-General to coordinate and consider requests for electoral verification, and to channel requests for electoral assistance to the appropriate office or programme. The GA resolution also recommended that an office be created to support the Focal Point in these functions. Since 1992, the United Nations Electoral Assistance Division (UNEAD) has filled this role and has provided coordination and technical support, particularly to major electoral missions. All UN electoral assistance must follow a request made by a recognised national authority and most assistance has relied heavily on UNDP's financial and personnel resources. UNDP's field presence and traditional custodianship of the UN Resident Coordinator system proved important facilitating factors for the implementation of the UN electoral assistance: UNDP resident officials provided established relationships with government, bilateral development agencies, non-governmental organisations and political parties, as well as logistical infrastructure, country knowledge and financial resources for the mobilisation of assistance.