# Community Engagement in UN Peacekeeping Operations: A People-Centered Approach to Protecting Civilians

HARLEY HENIGSON
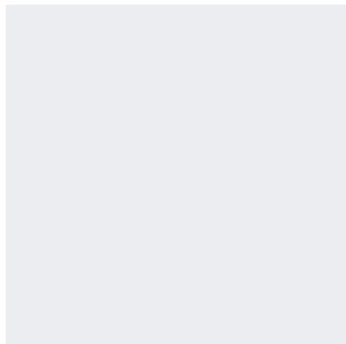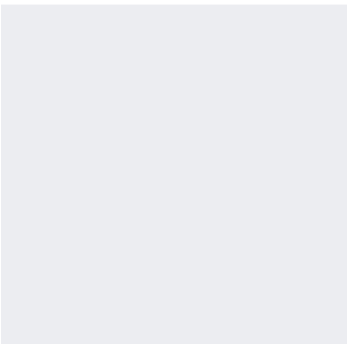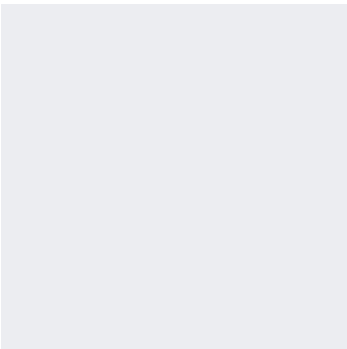


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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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# ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|---|---|
| C-34 | UN Special Committee on Peacekeeping Operations |
| CAN | Community alert network |
| CAR | Central African Republic |
| CLA | Community liaison assistant |
| CVR | Community violence reduction |
| DDR | Disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration |
| DFS | UN Department of Field Support |
| DRC | Democratic Republic of the Congo |
| DPET | UN Policy, Evaluation and Training Division |
| DPKO | UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations |
| DPO | UN Department of Peace Operations |
| FPU | Formed police unit |
| HIPPO | High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations |
| IDP | Internally displaced person |
| IPO | Individual police officer |
| JOC | Joint operations center |
| JPT | Joint protection team |
| MINUSCA | UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in CAR |
| MINUSMA | UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali |
| MONUC | UN Organization Mission in the DRC |
| MONUSCO | UN Organization Stabilization Mission in the DRC |
| NP | Nonviolent Peaceforce |
| POC | Protection of civilians |
| SPU | Strategic planning unit |
| UNCEG | UN Community Engagement Guidelines on Peacebuilding and Sustaining Peace |
| UCP | Unarmed civilian protection |
| UNMISS | UN Mission in South Sudan |
| UNPOL | UN police |

# Executive Summary

Community engagement is critical to UN peacekeeping operations' mandate to protect civilians. The UN mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo began developing mechanisms for community engagement in the late 2000s, and by 2014, similar mechanisms were being implemented by the UN missions in the Central African Republic, Mali, and South Sudan. In 2015, the High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations called for community engagement as part of a people-centered, whole-of-mission approach to the protection of civilians. The panel's report solidified the term "community engagement" in the UN lexicon and led the Security Council to include explicit language on community engagement in all four of the largest peacekeeping operations.

UN peacekeeping operations engage with communities for three main reasons. First, they seek to sensitize local communities on their mandate, manage expectations of what the mission can and cannot do, and build confidence and relationships between the mission and community members. Second, they look to gather information that helps them understand the local context, remain aware of potential threats faced by communities, and understand existing community-based self-protection mechanisms. Third, missions can engage with communities to support the resolution of localized conflicts and the building of a protective environment.

The four largest UN peacekeeping operations have developed an array of tools for community engagement, with varying degrees of effectiveness. Community liaison assistants (CLAs), joint protection teams (JPTs) and community alert networks (CANs) all support and facilitate community engagement by the missions' civilian, military, and police components. CLAs in particular provide invaluable expertise and a link between the mission and local communities. More recently, they have developed units specializing in engaging communities and begun exploring best practices and lessons learned from humanitarian practitioners of unarmed civilian protection.

As the UN has developed approaches and mechanisms for engaging local communities, a number of challenges have emerged. Siloed approaches by the different sections of missions, shortcomings in training, and the short rotations of uniformed personnel limit the efficacy of missions' efforts to engage communities. Missions also face challenges ensuring that community engagement is gendered and inclusive and does not expose civilians to retaliation. The COVID-19 pandemic adds an additional layer of complexity to these efforts.

There are several steps the UN and its member states could take to address these challenges and improve community engagement by peacekeeping missions:

- UN member states, including mandate penholders on the Security Council, should continue to refine the language on community engagement in upcoming mandates.

- The UN Secretariat should develop more in-depth modules on community engagement in relevant training materials.

- Relevant UN stakeholders should explore areas where missions' military personnel can improve their community engagement, including through more effective engagement during patrolling and the expanded use of specialized engagement units.

- The UN Secretariat and missions should optimize their use of CLAs, including by standardizing their role across missions and emphasizing the role of female CLAs.

- The UN Department of Peace Operations should continue to explore where the unarmed civilian protection methodology and best practices could complement the community engagement efforts of UN peacekeeping operations.

# Introduction

As the practice of the protection of civilians (POC) has evolved in peacekeeping missions, the UN has increasingly focused on "people-centered" approaches. This has led the UN Secretariat and multidimensional missions mandated to protect civilians to strengthen community engagement as a core component of POC efforts. By increasing community engagement, peacekeeping operations can build trust with the communities they support, increase both the quality and the quantity of their information on local contexts and their peacekeeping-intelligence, and better understand local communities' protection needs and concerns. Ultimately, this can improve missions' ability to identify and quickly respond to threats facing civilians and support local communities' self-protection strategies and approaches.

> Community engagement can help missions identify and quickly respond to threats facing civilians and support local communities' self-protection strategies and approaches.

An understanding of the need for increased community engagement has slowly filtered through the UN system over the past decade. Over the past five years, the UN Secretariat has called for increased and improved community engagement. The UN Security Council has now incorporated language on community engagement into the mandates of the four largest multidimensional peacekeeping operations: the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA), the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), the UN Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO), and the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS).[1] Community engagement is also promoted in the 2018 Action for Peacekeeping initiative and regularly recognized in the annual reports of the Special Committee on Peacekeeping Operations (C-34), demonstrating member states' strong support for this approach.

Community engagement activities are pursued by all of the components of peacekeeping missions. Military components, for example, informally engage with communities during dismounted patrols and consult with local populations. Similarly, UN police (UNPOL) engage with local communities when patrolling, gathering contextual and situational information, and strengthen the capacity of communities to protect themselves. Civilian components engage with communities by consulting with them, supporting community conflict-resolution and reconciliation projects, and documenting and analyzing protection threats and needs. Missions have also developed dedicated structures for community engagement, including community liaison assistants (CLAs), community alert networks (CANs), and local protection committees (LPCs).[2]

This report analyzes the conceptual and practical shift toward a people-centered, community engage-ment–based approach to POC in peacekeeping contexts. It examines the positive implications and impact of this approach, as well as the challenges and risks it can pose both for communities and for missions. Drawing on best practices as well as non-UN and UN unarmed approaches to community engagement and POC, it puts forward recommendations for the UN Secretariat, the four largest peacekeeping operations, and UN member states on the Security Council. This report draws on desk research, remote interviews conducted from May to September 2020, the author's in-country research and experience working with a humanitarian NGO in South Sudan from May 2018 to March 2020, and input from participants in a virtual roundtable in September 2020.[3] More than thirty interviews were conducted with personnel from the UN Secretariat and all four of the largest peacekeeping operations, civil society representatives, humanitarian aid workers, and academics.[4]

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1  MINUSCA was first mandated to engage with communities by UN Security Council Resolution 2448 (December 13, 2018); MINUSMA by Resolution 2423 (June 30, 2019); MONUSCO by Resolution 2409 (March 27, 2018); and UNMISS by Resolution 2459 (March 15, 2019).

2  These structures are not all present in every mission.

3  The closed-door roundtable was held on September 9, 2020. Participants comprised UN officials from New York, Geneva, and field missions, as well as academics and humanitarian aid workers.

4  Interviews were conducted with sixteen UN personnel, twelve representatives of NGOs and civil society actors, and five academic researchers.

# Policy Developments: A Growing Recognition of Community Engagement

Over the past twelve years there has been a growing recognition within the UN system that peacekeeping operations need to improve their engagement with the communities they serve. Initially, peacekeeping operations engaged with communities to improve their information gathering and situational awareness and to build relationships with community members. More recently, missions have also come to see community engagement as essential to carrying out their POC mandates.

## Early Community Engagement Mechanisms in MONUSCO

The first documented instance of community engagement was in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC).[5] MONUSCO's predecessor, the UN Organization Mission in the DRC (MONUC), developed three main community engagement mechanisms in response to a series of high-profile incidents in which UN peacekeepers failed to prevent large-scale violence against civilians: joint protection teams, community liaison assistants, and community alert networks.[6]

MONUC established joint protection teams (JPTs) after recognizing the need for context-specific protection analyses and responses following the massacre of more than 150 civilians roughly one mile from a UN base in North Kivu.[7] These teams deployed to volatile locations to analyze and respond to protection needs and included military, police, and civilian personnel. The inclusion of civilian personnel allowed them to draw on the expertise of missions' sections on human rights, child protection, civil affairs, political affairs, disarmament, rule of law, and other areas.[8]

Although the JPTs were effective at responding to specific instances of potential or ongoing violence, the mission realized it needed a more widespread and continuous presence on the ground to liaise between UN military personnel and local communities. MONUC therefore developed a second mechanism: community liaison assistants (CLAs). CLAs were national staff embedded with UN battalions as intermediaries between the mission and communities.[9]

While both of these mechanisms improved community engagement, there was no mechanism for civilians to report incidents to the UN in areas where neither JPTs nor CLAs were deployed. MONUSCO's failure to predict or prevent a campaign of systematic rape in and around the town of Luvungi in eastern DRC in 2010 put this gap in stark relief.[10] In response, the mission developed community alert networks (CANs), early-warning mechanisms that comprised networks of community focal points who can report imminent or ongoing threats to civilians through phones, radios, or, in some instances, toll-free numbers provided by the UN. These three mechanisms allowed MONUSCO to gather information on and respond to civilians' protection needs and concerns more effectively.[11]

5   While peacekeeping operations were conducting community engagement prior to this, this was the first time these approaches and mechanisms were used in a peacekeeping operation mandated to protect civilians.

6   Center for Civilians in Conflict, "Community Engagement by MONUSCO with Reduced Field Presence," June 2018.

7   Janosch Kullenberg, "Community Liaison Assistants: A Bridge between Peacekeepers and Local Populations," *Forced Migration Review*, October 2016. JPTs evolved from the concept of "joint protection" developed by MONUC in 2006. UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO) and Department of Field Support (DFS), "DPKO/DFS Lessons Learned Note on the Protection of Civilians in UN Peacekeeping Operations," 2010.

8   The civil affairs section, child protection section, and human rights division are the main civilian sections participating in JPTs, though smaller sections may be included depending on the need and context. Julie Reynaert, "MONUC/ MONUSCO and Civilian Protection in the Kivus," International Peace Information Service, 2011; Victoria Holt, Glyn Taylor, and Max Kelly, "Protecting Civilians in the Context of UN Peacekeeping Operations," DPKO and UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 2009; Alexandra Novosseloff et al., "Assessing the Effectiveness of the United Nations Mission in the DRC/MONUC-MONUSCO," Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, 2019.

9   UN DPKO, DFS, and Policy, Evaluation and Training Division (DPET), "Community Liaison Assistants in United Nations Peacekeeping Operations: Survey of Practice," November 2016; Center for Civilians in Conflict, "Community Engagement by MONUSCO with Reduced Field Presence."

10  MONUSCO replaced MONUC on July 1, 2010, roughly a month before the incident in Luvungi. Reynaert, "MONUC/ MONUSCO and Civilian Protection in the Kivus"; Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, "Final Report of the Fact-Finding Missions of the United Nations Joint Human Rights Office into the Mass Rapes and Other Human Rights Violations Committed by a Coalition of Armed Groups Along the Kibua-Mpofi Axis in Walikale Territory, North Kivu, From 30 July to 2 August 2010," July 2011.

11  Remote interviews with mission-based UN civilian personnel, September 2020.

## Political Initiatives Recognizing Community Engagement

The positive impact of these community engagement mechanisms was soon recognized by the UN Secretariat, UN member states, and other large peacekeeping operations. The Special Committee on Peacekeeping Operations (C-34) began to include language on community engagement in its annual reports, stressing that interacting "with the local population is necessary for the efficient and successful action of peacekeeping operations."[12] As missions' community engagement approaches evolved, so too did the language in the C-34's annual reports. The committee's 2011 annual report noted the important role that JPTs, CLAs, and civil affairs officers play in improving missions' "local-level analysis" and managing communities' expectations.[13]

At the Secretariat, the Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO) and Department of Field Support (DFS) highlighted the positive impact of the JPTs on MONUC's POC efforts in an internal report in 2010. In guidance documents in 2010 and 2011, they noted the importance of engaging with local populations not only to seek their feedback but also "to identify the threats posed to them and their vulnerabilities, and to understand how the mission can support existing protection capacities within the local community."[14] In 2012, DPKO and DFS issued comprehensive guidance on community engagement for civil affairs personnel, including a comprehensive breakdown of approaches and mechanisms.[15]

At the mission level, in 2009 and 2010, MONUSCO

> The UN Security Council has now incorporated language on community engagement into the mandates of all four of the largest peacekeeping operations.

was mandated to continue building on and extending its community engagement approaches and mechanisms.[16] It established local protection committees and local security committees, which were intended, inter alia, to facilitate regular discussions between local communities and national security forces. UNMISS's 2013 mandate encouraged the mission to strengthen its communication with communities, including through CLAs.[17] For MINUSMA and MINUSCA, the Security Council resolutions that established their mandates in 2013 and 2014, respectively, emphasized the importance of conducting community engagement activities "to anticipate, prevent, mitigate and resolve conflict."[18] However, neither mandate mentioned specific community engagement tools or their value for POC.

Following more than a decade of growing recognition within the UN system, the first explicit and formal call for community engagement came in 2015 with the report of the High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations (HIPPO). The HIPPO report found that, "to sustain peace, lessons must be learned and new approaches embraced to help prevent relapse into conflict" including through broadening "community engagement, with women and youth playing a prominent role." The report further argued that "the [UN] will remain legitimate to the extent that it acts as a voice for the unheard, seeking their views and ensuring their full participation... [and] should move beyond merely consulting the local population to actively include it in their work."[19] In short, UN peace operations needed to become "oriented more towards the populations served."[20]

12  UN General Assembly, *Report of the Special Committee on Peacekeeping Operations and Its Working Group: 2009 Substantive Session*, UN Doc. A/63/19, March 24, 2009.

13  UN General Assembly, *Report of the Special Committee on Peacekeeping Operations: 2011 Substantive Session*, UN Doc. A/65/19, May 12, 2011.

14  UN DPKO and DFS, "DPKO/DFS Operational Concept on the Protection of Civilians in UN Peacekeeping Operations," April 2010; UN DPKO and DFS, "Framework for Drafting Comprehensive Protection of Civilians (POC) Strategies in UN Peacekeeping Operations," 2011.

15  UN DPKO and DFS, "Civil Affairs Handbook," March 2012.

16  UN Security Council Resolution 1906 (December 23, 2009), UN Doc. S/RES/1906; UN Security Council Resolution 1925 (May 28, 2010), UN Doc. S/RES/1925.

17  UN Security Council Resolution 2109 (July 11, 2013), UN Doc. S/RES/2109.

18  UN Security Council Resolution 2100 (April 25, 2013), UN Doc. S/RES/2100; UN Security Council Resolution 2149 (April 10, 2014), UN Doc. S/RES/2149.

19  UN General Assembly and Security Council, *Report of the High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations on Uniting Our Strengths for Peace: Politics, Partnership and People*, UN Doc. A/70/95–S/2015/446, June 17, 2015.

20  UN General Assembly, *Overview of the Financing of the United Nations Peacekeeping Operations: Budget Performance for the Period from 1 July 2014 to 30 June 2015 and Budget for the Period from 1 July 2016 to 30 June 2017*, UN Doc. A70/749, February 23, 2016.

Similarly, the Advisory Group of Experts on the 2015 review of the UN peacebuilding architecture called for missions to adopt people-centered approaches, noting that current peacekeeping practices risked "perpetuating exclusion."[21] Around the same time, the C-34's annual reports began more strongly emphasizing community-based approaches.[22] The need for community engagement was further reinforced in the secretary general's 2018 Action for Peacekeeping initiative and its corresponding Declaration of Shared Commitments. In the declaration, UN member states commit "to improving strategic communications and engagement with local populations to strengthen the understanding of the peacekeeping missions and their mandates" and "to support the inclusion and engagement of civil society and all segments of the local population in peacekeeping mandate implementation."[23] However, the declaration does not explicitly link community engagement and POC, instead focusing on the value of community engagement for managing communities' expectations.

The only major POC policy document not to include any language on community engagement has been the Kigali Principles, a set of nonbinding pledges by troop- and police-contributing countries to increase the effectiveness of POC in UN peacekeeping operations. Even here, however, the positive impact of community engagement on the effectiveness of POC efforts was highlighted by participants in the 2015 conference where the principles were agreed.[24]

In addition to calling for a more people-centered approach, the HIPPO report solidified the term "community engagement" in the UN lexicon. Prior to that, even though community engagement approaches, mechanisms, and programming had

been developed and implemented, an umbrella term had yet to be widely accepted. By 2018, the term "community engagement" had been introduced into the mandates of the four largest peacekeeping operations.[25]

Since then, the language around community engagement has been expanded upon, most notably in the mandates of MONUSCO and UNMISS. MONUSCO's 2019 mandate links community engagement to a whole-of-mission approach, mandating the mission's military and police components to enhance their community engagement with civilians.[26] Similarly, UNMISS's 2020 mandate links proactive troop deployment and community engagement. It is also the only mission whose mandate acknowledges the potential complementarity between unarmed civilian protection (UCP) and community engagement.[27] MINUSCA and MINUSMA's mandates have more limited language, with both missions mandated merely to strengthen community engagement. Despite the widespread use of the term and its increasing importance within the UN system and UN peacekeeping operations, there is still no clear definition of community engagement.[28]

## The UN Secretariat's Guidance on the Linkages Between Community Engagement and POC

The Department of Peace Operations' (DPO) Policy on the Protection of Civilians in United Nations Peacekeeping, published in 2015 and updated in 2019, provides guidance on community engagement. It covers both community engagement activities that support missions' POC

21  UN General Assembly and Security Council, *Challenge of Sustaining Peace: Report of the Advisory Group of Experts on the Review of the Peacebuilding Architecture*, UN Doc. A/69/968–S/2015/490, June 30, 2015.

22  UN General Assembly, *Report of the Special Committee on Peacekeeping Operations: 2016 Substantive Session*, UN Doc. A/70/19, March 15, 2016.

23  United Nations, "Declaration of Shared Commitments on UN Peacekeeping Operations," August 16, 2020.

24  "The Kigali Principles on the Protection of Civilians," May 29, 2015.

25  See: UN Security Council Resolution 2409 (March 27, 2018), UN Doc. S/RES/2409; Resolution 2423 (June 28, 2018), UN Doc. S/RES/2423; Resolution 2448 (December 13, 2018), UN Doc. S/RES/2448; and Resolution 2459 (March 15, 2019), UN Doc. S/RES/2459.

26  UN Security Council Resolution 2502 (December 19, 2019), UN Doc. S/RES/2502.

27  UN Security Council Resolution 2514 (March 12, 2020), UN Doc. S/RES/2514.

28  Lauren Spink, "'Let Us Be a Part of It': Community Engagement by the UN Peacekeeping Mission in South Sudan," Center for Civilians in Conflict, December 2017; Center for Civilians in Conflict, "Community Engagement by MONUSCO with Reduced Field Presence."

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**Box 1. Rationale for community engagement**

UN peacekeeping operations engage with communities for many reasons. These fall under three over-arching categories.[29]

**Sensitization and relationship and confidence building**

- Raising awareness and sensitizing local communities on the mission's mandate, roles, and responsibilities
- Managing expectations and sensitizing local communities on what the mission can and cannot do
- Building confidence and relationships between the mission and community members

**Information gathering and analysis**

- Gathering information to improve situational awareness and to understand the context and community-level protection needs
- Gathering information on potential or ongoing threats faced by communities and their protection needs
- Understanding communities' existing self-protection, conflict-resolution, and reconciliation mechanisms

**De-escalation, mediation, and community-level peacebuilding**

- Supporting community-level and intercommunal mediation and conflict-resolution and reconciliation efforts
- Implementing projects such as quick-impact projects, liaising with humanitarian actors to support longer-term projects, and undertaking community-based activities
- Supporting community-level projects and efforts aimed at building a protective environment
- Supporting the restoration of state authority at the local level and building local-level confidence in state authorities

All three categories of community engagement activities support peacekeeping operations' POC efforts. The categories are also interlinked and mutually reinforcing. For example, increasing communities' understanding of a mission's mandates, understanding their perceptions of national and local institutions and of the mission itself, and implementing community-based projects and activities all build trust. Greater levels of trust between community members and the mission, in turn, increase the likelihood that communities will share information. Understanding communities' existing self-protection, conflict-resolution, and reconciliation mechanisms can help design POC strategies and develop programming to support conflict-mediation efforts.

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mandates and the principles that underpin a people-centered approach to peacekeeping.[30] The policy separates POC into three distinct, though mutually reinforcing, tiers:

- Tier I: protection through dialogue and engagement;
- Tier II: provision of physical protection; and

- Tier III: establishment of a protective environment.

Community engagement plays a key role in all three tiers of POC. The document's guiding principles emphasize the need for a "community-based approach," with engagement conducted in a "meaningful, safe and respectful" way with a full

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29  UN DPO, "The Protection of Civilians in United Nations Peacekeeping: Handbook," May 2020; UN DPKO, DFS, and DPET, "Community Liaison Assistants in United Nations Peacekeeping Operations: Survey of Practice."

30  The policy was originally formulated by UN DPKO and DFS. UN DPKO and DFS, "Policy on the Protection of Civilians in United Nations Peacekeeping," April 2015; UN DPO, "Policy on the Protection of Civilians in United Nations Peacekeeping," November 2019.

cross-section of society. Moreover, any activities conducted to protect civilians "must always be informed by consultation with the local community" and support and empower existing local protection mechanisms.[31]

In tier I, community engagement includes support for dialogue and mediation efforts, activities aimed at building social cohesion, and public information and strategic communication efforts. Direct engagement with local communities through early-warning mechanisms also allows mission personnel to intervene to prevent violence against civilians. Within tier I, the policy lays out clear guidance for engaging with communities:

> Engagement with communities should be an inclusive, two-way exercise which begins with listening to communities about their protection needs and capacities. It should identify, support, and bolster existing structures and mechanisms to resolve and respond to conflict and be inclusive of the protection needs of all community members, for example by considering the specific security needs of women.[32]

In tier II, community engagement supports efforts to physically protect civilians by providing mission personnel, including military and police personnel, with situational and early-warning information and analyses of communities' perceptions of threats, their vulnerabilities,

> Community engagement is both a set of activities carried out by all of a mission's components and a shift in mindset toward a more people-centered, whole-of-mission approach to the protection of civilians.

and their existing self-protection capacities. Both uniformed and civilian personnel can also deter physical violence against civilians through "regular, visible and direct engagement with civilian populations at risk."[33]

In tier III, community engagement activities broadly fall into the sphere of peacebuilding, including efforts to foster social cohesion and build or buttress communities' self-protection

mechanisms and resilience to violence. These activities may also include disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) and community violence reduction (CVR) programs, as well as efforts to raise awareness of threats to vulnerable populations. Much of the local-level programming under tier III relies on UN mission personnel regularly engaging with communities to ensure their participation, ownership, and buy-in.

The practical and operational linkages between community engagement and its direct impact on POC were further outlined in a 2018 note developed by DPKO and DFS. The document comprehensively breaks down how UN peacekeeping operations can integrate community engagement into their work. It also provides the first clear guidance on less tangible and less understood aspects of community engagement such as relationship building, the establishment of links with communities, and the management of rumors and misinformation.[34]

More recently, building on this earlier guidance, DPO, which replaced DPKO in 2019, has developed a comprehensive handbook on POC in UN peace operations. Published in May 2020, the handbook lays out guidance on all aspects of POC, including community engagement, which is given its own chapter. Community engagement is described as "a people-centered approach to POC, that understands the protection needs of communities based on their own perceptions and analysis of the threats and necessary responses."[35] The handbook notes that responses to protection concerns need to account for communities' existing self-protection mechanisms, that community engagement is vital for supporting sustainable solutions to conflict, that maintaining a "do-no-harm" approach is essential to community engagement, and that engagement should begin early on and continue

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31  UN DPO, "Policy on the Protection of Civilians in United Nations Peacekeeping," November 2019.
32  Ibid.
33  UN DPO, "The Protection of Civilians in United Nations Peacekeeping: Handbook."
34  UN DPKO and DFS, "Peacekeeping Practice Note: Community Engagement," March 2018.
35  UN DPO, "The Protection of Civilians in United Nations Peacekeeping: Handbook," p. 107.

throughout the mission's lifecycle.

The handbook further emphasizes the important roles the military and police components and UN national staff play in community engagement. Going beyond the usual acknowledgement of the role of CLAs, the handbook stresses that support from national colleagues, including women, is essential for community engagement efforts to succeed. The mutually reinforcing and crosscutting nature of community engagement—as well as its less tangible aspects—are touched upon not just in the community engagement chapter but throughout the handbook. This reinforces an understanding of community engagement both as a set of activities carried out by all of a mission's components and as a shift in mindset toward a more people-centered, whole-of-mission approach to POC.

To address community engagement across the entire UN system, the UN published the UN Community Engagement Guidelines on Peacebuilding and Sustaining Peace (UNCEG) in August 2020. While these guidelines focus on engaging with communities and civil society actors in a peacebuilding context, they also apply to peacekeeping operations. Community engagement is outlined as a process through which local populations are involved "in all aspects of decision-making and implementation to strengthen local capacities, community structures and local ownership."[36] Like guidance documents on community engagement in UN peacekeeping operations, the UNCEG stress the importance of conflict-sensitive approaches to engagement, in-depth understanding of the context, capacity building at the community level, and meaningful engagement with all community members. While UN peacekeeping guidance documents and the UNCEG share a common objective and a similar understanding of community engagement,

community engagement efforts by peacekeeping missions and other UN entities remain disconnected.

Community engagement approaches and mechanisms are also explained in pre-deployment trainings for uniformed personnel. The 2017 versions of the Core Pre-deployment Training Materials and the longer Comprehensive Protection of Civilians Training Materials both emphasize the importance of community engagement. They provide an overview of community engagement, introduce the core mechanisms (JPTs, CLAs, and CANs), and link POC to community engagement outcomes such as improved contextual and situational understanding and the building of protective environments.[37]

## An Increased Interest in Unarmed Civilian Protection Methods and Strategies

In addition to UN guidance on community engagement, there is a growing recognition of the role of unarmed civilian protection (UCP) strategies in POC. UCP, a methodology developed by the NGO Nonviolent Peaceforce (NP), is a set of techniques used by civilian humanitarian personnel to protect civilians in conflict through monitoring and early warning, proactive engagement and relationship building, direct protection, and the establishment of protective environments (see Box 3).[38] UCP has received attention from member states championing an integrated approach to POC.[39]

UCP formally entered the UN system's lexicon with its inclusion in UNMISS's 2018 mandate. This mandate noted that UCP could complement the mission's efforts to build a protective environment and encouraged the mission to explore the potential of UCP techniques.[40] There are ongoing

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36  United Nations, "United Nations Community Engagement Guidelines on Peacebuilding and Sustaining Peace," August 2020.

37  UN DPKO and DFS, "Comprehensive Protection of Civilians Training Materials for United Nations Peacekeeping Operations: Military Version," 2017; UN DPKO and DFS, "Core Pre-deployment Training Materials for United Nations Peacekeeping Operations," 2017.

38  Nonviolent Peaceforce, "Our Methodology: Unarmed Civilian Protection," available at https://www.nonviolentpeaceforce.org/unarmed-civilian-protection ; Rachel Julian, "The Transformative Impact of Unarmed Civilian Peacekeeping," Global Society 34, no. 1 (2018); Tor Kristian Birkeland, "Unarmed Civilian Protection: The Methodology and Its Relevance for Norwegian Church-Based Organizations and Their Partners," Norwegian Ecumenical Peace Platform, 2016.

39  For example, an Arria-formula meeting on unarmed approaches to POC was held in December 2017 with the support of the Netherlands. The meeting's concept note highlighted the need for integrated, locally owned approaches to POC and stated that "methods that are field effective, cost effective and demonstrative of a potential to sustain peace need to be scaled up." Permanent Mission of the Netherlands to the UN, "Statement Arria-Formula Meeting on 'Unarmed Approaches for the Protection of Civilians,'" December 1, 2017, available at https://www.permanentrepresentations.nl/latest/news/2017/12/01/statement-arria-unarmed-approaches-for-the-protection-of-civilians.

40  UN Security Council Resolution 2406 (March 15, 2018), UN Doc. S/RES/2406.

discussions about UCP's applicability to missions' community engagement efforts and transition and exit strategies, as well as how it can complement missions' POC efforts more broadly. As UN peacekeeping operations are forced to operate with increasingly limited means, missions will need to find alternative and creative approaches for engaging communities and carrying out their POC mandates. In addition, there have been ongoing discussions about the applicability of UCP to UN special political missions, notably the UN Integrated Transition Assistance Mission in Sudan (UNITAMS).[41]

## Community Engagement in Practice

All mission components play a role in engaging with communities (see Table 1). This section focuses on the community engagement approaches and mechanisms currently used by the civilian, military, and police components of MINUSCA, MINUSMA, MONUSCO, and UNMISS, as well as their perceived effectiveness and shortcomings.

While this section looks at each component separately, many of their community engagement activities are crosscutting and mutually reinforcing. For example, although community liaison assistants (CLAs) are civilian staff, they are usually embedded in force battalions and support the military component's community engagement efforts. In other instances, military personnel may patrol a hotspot to ensure that it is safe for civilian staff to mediate intercommunity conflict. There is also overlap in the activities carried out by the military and police components, with the division of labor often based on the context and the need for a specific type of response.

> Most community engagement activities are conducted by international and national civilian personnel.

## The Civilian Component: The Main Interface between Missions and Communities

Across all four of the largest UN peacekeeping operations, most community engagement activities are conducted by international and national civilian personnel. While both the force and UNPOL play pivotal roles in community engagement, civilian sections are responsible for the widest range of community engagement activities, many of which underpin military and police engagement.

The civil affairs section is usually perceived as the main interface between communities and the UN mission. The civil affairs section leads efforts to engage with community groups, ensure that communities understand the mission's work and role, and build relationships at the local level.[42] It also supports the communications and public information division in sensitizing communities on the mission's mandates and activities.[43] These information-sharing efforts open channels for cooperation, reduce confusion and negative rumors, build trust, and manage expectations of what peacekeeping operations can and cannot do. They usually take the form of meetings with one or more communities, either with a cross-section of society or with specific groups such as community leaders, women, or youth. Meetings can also take place through local protection committees, which are jointly attended by missions' civilian, military, and police personnel, providing an opportunity for joint UN engagement.[44]

Beyond information sharing, the civilian component regularly gathers contextual and situational information. Personnel from civil affairs and other sections gather information

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41  Asha Jyothi et al., "Transitioning to Peace: Recommendations for a Future UN Presence in Sudan" (master's capstone project, School of International and Public Affairs, 2020).

42  UN DPKO and DFS, "Civil Affairs Handbook"; Remote interviews with mission-based UN civilian heads of section, June 2020.

43  Each mission has different nomenclature for their communications and public information division. UN DPO, "The Protection of Civilians in United Nations Peacekeeping: Handbook"; Remote interview with mission-based UN civilian head of section, June 2020.

44  Different missions have different names for these committees, such as local security committees or community protection committees. For the sake of clarity, this paper will use the catch-all term local protection committee (LPC). In addition to all three components of UN missions, LPCs are attended by host-state security sector actors. This provides an opportunity for the mission to build trust between local communities, civil society, and host-state military and police forces.

Table 1. Community engagement activities[45]

| | Civilian Component | Military Component | Police Component |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Awareness raising, information sharing, and relationship building** | • Meetings with local communities to sensitize them on the mission mandate<br><br>• Information sharing through activities such as public events, radio shows, or use of social media | • Informal engagement with community members during dismounted patrols<br><br>• Meetings with local communities in hotspots to sensitize them on the mission mandate | • Informal engagement with community members during dismounted patrols<br><br>• Information sharing in community meetings<br><br>• Meetings with local communities in hotspots to sensitize them on the mission mandate |
| **Information and peacekeeping-intelligence gathering and analysis** | • Gathering of information from community-alert network focal points<br><br>• Discussions with commuity members led by community liaison assistants during military patrols<br><br>• Gathering of information on communities' protection concerns and self-protection capacities | • Meetings with community members in hotspots to gather information | • Meetings with community members in urban areas and camps for refugees or internally displaced persons to gather information<br><br>• Gathering of information from local contacts and national police networks |
| **Conflict resolution and reconciliation and community-level peacebuilding** | • Facilitation of inter-community meetings to mediate conflict<br><br>• Capacity building workshops with civil society organizations or community-level groups and actors<br><br>• Disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) and community violence reduction (CVR) programming<br><br>• Quick-impact projects | • Support to local conflict-resolution and reconciliation efforts, usually in coordination with civilian sections<br><br>• Support for quick-impact projects, usually in coordination with civilian sections<br><br>• Facilitation of dialogue between host-state security forces and local communities | • Efforts to build community-level trust in the national police<br><br>• Support to local conflict-mediation efforts<br><br>• Capacity-building support to strengthen community members' self-protection measures |

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45 Certain activities also cut across multiple categories of community engagement and are carried out by multiple sections. Participation in LPCs can be considered an awareness-raising, information-sharing, and relationship-building activity, or an information-and peacekeeping-intelligence-gathering and analysis activity.

during field missions by joint protection teams (JPTs) or through other activities in the field. This information is then analyzed and reported on by the JPT or joint mission analysis center, which helps produce peacekeeping-intelligence and inform the mission's short- and long-term POC activities.[46] Community liaison assistants (CLAs) also play a crucial role in gathering information and peacekeeping-intelligence through their relationships with local communities, management of the community alert networks (CANs), language skills, and contextual and cultural understanding (see Box 2).[47]

Across all four missions, the civil affairs section works with influential community members, local authorities, civil society and religious groups, and vulnerable populations to understand and support local conflict-resolution and reconciliation efforts.[48] Conflict-resolution efforts usually take the form of meetings or discussions between or within communities, while reconciliation efforts are part of longer-term support to community-level peacebuilding. Conflict-resolution and reconciliation efforts can also involve strengthening traditional justice mechanisms, improving access to justice for marginalized populations such as IDPs, and building the capacity of civil society and community-based organizations.[49] In supporting and strengthening existing self-protection mechanisms, civilian mission personnel can build communities' capacity to prevent or de-escalate violent conflict.[50]

Missions' DDR sections, which usually handle DDR and CVR programming, build a protective environment by reducing access to arms and providing alternatives to violent conflict.[51] DDR programs focus on disarming, demobilizing, and reintegrating former combatants from armed groups, whereas CVR programs support community-level violence-reduction initiatives such as weapons-free zones in markets and schools. By working with both the community and armed actors, especially local militias and criminal groups, and by incentivizing them not to participate in armed conflict or criminal behavior, DDR and CVR personnel can reduce community-level violence.

Targeted quick-impact projects can be used in conjunction with DDR and CVR programming and as part of conflict-resolution and reconciliation efforts. These projects, including small-scale infrastructure projects and capacity-building workshops, can build communities' resilience to violence and address the triggers of conflict. For example, by building additional boreholes, missions can reduce tensions arising from limited access to clean water. Similarly, capacity-building workshops to strengthen community-level justice systems can help avert future local-level conflicts. Quick-impact projects also have the potential ancillary benefit of building trust between the community and the mission. To avoid exacerbating conflict or unrealistically raising expectations, however, they must be implemented with a "do-no-harm" approach.

Missions' human rights divisions also play an important role in community engagement. They sensitize community members on human rights, build their capacity to monitor and report on violations of international human rights and

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Moreover, two-way communication between missions and community members during LPC meetings is a prerequisite for them to function effectively. UN DPKO, DFS, and DPET, "Community Liaison Assistants in United Nations Peacekeeping Operations: Survey of Practice"; UN DPKO and DFS, "Peacekeeping Practice Note: Community Engagement"; UN DPKO and DFS, "Civil Affairs Handbook"; UN DPO, "Policy on the Protection of Civilians in United Nations Peacekeeping," November 2019; UN DPKO and DFS, "Guidelines: Quick Impact Projects," October 2017; Charles Hunt, "Protection through Policing: The Protective Role of UN Police in Peace Operations," International Peace Institute, February 2020; UN DPKO and DFS, "Manual on Community-Oriented Policing in United Nations Peace Operations," 2018.

46   Remote interview with mission-based UN civilian head of section, June 2020; Remote interview with mission-based UN civilian personnel, September 2020. The 2017 Peacekeeping-Intelligence Policy defines peacekeeping-intelligence as "the non-clandestine acquisition and processing of information by a mission within a directed mission intelligence cycle to meet requirements for decision-making and to inform operations related to the safe and effective implementation of the Security Council mandate." However, following concerns expressed by member states, a revised version was adopted in 2019, which left the term undefined. UN DPKO and DFS, "Peacekeeping Intelligence Policy," May 2017. For more information, see: Sarah-Myriam Martin-Brûlé, "Finding the UN Way on Peacekeeping-Intelligence," International Peace Institute, April 2020.

47   UN DPKO, DFS, and DPET, "Community Liaison Assistants in United Nations Peacekeeping Operations: Survey of Practice"; MONUSCO, "CLA Handbook: A Practical Field Guide for MONUSCO Community Liaison Assistants," August 2013; Remote interview with mission-based UN civilian personnel, June 2020; Remote Interview with mission-based UN civilian head of section, June 2020.

48   UN DPO, "The Protection of Civilians in United Nations Peacekeeping: Handbook"; UN DPKO and DFS, "Civil Affairs Handbook."

49   UN DPO, "The Protection of Civilians in United Nations Peacekeeping: Handbook."

50   It remains unclear both to what extent the four largest peacekeeping operations have put this into practice and how effective their ongoing efforts have been.

51   The design and extent of CVR programming vary across missions. For example, in MONUSCO, the DDR section and the stabilization support units jointly manage and carry out CVR programming. Center for Civilians in Conflict, "Community Engagement by MONUSCO with Reduced Field Presence."

**Box 2. Community liaison assistants**

Community liaison assistants (CLAs) are UN national staff who are employed to link missions to local communities.[52]   In three of the four largest missions, CLAs are managed by the civil affairs section but embedded in specific force battalions, usually with two CLAs deployed to each company operating base.[53] They jointly report to the civil affairs section and the military battalion where they are embedded to ensure that both receive regular contextual and situational updates.[54] CLAs are responsible for activities that fall under all three of the categories of community engagement (see Table 1): sensitization to the mission's mandate and POC efforts; relationship building and expectation management; information gathering and analysis; identification of communities' protection needs; project implementation; and local capacity building.[55] CLAs also support and facilitate community engagement through the JPTs, CANs and other early-warning networks, and LPCs.

CLAs are usually the only national and the only civilian staff in remote UN military bases. They are the interlocutors between communities and UN force personnel, who may not have a strong understanding of the local context, dynamics, or language. CLAs help mitigate potential misunderstandings and ensure that battalions' programming is informed by local dynamics and is people-centered. Because of their deployment deep in the field, their work alongside the uniformed component, and their specialized community engage-ment training, CLAs are able to engage community members who might be out of reach to other UN civilian staff. They can also support other civilian sections such as the child protection or human resources divisions. In CAR, for example, a CLA was alerted to the presence of an illegal detention center through his network of local contacts and was able to support the human rights division in negotiating and coordinating the release of the detainees.

In addition to directly engaging with communities and managing early-warning mechanisms, CLAs help assess and develop missions' community-protection plans, which establish the protection needs of specific communities.[56] When they are utilized, these plans are developed jointly by the civil affairs section and the uniformed components, with CLAs providing information on local self-protection mechanisms, community leaders, and armed groups.[57]

Of the four largest missions, UNMISS is the only one where CLAs are not managed by the civil affairs section and embedded in force battalions. Instead, they fall under the management of the heads of field offices so that they can more readily support all mission sections at the field level.[58] However, this decision has had the unintended consequence of creating additional bureaucratic barriers for UNMISS personnel to receive support from CLAs. As noted in a 2017 report on community engagement in UNMISS, "The process for requesting [CLAs'] assistance is somewhat lengthy and burdensome—in some locations requests have to be made 72 hours in advance." This can lead to missions underusing CLAs, thus losing out on a valuable community engagement resource.[59]

Adding to the confusion surrounding the role of CLAs in UNMISS, in 2014 the mission decided to turn fifty language assistant posts into CLA posts. This rollover meant that, unlike the other missions where CLAs are hired at either the GL-5 or GL-6 level, these CLAs were hired at the lower GL-4 level. As a result, UNMISS's

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52  The 2016 survey of practice of CLAs defines them as "national staff, deployed alongside uniformed components of United Nations peacekeeping operations and managed by Civil Affairs components as one part of the broader community engagement work of missions." UN DPKO, DFS, and DPET, "Community Liaison Assistants in United Nations Peacekeeping Operations: Survey of Practice."

53  UN DPKO and DFS, "Implementing Guidelines for Military Components of United Nations Peacekeeping Missions," February 2015.

54  UN DPKO, DFS, and DPET, "Community Liaison Assistants in United Nations Peacekeeping Operations: Survey of Practice."

55  Ibid., pp. 7–8; UN DPO, "The Protection of Civilians in United Nations Peacekeeping: Handbook"; UN DPKO and DFS, "Civil Affairs Handbook."

56  MONUSCO, "CLA Handbook."

57  UN DPO, "The Protection of Civilians in United Nations Peacekeeping: Handbook."

58  UN DPKO, DFS, and DPET, "Community Liaison Assistants in United Nations Peacekeeping Operations: Survey of Practice."

59  Spink, "'Let Us Be a Part of It.'"

CLAs are effectively little more than glorified language assistants. Confusingly, the mission still employs language assistants, who are also at the GL-4 level, and the roles and responsibilities of the two positions overlap. This overlap is especially confusing for the uniformed components that rely more heavily on CLAs than civilian sections, which usually have more national staff.[60] By hiring CLAs at a lower position and with a lower salary, UNMISS attracts less experienced and less educated candidates. As one UNMISS official noted, CLAs in UNMISS would never be put in a position to represent the mission to communities.[61] As this is arguably their most important function, UNMISS is missing out on a crucial resource for community engagement.

humanitarian law, and interview victims and witnesses of abuses during human rights investigations.[62] These efforts can feed into reporting and early-warning mechanisms by enabling community members to report violations to mission or humanitarian personnel.[63]

## The Military Component: Supporting Engagement in Volatile Areas

In the four largest UN peacekeeping operations, civilian sections carry out most of the structured, in-depth, community engagement activities.[64] However, due to the violent conflicts in which these missions operate, civilian staff do not have free access to many locations and communities. As a result, force personnel conduct much of the informal, spontaneous community engagement, especially with communities in volatile areas and hotspots.[65]

During patrols, force personnel occasionally engage with community members both informally and more formally through meetings with community leaders, civil society actors, and local authorities. Dismounted patrols and, to a lesser extent, integrated patrols provide the principal opportunity for the force to engage community members directly. Dismounted patrols project a more immediate, visible, and approachable presence than vehicle patrols and have "immense protective effects" for civilians.[66] Moreover, they make it easier to build and maintain trust at the community level and to gather contextual and situational information. As one senior military official noted, "You can't build rapport [with the community] sitting in a tank."[67] However, the extent to which force personnel engage with civilians during both vehicular and dismounted patrols remains unclear.

> Force personnel conduct much of the informal, spontaneous community engagement in volatile areas that civilian personnel cannot freely access.

During patrols, force personnel, usually together with CLAs and civil-military coordination officers or military observers, have the opportunity to speak with community members to gather contextual and situational information.[68] The force then uses this information to plan its POC activities and shares it with civilian sections such as the joint mission analysis center, human rights division, or child protection section. Civilian

60  GL refers to general staff who have been recruited in-country. UN DPKO, DFS, and DPET, "Community Liaison Assistants in United Nations Peacekeeping Operations: Survey of Practice"; Remote interview with mission-based UN civilian head of section, June 2020. Remote interview with mission-based UN civilian head of section, June 2020; Spink, "'Let Us Be a Part of It.'"

61  Remote interview with mission-based UN civilian head of section, June 2020.

62  UN DPO, "The Protection of Civilians in United Nations Peacekeeping: Handbook."

63  Written communication with mission-based UN civilian personnel, May 2020.

64  UN DPO, "The Protection of Civilians in United Nations Peacekeeping: Handbook."

65  Remote interview with mission-based UN civilian personnel, June 2020; Remote interview with mission-based UN civilian head of section, June 2020; Remote interview with mission-based UN military commander, July 2020; Remote interview with researcher for a research and advocacy organization, July 2020.

66  UN DPO, "The Protection of Civilians in United Nations Peacekeeping: Handbook."

67  Remote interview with mission-based UN military commander, July 2020.

68  Remote interview with mission-based UN military commander, July 2020; UN DPKO and DFS, "Civil Affairs Handbook."

sections may request force battalions to gather information on specific conflicts or contexts during their patrols.[69]

To ensure they are engaging with the full cross-section of community members, missions have also used ad hoc female engagement teams, which are small, all-female tactical units tasked with engaging communities, gathering information, and responding to gendered protection concerns. Building on the success of these teams, DPO's Office of Military Affairs is developing guidance on mixed-gender or all-female "engagement platoons" that are trained to engage with all community members.[70]

The force also supports civilian sections' community engagement activities by protecting civilians moving outside of UN bases in insecure areas and by conducting patrols prior to and during activities carried out by civilian sections.[71] For example, MINUSMA's military, police, and civilian personnel planned and carried out a joint operation in central Mali in 2019, with military and police patrols facilitating the deployment of civilian personnel to engage in dialogue with local communities. This operation helped deter attacks against civilians and facilitated conflict-resolution and reconciliation efforts.[72]

Community engagement by the force is most effective when done in coordination with and with the support of civilian sections. For example, this coordination can take place through community-level meetings, such as those convened by local protection committees (LPCs) in which civilian, military, and police personnel all participate, or through mechanisms such as JPTs. Conversely, when the force is not supported by civilian personnel or CLAs, it usually lacks the expertise, language skills, or contextual knowledge needed to effectively engage with local communities. While

civil-military coordination officers have community engagement expertise, they often lack an in-depth understanding of local social or conflict dynamics.

This lack of support from civilian sections or CLAs is primarily an issue for battalions deployed to forward or temporary operating bases. For example, the Ghanaian battalion in UNMISS's temporary operating base in Leer, South Sudan, lacks a CLA or a translator. As a result, soldiers reportedly lack an in-depth understanding of the local conflict dynamics and are only able to engage with the few community members who speak English. This makes it hard for the mission to gather situational and contextual information and for community members to report current or potential threats. To mitigate these challenges, starting in 2018, successive commanders of the battalion have informally used the national staff of national and international NGOs in Leer to help with translation.[73] This informal working relationship could endanger the perceived impartiality of these NGOs and put their national staff at risk of retaliation by armed actors that are hostile to the UN's presence.

## The Police Component: A Community-Oriented Approach

Community engagement is central to the POC efforts of UN police in the four largest peacekeeping operations. Through their community-oriented approach, UNPOL aim to prevent and change the conditions that lead to criminality rather than respond to individual incidents. This approach is only effective when it is grounded in two-way communication that builds mutual trust, fosters transparency, manages expectations, and helps the mission understand existing protection mechanisms.[74]

69  Remote interview with academic researcher, June 2020; Remote interview with mission-based UN civilian head of section, June 2020; Remote interviews with mission-based UN civilian personnel, June and September 2020.

70  Gretchen Baldwin and Sarah Taylor, "Uniformed Women in Peace Operations: Challenging Assumptions and Transforming Approaches," International Peace Institute, June 2020; MONUSCO, "MONUSCO's Engagement Teams: Promoting the Women, Peace and Security Mandate," October 2020.

71  Remote interview with mission-based UN civilian personnel, September 2020.

72  UN DPO, "The Protection of Civilians in United Nations Peacekeeping: Handbook," p. 54; Lauren Spink, "Strengthened Planning in UN Peacekeeping Operations: How MINUSMA Is Reinforcing Its Strategic Planning Unit," Center for Civilians in Conflict, August 2019.

73  Remote interview with South Sudanese national NGO staff member, May 2020; Discussion with UN commander of Ghanaian battalion, Leer, Unity State, South Sudan, March 2019.

74  UN DPO, "The Protection of Civilians in United Nations Peacekeeping: Handbook," p. 54; Lauren Spink, "Strengthened Planning in UN Peacekeeping Operations: How MINUSMA Is Reinforcing Its Strategic Planning Unit," Center for Civilians in Conflict, August 2019.

Most community engagement by UN police is conducted by individual police officers (IPOs), who have a broad range of specialized skills related to community-oriented policing, information gathering, and capacity building. During patrols, community engagement by IPOs is similar to engagement by force personnel. IPOs speak with community members during dismounted patrols to build rapport and relationships and gather information on their protection concerns and the local context.[75] Unlike force patrols, UNPOL operate primarily in urban areas and IDP and refugee camps such as the UNMISS POC sites. UNPOL also conduct joint patrols with the host state's police force, which not only affords UNPOL officers an opportunity to engage with local communities but also builds communities' trust in state security institutions.[76]

As UNPOL's focal points for community engagement, IPOs also support communities' existing protection mechanisms and strengthen their capacity to prevent and respond to criminal activity.[77] For example, all four of the largest missions have set up channels of communication for communities to report criminal activity or protection concerns to mission personnel or the national police. They can also support efforts to promote reconciliation and social cohesion.[78] These activities not only support long-term efforts to build a protective environment but also build trust between communities and missions.

For instance, in 2018, Ivorian IPOs in Bria, CAR, engaged with IDPs, the host community, local authorities, and armed groups to identify the concerns they felt UNPOL should be addressing. They also put in place mechanisms for community

> Community engagement is central to the community-oriented approach of UN police.

members to report incidents to the mission. The relationships built during the initial consultations allowed UNPOL to respond to reports of serious incidents within the IDP camp. For example, UNPOL officers used their established relationships with the local authorities and armed groups to negotiate the release of several girls who had been abducted from an IDP camp.[79] It also helped that the officers spoke French, had a general understanding of Western and Central African culture, and were operating in a relatively small community.

Although IPOs are well-placed to engage with local communities, their engagement is complicated by their coordination with and support to host-state law enforcement agencies.[80] Conducting joint activities with national police and building their capacity can reduce violence perpetrated by the host state against civilians and ensure that national police are responsive to threats to civilians at the community level. However, it can also undermine UNPOL's relationships with communities.[81] For instance, in February 2020, UNPOL officers in the Bentiu POC site in South Sudan conducted a joint patrol with government and opposition police in an area where youth were allegedly scavenging for items they could sell. During the patrol, government and opposition police reportedly physically assaulted a number of youths, including some minors, while the UN IPOs failed to intervene. Two NGOs that work with these youths reported that distrust of UNMISS increased markedly following the incident.[82] Although this example is atypical of joint activities between UNPOL and national police, it elucidates the tension between IPOs' community-oriented policing and their cooperation with national police.

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75  Hunt, "Protection through Policing"; Remote interview with mission-based UN military commander, July 2020; Remote interview with mission-based UN civilian personnel, September 2020.

76  UN DPKO and DFS, "Guidelines on the Role of United Nations Police in Protection of Civilians," August 2017; Hunt, "Protection through Policing."

77  Hunt, "Protection through Policing."

78  UN Security Council, *Letter Dated 24 October 2019 from the Secretary-General addressed to the President of the Security Council*, UN Doc. S/2019/842, October 25, 2019; Namie Di Razza, "UN Peacekeeping and the Protection of Civilians in the COVID-19 Era," IPI Global Observatory, May 22, 2020; Hunt, "Protection through Policing"; Remote interviews with mission-based UN civilian personnel, June 2020.

79  Remote interview with mission-based UN civilian head of section, June 2020; Remote interview with academic researcher, May 2020.

80  UN DPKO and DFS, "Guidelines on the Role of United Nations Police in Protection of Civilians," August 2017; Hunt, "Protection through Policing"; UN DPKO and DFS, "Manual on Community-Oriented Policing in United Nations Peace Operations."

81  Hunt, "Protection through Policing."

82  Remote interviews with international NGO officials, May and July 2020.

Unlike IPOs, formed police units (FPUs), which are armed, company-sized units that operate in hostile and volatile contexts, play a small role in community engagement, even if they are deployed to IDP sites.[83] During UNPOL patrols involving FPUs, IPOs handle almost all engagement with community members. This is because FPUs are often tasked with standing in for the force in specific situations, such as in the POC sites in South Sudan or during periodic outbreaks of conflict in Bangui in CAR. While there are examples of FPUs coordinating and supporting community engagement efforts, these are the exception.[84]

Due to their lack of expertise and training in community engagement and the tasks assigned to them, FPUs use a militarized approach rather than a community-oriented policing approach.[85] Nonetheless, as UN police officers, they are often put in positions that call for a people-centered approach and require community engagement skills. In such situations, their lack of community engagement expertise often shows. For example, in November 2019 in the Bentiu POC site in South Sudan, FPUs responded to a scuffle between teenage IDPs by using force instead of trying to de-escalate the situation, resulting in the death of one youth.[86] Though reportedly unintentional, this incident and the ensuing breakdown in trust between IDPs and the mission resulted from FPUs' militarized approach to policing.

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**Box 3. Unarmed civilian protection strategies and community engagement in South Sudan**

Several NGOs pursue unarmed strategies for the protection of civilians that could complement the community engagement work of UN peacekeeping operations. Unarmed civilian protection (UCP) is the primary methodology behind such strategies.[87] UCP emphasizes the importance of creating and strengthening protective environments for communities to build peace. It is usually divided into three programmatic tiers, which map relatively closely onto DPO's three tiers of POC, though they are practiced strictly by unarmed civilian NGO staff.[88] These include: (1) monitoring, including early warning and early response; (2) providing a protective environment through patrolling and protective accompaniment; and (3) capacity building, including support to community-level infrastructures for peace.[89] Relationship building is either a fourth tier of UCP or an underlying principle, depending on the source.

While a number of international NGOs implement activities that fall under the thematic umbrella of UCP, Nonviolent Peaceforce (NP) remains the largest UCP practitioner.[90] Due to NP's continuous relationships and two-way dialogue with community members and its knowledge of the local context, the organization's programming is informed and supported by community stakeholders. This local-level engagement also provides NP's field teams with in-depth information on community stakeholders, which reduces the likelihood that NP personnel will unknowingly engage with nonrepresentative or abusive actors or put their teams at risk of physical harm.

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83   Discussion with UNPOL officer, Bentiu, South Sudan, November 2019; UN DPKO and DFS, "Guidelines on the Role of United Nations Police in Protection of Civilians," August 2017; Remote interview with mission-based UN civilian personnel, June 2020.

84   Remote interview with mission-based UN civilian personnel, June 2020.

85   Remote interview with academic researcher, May 2020.

86   United Nations, "Report of the Joint Investigation Team Constituted to Investigate the Circumstances Surrounding the 21–23 November 2019 Incidents at the UNMISS Bentiu POC Site," December 2019; Remote interviews with international NGO officials, May and July 2020.

87   Some UN personnel consider the work of missions' civilian sections to fall under the broad category of unarmed POC efforts. This is disputed by humanitarian protection-focused NGOs and practitioners of UCP, who consider any activities carried out by UN peacekeeping operations to fall under the category of armed responses. For a UN POC response to be considered unarmed, that response in its entirety would have to not use armed action. That understanding holds true in practice, as community engagement by civilian sections in the field is generally supported by armed military or police personnel. Most humanitarian organizations consider any overt joint activities with armed peacekeeping personnel to breach their humanitarian principles and, in the case of NP, to undermine their identity as unarmed actors.

88   Jyothi et al., "Transitioning to Peace."

89   Birkeland, "Unarmed Civilian Protection."

90   These include Christian Peacemaker Teams, Peace Brigades International, and the Ecumenical Accompaniment Program in Palestine and Israel.

In South Sudan, where it has a static presence in eight of ten states, NP's protection programming encompasses all aspects of UCP.[91] Each of NP's state-level teams adapts its UCP programming to the local context. For example, in northeastern Jonglei state—the site of an ongoing conflict between the Murle and Nuer ethnic groups that has led to widespread kidnapping—the NP team focuses on child-protection activities, capacity building of community self-protection mechanisms, and mediation and conflict-resolution efforts. In volatile areas of Unity state, the NP team accompanies women gathering firewood in the bush and patrols hotspots between areas controlled by government and opposition forces.

Protection-focused NGOs have some comparative advantages over UN multidimensional peacekeeping operations. With small teams that mostly comprise national staff and are based in the communities where they work, NP personnel are able to gather local contextual and situational information more easily. Community members hesitant to speak with UN peacekeeping personnel will often more readily share that information with a humanitarian organization. For example, in Bentiu, South Sudan, in December 2018, women felt more comfortable providing early-warning information on sexual violence to NP than to the mission.

Similarly, government actors or armed groups may feel threatened by peacekeeping personnel, limiting the ability of missions to engage with the population or patrol hotspots.[92] This was the case in early 2020 in Western Equatoria, South Sudan, where government forces were limiting UNMISS's access to most areas controlled by an armed opposition group. NP's status as an unarmed, nonpartisan humanitarian actor meant that it was allowed to cross the front lines and engage with communities in opposition-held areas.

It should be noted, however, that protection-focused humanitarian organizations do not face the same constraints as UN peacekeeping operations. With no overarching protection mandate, they can more easily limit the scope of their response based on what they are realistically able to do. Moreover, with small, decentralized teams, it is easier for them to engage with communities to manage their expectations. As a result, unlike with UN peacekeeping missions, NP is not blamed for failures to protect civilians in areas where it does not operate.

NP and UNMISS are jointly exploring aspects of UCP that could be incorporated into the mission's community engagement efforts. UCP offers several best practices for the mission, especially in terms of relationship building, community acceptance of activities, and two-way communication. In some cases, however, UCP-based activities are successful because of the size and makeup of NP's teams. In these instances, UCP-based approaches complement UN peacekeeping efforts to protect civilians but could not be adopted by the mission.

## Challenges to Community Engagement

As the practice of community engagement has evolved from the initial mechanisms developed by MONUSCO to the mission-wide, people-centered approaches implemented by all four of the largest UN peacekeeping operations, challenges have emerged. These include challenges related to coordinating between mission components, training mission personnel, ensuring engagement is gender-sensitive and inclusive, avoiding putting community members at risk as a result of their engagement with mission personnel, and adapting to the COVID-19 pandemic. These challenges all hamper the effectiveness of UN peacekeeping operations' efforts to engage communities, ultimately reducing the effectiveness of POC.

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91  Nonviolent Peaceforce, "South Sudan," available at https://www.nonviolentpeaceforce.org/program-locations/south-sudan ; Remote interview with international NGO senior management official, May 2020.

92  Jyothi et al., "Transitioning to Peace."

## Siloed Approaches to Community Engagement

Just as POC requires a whole-of-mission approach, community engagement relies on coordinated efforts by the civilian, military, and police components of each mission. Community engagement is inherently crosscutting, and coordination across sections is mutually beneficial. As Alice Debarre and Namie Di Razza note, "Civilian, police, and military components have a better chance to be effective in their specific interventions when they share analysis and conduct joint planning of protection activities."[93] On the other hand, a siloed approach, with ineffective coordination or the underutilization of coordination mechanisms, can lead to gaps and duplication. According to a former UN consultant, "Especially in the field, components appear to work in isolation rather than align activities with other actors, which negatively affects rapid response in particular."[94]

Poor communication and coordination can cause gaps in missions' contextual information and situational awareness, especially when civil affairs personnel, CLAs, or other staff at the forefront of community engagement are not present (see Box 4). They can also cause duplication, as when multiple sections engage with the same community members. Both gaps and duplication reduce communities' confidence in missions. Communities reportedly get frustrated and confused when they share information with mission personnel who do not pass it along.[95] One civil society actor in North Kivu, DRC, noted that communities are tired of answering the same questions from MONUSCO personnel time and time again while nothing changes on the ground.[96] This ultimately reduces

> Improving coordination and breaking down the siloed approach to community engagement are priorities for the UN.

the effectiveness of community engagement, which depends on a foundation of confidence in missions' ability to protect civilians.

Improving coordination and breaking down the siloed approach to community engagement are priorities for the UN as a whole and for individual missions. This requires integrated strategic and operational planning. All four of the largest UN peacekeeping operations have working-level coordination mechanisms. At mission headquarters, strategic planning units (SPUs) and joint operations centers (JOCs) are usually cited as the mission components that handle strategic and operational planning. However, neither is specifically tasked with or particularly well-suited for it.[97] SPUs are tasked with strategic planning but are usually understaffed and underutilized.[98] Though JOCs can play a vital role in supporting strategic and operational planning, they do not have an explicit planning function and do not support planning at the operational level.[99]

At the field level, heads of field offices and field JOCs both play roles in tactical coordination and strategic engagement with communities. POC units also help coordinate community engagement at the field level as part of their coordination of POC activities. However, like SPUs and JOCs, the coordination role of POC units is not uniform across missions.[100]

## Training and Deployment

Effective community engagement relies on a baseline understanding of how to engage with communities, the conflict dynamics and cultural context in which the mission is operating, and the population's protection concerns. Most civilian

93    Alice Debarre and Namie Di Razza, "Pursuing Coordination and Integration for the Protection of Civilians," International Peace Institute, February 2020.

94    Written communication with former UN DPO Consultant, August 2020.

95    Remote interview with think tank researcher, July 2020; Remote interviews with mission-based UN civilian personnel and head of section, May and June 2020.

96    Remote interview with Congolese civil society actors, May 2020.

97    Debarre and Di Razza, "Pursuing Coordination and Integration for the Protection of Civilians"; IPI roundtable, September 9, 2020; Lauren Spink, "Data-Driven Protection: Linking Threat Analysis to Planning in UN Peacekeeping Operations," November 2018.

98    Spink, "Data-Driven Protection"; Spink, "Strengthened Planning in UN Peacekeeping Operations."

99    Written communication with UN consultant, October 2020.

100   Remote interview with researcher for a research and advocacy organization, July 2020; Remote interview with mission-based UN civilian personnel, June 2020.

> **Box 4. Consequences of siloed engagement in Alindao, Central African Republic**
>
> The negative impact of siloed approaches became clear in Alindao, CAR, when MINUSCA force personnel were unable to prevent a massacre of 112 residents of an IDP camp in November 2018. Of the five main hotspots in CAR at the time, Alindao was the only one that lacked a multidimensional presence with civilian, military, and police coordinating POC efforts, including on community engagement.[101] The absence of civilian staff—including a CLA, who had not been deployed due to bureaucratic barriers—meant that the Mauritanian force battalion lacked the situational awareness and early-warning information needed to anticipate an attack of this scale.[102] Furthermore, the Mauritanian battalion reportedly failed to engage with civilians on a regular basis and was not following the UN's best practices for community engagement. Effective community engagement could likely have picked up on the signs of heightened tensions, including an increasing number of civilians being attacked and killed by non-state armed groups and local militias in the days prior to the massacre.[103]
>
> Following the massacre, MINUSCA deployed additional personnel to Alindao and imbedded a CLA in the battalion. The mission also deployed civilian surge teams to improve outreach and early warning and strengthen community-level protection strategies.[104] While there are many factors that contributed to MINUSCA's failure to protect civilians in Alindao, its failure to coordinate between the different missions or support engagement with the local population highlight the need for integrated approaches to community engagement.

mission personnel interviewed for this paper, including both senior and more junior staff, spent years in their respective mission contexts. Force and UNPOL personnel, on the other hand, are usually only deployed for six to fifteen months.[105] This means that as soon as they begin to understand the context and build relationships with community members, their rotation ends.

These short-term deployments are a challenge both for missions and for communities. Successive battalion commanders may respond to situations differently. Moreover, handover to incoming battalion commanders, military observers, or individual police officers is often poor or lacking.[106] As one mission-based head of section noted, "They don't leave handover [notes], or they don't train their replacements."[107] As a result, these personnel often have to build up their own situational and

contextual understanding and usually begin their deployment by conducting fact-finding assessments. In doing so, they tend to use the same questionnaire or ask the same questions as the previous battalion.[108] This has the potential to fray relations with communities and is an inefficient way to generate and retain contextual knowledge.

These challenges are exacerbated by poor or uneven pre- and post-deployment training. UNPOL and force personnel reportedly lack a basic context-specific understanding of POC, let alone the skills, cultural awareness, and conflict sensitivity needed to effectively engage with communities.[109] Pre-deployment training materials developed by the UN for troop- and police-contributing countries briefly introduce community engagement approaches and mechanisms and explain that effective POC

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101  Namie Di Razza, "XXX," International Peace Institute, forthcoming, 2020.

102  Debarre and Di Razza, "Pursuing Coordination and Integration for the Protection of Civilians."

103  Amnesty International, "'Everything Was in Flames': The Attack on a Displaced Persons Camp in Alindao," December 2018.

104  UN Security Council, *Central African Republic—Report of the Secretary-General*, UN Doc. S/2019/498, June 17, 2019.

105  Remote interview with mission-based UN military commander, July 2020; Remote interview with mission-based UN civilian personnel, June 2020; Remote interview with academic researcher, June 2020.

106  Remote interview with researcher for a research and advocacy organization, July 2020; Remote interview with mission-based UN civilian head of section, June 2020.

107  Remote interview with mission-based UN civilian head of section, June 2020.

108  Ibid.; Remote interview with Secretariat-based UN civilian personnel, July 2020.

109  Remote interview with Secretariat-based UN civilian personnel, July 2020; Written communication with former UN DPO consultant, August 2020.

depends on missions regularly engaging and communicating with local communities.[110] However, in-mission induction and specialized trainings do not cover community engagement, with the exception of trainings for military observers, military liaison officers, and staff officers, which cover liaison, mediation, and negotiation skills. Notably, the standard three-day induction training allocates only forty-five minutes for cultural awareness and diversity, and specialized military and police induction trainings do not cover community engagement approaches or mechanisms.[111] Both pre-deployment and in-mission trainings focus on providing knowledge rather than the specific skills mission personnel need to engage with communities.[112]

Community liaison assistants (CLAs) mitigate some of these challenges by educating incoming battalions on the context, introducing them to key community members, and maintaining community-level linkages. However, CLAs cannot substitute for community engagement training or experience. Lack of training may also be less of a challenge for battalions from neighboring countries whose foundation of cultural and contextual understanding helps them engage with communities. However, deploying peacekeepers from neighboring countries presents other challenges. In MINUSMA, for example, ethnic Dogon communities perceived the Fulani-speaking Senegalese battalion as more responsive to the security concerns of Fulani communities. This reportedly was a challenge, though not an insurmountable one, when undertaking conflict-resolution and reconciliation efforts related to intercommunal violence between Dogon and Fulani communities.[113]

In addition to contextual and cultural knowledge, community engagement also requires the willingness, ability, and capacity to conduct dismounted patrols.[114] According to one academic, however, "Some [battalions] are super scared and will just go on patrols for eight hours without getting out of their vehicles."[115] In some instances, battalions operate under strict rules from their capitals on whether or not they can dismount to engage with communities when conducting vehicle patrols.[116] Moreover, training on dismounted patrolling is not currently required for force personnel. UN guidelines on operational readiness do not stipulate how force personnel should conduct patrols, and the POC training materials require only that troop-contributing countries confirm that their "troops are willing and able to conduct dismounted patrols."[117]

## Gendered and Inclusive Engagement

The HIPPO report calls for UN peacekeeping operations to adopt a more inclusive and gender-sensitive approach to community engagement. It also emphasizes the need for gender-related activities to be integrated into mission sections rather than relegated to gender units. Accordingly, the mandates of all four of the largest UN peacekeeping operations state that gender issues are crosscutting, and all four missions are mandated to deter or prevent conflict-related sexual violence as part of their POC efforts.[118] Inclusive and gendered approaches to community engagement are widely seen as critical to improving missions' POC efforts by increasing their contextual and situational awareness and community-level trust.[119]

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110 UN DPKO and DFS, "Comprehensive Protection of Civilians Training Materials for United Nations Peacekeeping Operations: Military Version"; UN DPKO and DFS, "Core Pre-deployment Training Materials for United Nations Peacekeeping Operations."

111 United Nations, "United Nations Peacekeeping Resource Hub," July 20, 2020, available at https://research.un.org/c.php?g=857100&p=6408245&preview=e90a550cde1195b3e7fc9460743d400a .

112 Remote interviews with mission-based UN civilian personnel, June and September 2020; Written communication with UN consultant, October 2020.

113 Remote interviews with mission-based UN civilian personnel and with mission-based UN military commander, June and July 2020.

114 Spink, "'Let Us Be a Part of It.'"

115 Remote interview with academic researcher, June 2020.

116 Ibid.; Remote interview with Secretariat-based UN civilian personnel, July 2020.

117 UN DPKO and DFS, "Operational Readiness Preparation for Troop Contributing Countries in Peacekeeping Missions Guidelines," December 2018; UN DPKO and DFS, "Comprehensive Protection of Civilians Training Materials for United Nations Peacekeeping Operations: Military Version."

118 UN Security Council Resolution 2499 (November 15, 2019), UN Doc. S/RES/2499; UN Security Council Resolution 2502 (December 19, 2019), UN Doc. S/RES/2502; UN Security Council Resolution 2514 (March 12, 2020), UN Doc. S/RES/2514; UN Security Council Resolution 2531 (June 29, 2020), UN Doc. S/RES/2531; Alexander Ilitchev, "Implementing the HIPPO Report: Sustaining Peace as a New Imperative?" International Forum for the Challenges of Peace Operations, June 2015, p. 6.

119 Remote interview with mission-based UN civilian personnel, September 2020.

UN peacekeeping personnel are generally cognizant of the need for more inclusive engagement, with guiding documents such as DPO's POC handbook emphasizing the need to engage women.[120] However, force and UNPOL personnel usually lack an in-depth understanding of the different protection concerns that women across the four contexts may have. Moreover, they lack the same degree of conflict sensitivity and cultural understanding as many of their civilian counterparts, and gender biases or norms may make them uncomfortable or unwilling to directly engage with women. This can be a problem as force and UNPOL personnel operate in volatile security environments where UN civilian personnel are not present and female community members are at higher risk of violence, including conflict-related sexual violence. To address this challenge, some peacekeeping operations have experimented with approaches and mechanisms to improve their engagement with female community members. As discussed above, these include ad hoc female force engagement teams and more structured engagement platoons, both of which aim to make missions' engagement more inclusive and gendered.

In many places, female community members may have a more in-depth understanding of community-level protection concerns than their male counterparts.[121] In South Sudan, for example, female community members move in and out of POC sites more frequently than men.[122] As Lauren Spink notes, women may also be able to engage with a broader range of community actors than men: "Women are often able to cross boundaries between communities in South Sudan that men cannot, as armed groups heavily target and kill men because they are suspected of being armed group members."[123]

A related challenge is the relative lack of female CLAs across all four missions.[124] Anecdotally, survivors of conflict-related sexual violence, whether male or female, are more likely to share sensitive information with a female translator from their same ethnic or linguistic group than a male one, regardless of the gender of international UN civilian or uniformed personnel accompanying them.[125] It is therefore possible that the effectiveness of female engagement teams or engagement platoons interacting with survivors of conflict-related sexual violence could be diminished if translation is strictly handled by male CLAs or language assistants, though further research is needed.[126] This finding is supported by MONUSCO's practice note on female engagement teams, which states that "a persistent lack of female [CLAs] and female Language Assistants... hampers effective communication with women in local communities."[127]

Inclusive and gendered approaches to community engagement are also hampered by the practical challenges and the taboos and stigmas facing women peacekeepers. Mission leaders often see women mission personnel, including female force personnel and CLAs, as needing protection and thus deploy them to safer missions or safer field sites within missions, or keep them on base.[128] For example, female CLAs in MINUSMA are usually assigned administrative tasks by their male Malian supervisors or counterparts instead of being given more dangerous assignments.[129] In addition, the lack of safe or secure accommodations or bathroom facilitates has been used as an excuse for not sending women peacekeepers to forward and temporary operating bases.[130] According to

120  UN DPO, "The Protection of Civilians in United Nations Peacekeeping: Handbook," pp. 107, 109.

121  Spink, "'Let Us Be a Part of It'"; Remote interview with South Sudanese national NGO staff member, May 2020.

122  Remote interview with South Sudanese civil society actor, May 2020.

123  Spink, "'Let Us Be a Part of It.'"

124  UN DPKO, DFS, and DPET, "Community Liaison Assistants in United Nations Peacekeeping Operations: Survey of Practice"; Remote interviews with mission-based UN civilian heads of section, June 2020.

125  Author's experience conducting mobile needs assessments in Unity State, South Sudan from 2018 to 2020; Remote interviews with mission-based UN civilian personnel, June and September 2020; Remote interviews with South Sudanese civil society actors, May 2020.

126  Remote interviews with field-, mission-, and Secretariat-based UN civilian personnel, June, July, and September 2020.

127  MONUSCO, "MONUSCO's Engagement Teams: Promoting the Women, Peace and Security Mandate."

128  Lotte Vermeij, "Woman First, Soldier Second: Taboos and Stigmas Facing Military Women in UN Peace Operations," International Peace Institute, October 2020; Baldwin and Taylor, "Uniformed Women in Peace Operations."

129  Remote interview with mission-based UN civilian personnel, June 2020.

130  Remote interview with academic researcher, July 2020.

Gretchen Baldwin and Sarah Taylor, "This keeps women peacekeepers from interacting with the local population, which limits their ability to carry out the mission's mandate." Ultimately, this reduces the inclusivity and effectiveness of community engagement.[131]

## Exposure of Civilians to Retaliation

In contexts where the UN is seen as a party to the conflict or a partisan actor, community engagement activities could inadvertently put civilians at risk. DPO's policy on POC therefore calls for a community-based "do-no-harm" approach to community engagement, and the POC handbook calls on peacekeeping operations to be aware of the potential risk of reprisal against civilians who engage with missions.[132] In CAR, the DRC, Mali, and South Sudan, there have been retaliatory attacks against community members who share information on current or potential threats or human rights violations with missions, UN humanitarian agencies, and NGO actors.

> Missions need to take a "do-no-harm" approach to community engagement to avoid inadvertently putting civilians at risk.

Such attacks are most prevalent in Mali. The violent extremist nature of certain armed groups in Mali and across the Sahel, in addition to armed groups' direct targeting of MINUSMA personnel, increases the risk to civilians.[133] In the center and north of the country, even going to a UN base to provide information, report an issue, or engage with mission personnel is a risk. Of greater concern, however, are reprisals against civilians who have engaged with MINUSMA. Civilians who have engaged with mission personnel have been kidnapped, tortured, or killed, predominantly by violent extremist groups.[134]

Armed groups and state actors in CAR, the DRC, and South Sudan also reportedly threaten and carry out reprisals to dissuade civilians from sharing information, albeit less systematically than many of the violent extremist groups in Mali.[135] In all four contexts, even the threat of violent reprisals can have a chilling effect on civilians' willingness to engage with missions. In late 2019 and early 2020, for example, UNMISS intervened to protect IDPs in Central Equatoria state who the South Sudanese national armed forces had relocated directly in front of their barracks. Widespread support for one of the non-state armed groups in Central Equatoria led the armed forces to view the mission's interaction with the local population as tacitly supporting the armed group it was fighting. As a result, they threatened to retaliate against civilians who engaged with the mission, which reportedly reduced the civilian population's willingness to interact with the mission in those locations.[136]

Missions use a variety of techniques and mechanisms to mitigate these challenges. MONUSCO developed its community alert networks (CANs) with this challenge in mind, and most CAN focal points remain anonymous from their fellow community members. This has not completely prevented them from being targeted, especially in the early stages when focal points were given new phones or radios to communicate with MONUSCO, making them identifiable to community members. Since then, the CANs have moved to more discreet forms of communication such as toll-free numbers, and reprisals against CAN focal points have become less frequent.[137] MINUSMA subcontracts some of its community engagement activities to national NGOs that can engage with communities without putting them at the same degree of risk. However,

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131  Baldwin and Taylor, "Uniformed Women in Peace Operations."

132  UN DPO, "Policy on the Protection of Civilians in United Nations Peacekeeping," November 2019, para. 35; UN DPO, "The Protection of Civilians in United Nations Peacekeeping: Handbook," p. 111.

133  IPI roundtable, September 2020; Remote interviews with mission-based UN personnel, June and September 2020.

134  Remote interview with mission-based UN civilian personnel and a mission-based UN military commander, June and July 2020; Namie Di Razza, "Protecting Civilians in the Context of Violent Extremism: The Dilemmas of UN Peacekeeping in Mali," International Peace Institute, October 2018.

135  Remote interviews with mission-based UN civilian personnel, June and September 2020; IPI roundtable, September 2020.

136  Written communication with mission-based UN civilian personnel, May 2020; Remote interview with international NGO official, May 2020; Author's experience in South Sudan, 2018-2020; Nonviolent Peaceforce internal reports, January–February 2020.

137  Remote interview with mission-based UN civilian personnel, September 2020.

the mission lacks the means to oversee and assess the impact of these NGOs. In addition, as Di Razza notes, "[To] protect themselves from retaliation due to a presumed association with MINUSMA, many NGOs have distanced themselves from the UN."[138]

Training on "do-no-harm" approaches for incoming UN personnel, especially force and UNPOL, remains inadequate. Investigators from missions' human rights divisions are trained on how to avoid reprisals and protect witnesses, including by mapping local stakeholders and community dynamics before they engage and being discrete during their engagement. However, most mission personnel are not trained in how to identify and avoid situations where their engagement with communities could put civilians at risk.[139]

## Community Engagement during the COVID-19 Pandemic

The challenges outlined above sit at the intersection between the contextual realities of conflict environments and the way the UN system operates in those environments. The COVID-19 pandemic, on the other hand, is an external challenge confronting all peacekeeping operations. Public health considerations and measures to contain the spread of the virus have to be integrated into any "do-no-harm" approach to community engagement. As Di Razza explains, "With COVID-19, the feasibility of protection strategies based on such extensive contact with local populations is being challenged."[140] As a result, missions have reduced engagement with most conflict-affected communities to reduce the spread of the virus, especially in densely populated refugee and IDP camps.

Beyond the challenges linked to preventing the spread of COVID-19, many communities blame international staff of peacekeeping missions and

humanitarian organizations for bringing the virus to their countries. There may be some evidence for that claim.[141] Regardless, this belief makes it harder for UN international personnel to engage with communities, even when they take mitigating measures such as wearing masks and social distancing. As a result, community engagement activities such as local protection committees, conflict-resolution and reconciliation efforts, and DDR projects have been curtailed or halted altogether.[142]

Despite these restrictions on direct engagement, the mechanisms missions have put in place over the years have helped them continue gathering information from the focal points for the CANs and other early-warning networks. Missions have also taken steps to continue community engagement efforts remotely. The civil affairs sections of at least three of the missions have scaled up their remote engagement with community members and civil society actors, including remote capacity-building workshops, in order to maintain dialogue at both the national and local levels. For example, UNMISS's civil affairs section hosted an online video conference with civil society actors in South Sudan to find practical ways for the mission to support the implementation of the peace agreement in the context of COVID-19.[143]

While mobile phones or smartphones have allowed for continued engagement, they have also reduced engagement to a small and relatively privileged elite, especially in rural areas. As one participant in an IPI roundtable on community engagement noted, "Access to devices and smartphones has produced another dynamic of consolidating engagement to elite groups within communities, whether it's community leaders, civil society, or other individuals who have access to these tools, and has therefore excluded other segments of society."[144]

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138  Di Razza, "Protecting Civilians in the Context of Violent Extremism."

139  IPI roundtable, September 9, 2020.

140  Di Razza, "UN Peacekeeping and the Protection of Civilians in the COVID-19 Era."

141  Remote interviews with international NGO officials, May and July 2020; Remote interview with mission-based UN agency staff member, May 2020; Remote interview with mission-based UN military commander, July 2020.

142  Remote interview with mission-based UN civilian personnel, September 2020; Di Razza, "UN Peacekeeping and the Protection of Civilians in the COVID-19 Era."

143  IPI roundtable, September 9, 2020; Remote interview with mission-based UN civilian head of section, June 2020; UNMISS, "CAD Report on Virtual Panel Discussion with Civil Society," internal draft report, June 2020.

144  IPI roundtable, September 9, 2020.

However, these technologies have also opened new channels for dialogue. Some communities that may not have been willing to meet in-person have engaged remotely in dialogue aimed at conflict resolution or reconciliation. In eastern Jonglei, South Sudan, for example, UNMISS has used mission resources to enable representatives from the Murle and Nuer communities to have remote discussions on the longstanding issue of the kidnapping of children. As one UN official noted, "It was easier to bring people who were not sitting physically in the same room together to talk to each other. The psychological barriers were easier to overcome."[145]

For military personnel, COVID-19 restrictions have also necessitated a reduction of POC and community engagement activities. In some cases, armed actors have taken advantage of this reduced presence of peacekeepers, as well as of other international and state actors. As Di Razza explains, "Measures put in place to limit [COVID-19's] propagation exacerbate existing vulnerabilities, create new protection needs, and hamper the capacities of protection actors operating in conflict zones."[146] According to one military officer, the force has had to halt engagement both at the street level and with key leaders and to cut all but vehicular patrols.[147] Nonetheless, through CLAs, the force has been able to continue engaging with key community members by phone, allowing it to maintain a base level of situational awareness.

> In the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, missions have taken steps to continue community engagement efforts remotely.

Like the force, UNPOL have curtailed their daily engagement with community members and joint activities with national police. Due to the high risk of COVID-19 in large refugee and IDP camps, UNPOL have almost completely halted their activities in these areas.[148] For example, UNPOL's reduced presence in POC sites in South Sudan has curtailed UNMISS's ability to gather information and peacekeeping-intelligence and respond to protection concerns.[149] The reduction of joint activities with the South Sudanese police has also limited UNPOL's ability to provide a check on the excessive use of force by state security forces enforcing COVID-19 curfews.[150]

COVID-19 presents a fundamental challenge to every aspect of peacekeeping. With its emphasis on relationship building and in-person engagement, community engagement is no exception. However, certain community engagement approaches and mechanisms can mitigate some of the challenges presented by the pandemic. These include long-term trust building, well-established channels of communication for early warning, and mechanisms for sharing strategic information and public messaging to counter rumors and disinformation.[151] COVID-19 has allowed mission personnel to test assumptions of how they can operate and remain relevant with limited direct engagement and has led missions to experiment with creative solutions to community engagement challenges.[152]

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145  Ibid.

146  Di Razza, "UN Peacekeeping and the Protection of Civilians in the COVID-19 Era."

147  Remote interview with mission-based UN military commander, July 2020.

148  This reflects the status as of the end of July 2020. Remote interview with international NGO official, July 2020.

149  Remote interviews with international NGO officials, May and July 2020.

150  Sam Mednick, "COVID-19 Brings Abuse and Other Fears to Displaced Women in South Sudan," New Humanitarian, May 6, 2020.

151  Di Razza, "UN Peacekeeping and the Protection of Civilians in the COVID-19 Era."

152  IPI roundtable, September 9, 2020.

# Conclusion and Recommendations

Improving community engagement by peacekeeping missions is vitally important both to increase the effectiveness of their mandated POC efforts and to ensure that those efforts are informed and understood by local communities. However, engaging with civilians in a coherent and impactful way is a challenge, especially considering that civilian, military, and police personnel deploy for different lengths of time and have different skills, experience, and contextual knowledge.

Since the HIPPO report's call for a people-centered approach to POC, UN documents such as the 2018 peacekeeping practice note and DPO's POC handbook have increasingly reinforced the importance of community engagement. However, while there is a system-wide acknowledgement of the need for increased community engagement—evidenced by the inclusion of explicit community engagement language in mission mandates in the past few years—missions' community engagement efforts continue to suffer from shortcomings.

Established community engagement mechanisms such as joint protection teams (JPTs), community liaison assistants (CLAs), and community alert networks (CANs), together with new mechanisms such as engagement platoons, mitigate some of the challenges and shortcomings of missions' community engagement efforts. More in-depth and comprehensive training for force and UNPOL personnel on their roles in community engagement and increased support of communities' existing protection mechanisms could further improve missions' ability to engage with, and ultimately protect, civilians.

The following are recommendations for the UN Security Council, Secretariat, and peace operations to improve missions' ability to engage with communities and ultimately to better protect civilians in conflict.

1. **The UN Security Council should continue to refine the language on community engagement in upcoming mandates for MINUSCA, MINUSMA, MONUSCO, and UNMISS.**

While all four missions' mandates include language on community engagement, expanded language could emphasize that community engagement should be undertaken with a people-centered and whole-of-mission approach. This is especially important for MINUSCA and MINUSMA, which have the least comprehensive language on community engagement. Unlike MONUSCO and UNMISS, their mandates do not stress the role of the force and UNPOL in community engagement. While both missions' military and police components already carry out and support community engagement efforts, language emphasizing a whole-of-mission approaches could encourage them to focus more on community engagement.

2. **DPO and the Integrated Training Service should expand the community engagement modules in the updated Core Pre-deployment Training Materials.**

The Core Pre-deployment Training Materials and the Comprehensive Protection of Civilians Training Materials both introduce incoming military and police personnel to community engagement. However, with the growing importance of community engagement by force and UNPOL personnel as part of their POC efforts, pre-deployment trainings need to focus more on community engagement. These expanded trainings should both increase participants' knowledge of what community engagement is and provide them with the skills to implement it in practice.

To effectively undertake community engagement, incoming military and police personnel also need a baseline understanding of the conflict dynamics and cultural context in their area of operation. To this end, DPO and the Integrated Training Service should work with each mission to include material on general conflict sensitivity and community engagement in specialized in-mission trainings and post-deployment debriefing to support the identification of lessons learned. These community engagement training modules should be based on the "do-no-harm" approach reflected in the Comprehensive POC Training Materials by prioritizing the safety and security of the community members the mission engages with.

3. **DPO's Office of Military Affairs should consider requiring troop-contributing countries to train their forces on conducting dismounted patrols.**

Local-level community engagement by military personnel predominantly takes place during patrols, especially dismounted and specialized patrols. The guidelines on the operational readiness of troop-contributing countries, set to be reviewed in December 2020, could include training on dismounted patrolling in the guidelines on "special to arms skills." This would help ensure that incoming military personnel have the skills and willingness to conduct dismounted patrols and to respond to the needs of communities more readily.

4. **DPO's Office of Military Affairs should continue to develop policy, guidance, best practices, and training materials on engagement platoons.**

In developing policy and guidance, DPO's Office of Military Affairs, in coordination with the Integrated Training Service, should consider developing in-mission training modules for engagement platoons. These could include training on the local cultural context and conflict dynamics, context-specific approaches to gendered engagement, coordination with joint protection teams, and the use of community liaison assistants. The Office of Military Affairs could also consider integrating material on engagement platoons into the sections on community engagement in pre-deployment training materials.

5. **DPO and the Policy, Evaluation and Training Division (DPET), in conjunction with the four largest UN peacekeeping operations, should consider ways to optimize the use and management of community liaison assistants (CLAs).**

Expanding the number of CLAs and their roles and responsibilities would make missions more effective in engaging with communities. CLAs should be embedded in every battalion and, where possible, be deployed with battalions to forward and temporary operating bases. Where the security

context does not allow CLAs to be deployed to each base, as in MINUSMA, CLAs could support battalions remotely. Even remotely, CLAs could provide contextual information to military personnel and increase their situational awareness through community alert networks and other early-warning networks.

The growing emphasis on a gendered approach to community engagement puts in stark relief the lack of gender equality among CLAs. To ensure that community engagement approaches and mechanisms, including engagement platoons, can engage with all community members, it is imperative that missions provide female CLAs the same opportunities as their male counterparts. Moreover, missions should assess when female CLAs may provide a comparative advantage.

DPO and DPET should also standardize the roles, responsibilities, and management of CLAs across missions. Currently, guidance on CLAs predominantly comes from a MONUSCO-specific CLA handbook developed in 2010 and a CLA survey of practice developed by DPKO in 2016.[153] The development of a CLA handbook would help ensure uniformity in the roles and responsibilities of CLAs across missions and be a useful reference for incoming military personnel, especially battalion commanders. In addition, DPO and DPET should consider supplementing this handbook with a CLA training module to ensure that CLAs themselves have a baseline understanding of their role and have the skills and capacity to engage community members, work with missions' uniformed components, and represent their missions to local communities.

Embedding individual CLAs in force battalions with joint reporting to the civil affairs section and the force would bring UNMISS in line with the structure of the other three missions. It would also require building the capacity of the current CLAs or hiring new CLAs at the GL-5 or GL-6 levels with increased remuneration and a wider range of tasks and responsibilities. This new structure would make it easier for incoming personnel to understand the function of CLAs and for battalions

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153  MONUSCO, "CLA Handbook"; UN DPKO, DFS, and DPET, "Community Liaison Assistants in United Nations Peacekeeping Operations: Survey of Practice."

in forward or temporary operating bases to have the support of CLAs on the ground or remotely.

6.  **DPO and the Policy, Evaluation and Training Division should continue to explore where unarmed civilian protection (UCP) practices could complement the community engagement efforts of UN peacekeeping operations.**

While not every aspect of UCP is applicable to UN peacekeeping operations, UCP practices such as relationship building and two-way communication could help missions improve their community engagement. UCP methods and strategies for community engagement could be incorporated into in-mission training with support from UCP practitioners who understand the local context. UNMISS, which is mandated to explore the applicability of UCP techniques, can play a key role by developing a body of best practices and lessons learned. These lessons could be particularly useful when examining community engagement needs and gaps during the upcoming transition to a special political mission in Sudan or during the ongoing downsizing of MONUSCO.

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