



Accountability System for the Protection of Civilians

After-Action Reviews

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SUMMARY

An after-action review (AAR) is an internal discussion that is usually held following any action, activity, operation, or project conducted by a mission or at UN headquarters. It gathers all the people involved in the planning and conduct of the activity or operation in question in order to reflect on what happened, why it happened, what was learned, what follow-up action should be taken, and how it can be done better next time. It is usually held in a conversational format and aims to identify lessons and provide actionable recommendations. It is captured through short notes that are circulated within the mission or the UN Secretariat. The purpose of AARs is to inform future projects and actions and improve the UN's efficiency and effectiveness.¹

AARs are solely used for learning purposes—not for accountability—and are conducted regularly. Their voluntary, integrated, and collaborative approach focusing on reflections and lessons learned offers significant opportunities to improve processes and inform future activities.

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RELEVANCE TO THE PROTECTION OF CIVILIANS

AARs are mentioned in “The Protection of Civilians in United Nations Peacekeeping Policy,” revised in November 2019. The policy states that AARs are necessary “in situations where civilians have been killed or subject to physical violence (including sexual violence) in proximity to a UN base or in a situation where the mission knew or should have known about an imminent threat to civilians and failed to respond within their capabilities.” In these instances, “an inquiry or after-action review must be undertaken as soon as possible to identify gaps in mission information gathering analysis, coordination and/or response.”²

The “Protection of Civilians in United Nations Peacekeeping Handbook” establishes that

in consultation with the mission's Policy and Best Practices Officer (PBPO) or Best Practices focal point, the POC Adviser or Focal Point and any other relevant mission component may conduct regular reviews of protection mechanisms, processes and tools, or regular assessment of the impact of the mission's POC activities in the most affected areas (for example, an understanding of how patrolling is aligned to threats against or vulnerabilities of civilians). Further, critical issues with POC tools, challenges or crises that have occurred should be captured by carrying out lessons-learned studies and AARs and shared with Headquarters to

¹ Guidelines for After-Action Reviews, internal UN document.

² UN Department of Peace Operations (DPO), “The Protection of Civilians in United Nations Peacekeeping Policy,” November 1, 2019, p. 20.

support organizational learning across missions and inform future strategic planning and guidance.³

The POC Handbook also emphasizes that AARs should include the following “to ensure POC considerations are taken into account”: community perceptions; metrics established during the planning process; feedback from the POC adviser; and feedback from humanitarians and other protection actors. These AARs “may take place over an hour, or multiple days, depending on the scope of the operation and the AAR,” and further “background and guidance on considerations for the conduct of an AAR, as well as relevant templates” can be provided by the mission’s policy and best practices officer.⁴

Examples

AARs were conducted in the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) in February 2016 to look into the mission’s response to attacks on the POC site in Malakal, as well as into the incidents in Juba in July 2016. An AAR was also conducted to review MONUSCO’s action in Beni in 2019 following demonstrations and growing criticism of the inability of the mission to protect civilians from attacks by the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF).

The UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) conducted an AAR on its Campaign for the Protection of Civilians (CPOC) in Koro and Bankass subregions (the Folon Campaign). It listed several best practices, such as the participation of international journalists in the campaign to amplify the voice of communities and the need for the military and civilian sections to systematically and collectively debrief before and after missions.⁵ MINUSMA also conducted AARs after the Ogossagou massacre in March 2020. The first AAR was led by the joint operations center and focused on the civilian response, whereas the second was launched internally by the military component, with an expectation that the head of office would ultimately consolidate both reviews.⁶

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RULES, GUIDELINES, AND METHODOLOGY

Governing rules

The UN Department of Peace Operations (DPO) has developed internal guidelines for AARs, formalizing the definition, purpose, participants, timeframe, methodology, and the template for reports. The guidelines have recently been consolidated as an annex to a new DPO–UN Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA) policy on knowledge management and organizational learning.

³ UN DPO, “The Protection of Civilians in United Nations Peacekeeping Handbook,” May 1, 2020, p. 56.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 129.

⁵ UN DPO, “The Protection of Civilians in United Nations Peacekeeping Handbook.”

⁶ Interview with MINUSMA official, March 2020.

Process and functioning

Any member of a team, office, or unit in a mission can suggest an AAR. If a best practices officer is present in a field mission, they may also suggest an AAR. AARs should be conducted immediately after the project or event and are usually conducted within two weeks. The length of an AAR varies depending on the project or action being reviewed.

All involved in the project or action at all levels should be present and part of the discussion. During the AAR, the facilitator (usually the best practices officer) leads the discussion, touching upon: (a) the purposes and principles of an AAR (i.e., that it is a learning exercise); (b) the process and methodology of an AAR, by asking participants to identify specific “peacekeeping processes” involved in the action, as well as the methodology and sequence utilized by the team to carry out the task; (c) the objectives and deliverables of the task, to measure and discuss whether the primary objectives and aims of the project were delivered; (d) best practices; (e) areas of improvement; and (f) actionable recommendations for similar projects in the future.

After the AAR discussion, the note-taker submits the evaluation to the best practices officer and to the Policy and Best Practices Service of DPO. AARs do not have to be cleared by senior management.

Given their flexibility and informal character, AARs are easily initiated, and it seems that they are frequently used in missions mandated to protect civilians. Their impact, however, is difficult to substantiate, given that their findings and recommendations are not the object of mandatory follow-up actions.

There is generally a sense within missions that a lot of lessons learned are collected but that these lessons are not always fully and meaningfully integrated into the mission's processes and approaches.⁷

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ANALYSIS

AARs are not intended to be accountability tools. Rather, they are meant to function as learning tools. They allow for a fluid reflection on an action, with actionable recommendations for those carrying out similar actions in the future. Given their casual nature (they are often in a conversational format), they provide an opportunity to develop a more anecdotal understanding of the action undertaken and to collaboratively bring about change for future processes and operations. Because AARs are mostly voluntary exercises, however, their use remains inconsistent, and their impact limited.


⁷ Interview with UN mission officials, February–March 2020.

Timing

Regular process	X	Given that AARs can be conducted following any action, activity, or project, they can be thought of as regular monitoring and reporting tools. For example, each POC activity undertaken (community outreach, patrolling, a workshop, etc.) could be reviewed in an AAR.
Extraordinary measure after incident	X	AARs can also be conducted following a specific incident or response.

Actors and answerability structure

AARs are conducted on a voluntary basis and are demand-driven. Because they can be initiated by any member or section of the mission on any kind of activity or action, they can vary in scope. AARs provide an opportunity to openly discuss and learn from an action or event and to put forward actionable recommendations and lessons learned. In that sense, they can be seen as a way for individuals and units to hold themselves accountable for what they do in a collaborative way and to commit to learn from their action and improve them in an integrated manner. Given that the Policy and Best Practices Service of DPO collect and record AARs held at the mission level, the Secretariat can also play a role in promoting change.

 Held accountable by	Individuals	Unit			Mission	Secretariat	Contributing countries	Security Council/ 5 th Committee	Member states	Population	Other
		Military	Police	Civilian							
Individuals											
Unit/ section/ component	Military	X	X	X	X	X					
	Police	X	X	X	X	X					
	Civilian	X	X	X	X	X					
Mission		X	X	X	X	X					
Secretariat											
Contributing countries											
Member states											
Security Council/ 5th Committee											

Scope and objective

AARs collect best practices and lessons learned. They are meant to be reflective and conducted in way that allows for casual conversation about what occurred and what could be improved. They are a learning tool, not a performance review.

Collect best practices and lessons learned	X	AARs serve to collect not only best practices but also what did not work well or could be improved. They are meant to inform future practice and to be honest, inclusive, and reflective exercises.
Track performance		
Establish facts and circumstances		
Establish responsibility		
Identify structural and systemic issues	X	AARs can contribute to identifying structural issues that affected a particular activity or response.

Type of accountability

AARs offer a form of organizational accountability, and contribute to performance accountability, even though they are not set up or intended to act as a performance review. Rather, they are a learning and self-reflection opportunity for individuals and teams.

Outcome

Learn	Disseminate and integrate internally	X	AARs serve to collect not only best practices but also what did not work well or could be improved. The final report is circulated to relevant members within the mission, and a copy is kept by the Policy and Best Practices Service. Most AARs are made available to UN personnel on the internal Policy and Practice Database.
	Account for publicly		
Correct	Improve internal processes	X	By collecting lessons learned, AARs can contribute to improving internal processes and prompting corrective actions.
	Inform the selection of personnel		
Sanction	Recommend sanctions		

	Establish incentives		
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Independence and impartiality

AARs are conducted by the units or teams that participated in a given action, activity, or project. The best practices officer usually facilitates AARs by leading a discussion to draw out lessons learned, which can contribute to ensuring that the AAR has some level of impartiality. However, a specific team, office, or unit can also conduct its own AAR, which can limit its impartiality. As noted by an individual familiar with the process, when teams, offices, or units conduct their own AARs, they usually document positive things, while negative events are less likely to be documented or discussed.⁸ Organizationally, there is a reluctance to speak about failures.

Given that the “convening authority” rests with any team, office, unit, or best practice officer and that AARs are often convened on a voluntary basis, they may also be used inconsistently.⁹

Inclusivity

All individuals involved in the action under review must participate in AARs. There is no obligation for a mission component to engage in the review, which can affect its inclusivity. There is also no obligation to include partners or beneficiaries in the assessment, as, in practice, AARs remain internal tools.

Transparency

AARs are confidential and are only circulated and stored within the UN system. The Policy and Best Practices Service periodically reviews all AARs and provides an analysis of their recommendations with potential system-wide impact. The relevant offices at UN headquarters and the Policy and Best Practices Service keep a copy of AARs.

However, the dissemination of the AARs within the UN system, including to mission personnel, remains limited in practice, even if the Policy and Best Practices Service section issues a regular newsletter with links to a selection of AARs and lessons-learned notes. UN officials interviewed for this project have raised concerns about a persisting

⁸ Interview with UN official, January 2020.

⁹ Certain UN policies, such as the crisis management and casualty evacuation policies, require AARs after major incidents.

culture of confidentiality. Many have acknowledged that personnel that could learn from them do not systematically receive relevant AARs for their consideration.

Follow-up mechanisms		
Possible follow-up mechanisms	X	While actionable recommendations are made during the AAR process, there is nothing set up in the system to ensure systematic follow-up—the report is circulated, but there is no way to enforce and monitor the implementation of recommendations. There are also bandwidth and capacity deficits with regards to follow-up.
Available enforcement measures	X	While actionable recommendations are made during the AAR process and the report is circulated, there is no mechanism enforcing and monitoring the implementation of recommendations. There are also bandwidth and capacity deficits with regards to follow-up.
Transmissibility to other mechanisms	X	AARs can be considered during the course of other assessments or investigations, but there is no formal mechanism to transmit AARs to other mechanisms.