

The Primacy of Politics and the Protection of Civilians in UN Peacekeeping

JENNA RUSSO AND RALPH MAMIYA



Cover Photo: Personnel from the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA) visit Kouki, is a small town in the sub-prefecture of Nana Bakassa, where agricultural areas are regularly damaged by cattle herders, causing friction between communities, July 22, 2015. MINUSCA.

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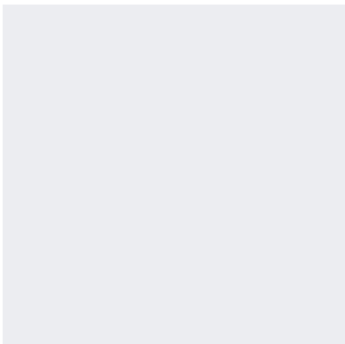
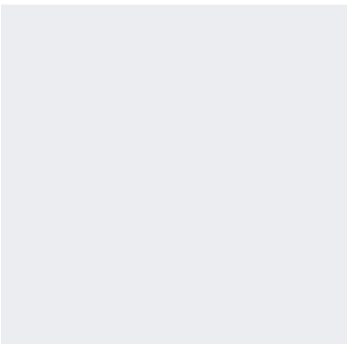
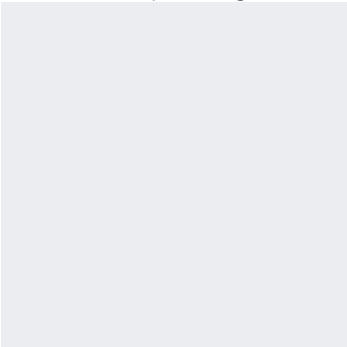
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ABBREVIATIONS

CAR	Central African Republic
DPO	UN Department of Peace Operations
DRC	Democratic Republic of the Congo
HIPPO	High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations
MINUGUA	UN Verification Mission in Guatemala
MINUSCA	UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic
MINUSMA	UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali
MONUSCO	UN Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo
ONUSAL	UN Observer Mission in El Salvador
POC	Protection of civilians
SRSG	Special representative of the secretary-general
UNMISS	UN Mission in South Sudan
UNTAES	UN Transitional Administration for Eastern Slavonia, Baranja and Western Sirmium
UNTAG	UN Transition Assistance Group

Executive Summary

Support to political processes and the protection of civilians (POC) are arguably the two most prominent mandated tasks for multidimensional UN peacekeeping operations. Policy guidance and independent reviews have made clear that politics and protection must be linked, yet within missions, POC is often considered in parallel to political work and is not always effectively incorporated into a political vision.

There are at least three reasons why missions' POC and political work should be integrated. First, sustainable protection can only be achieved by addressing the drivers of violence via a political solution. Second, political processes can be deeply destabilizing, and applying a protection lens may help reduce risks to civilians. Third, connecting missions' POC work with their political strategy can help ensure that POC is undertaken more strategically.

There are several potential entry points for linking missions' POC and political work. One is mapping and analysis: mapping exercises that include an analysis of the motivations behind various forms of violence can help missions facilitate more sustainable protection and address the underlying drivers of conflict. A second is planning and strategy: when both POC and political personnel are involved in planning and strategy development, they can ensure that POC and political strategies are working toward a common goal. A third entry point is negotiated agreements: when a cease-fire or other agreement is being negotiated, missions can advocate for the inclusion of language on POC. A fourth entry point is the potential for political processes to create an enabling environment for POC and, in turn, for POC to create an enabling environment for the durability of political agreements. A cross-cutting focus on local-level processes is also crucial to any efforts to link POC and politics.

While POC and political processes can be mutually reinforcing, there are also some areas of friction. When state forces are among the main perpetrators

of violence, efforts to hold state perpetrators accountable are often in tension with the need to maintain host-state consent for the peacekeeping presence. A related area of friction is the complex relationship between providing political support for the host state and extending its authority in ways that may or may not enhance civilian safety or contribute to durable peacebuilding. Another challenge is how to ensure that POC work is guided by a clear political strategy in contexts where there are high levels of ongoing violence or conditions are not “ripe” for a political process. In some cases, POC and missions' political objectives can also come into friction due to competition over the allocation of resources. Finally, at the local level, challenges can arise when POC and political efforts are disconnected from the national-level strategy.

To address these challenges and better integrate their POC and political work, member states, mission leadership, and other mission personnel can consider the following recommendations:

- Mission leaders should create and share a strategic vision for the mission that drives the work of individual components toward a common goal. They should also integrate POC into their overall strategic approach, including in the political work of the mission, and advocate for joint mission planning cells that include all mission components.
- SRSs should advocate for POC both in the lead-up to political processes and during negotiations. They should also advocate for frameworks and other agreements with national security forces to prevent conflict-related sexual violence.
- Where appropriate, heads of POC and political components should jointly develop their respective strategies, which should directly reflect the mission concept and mission plan.
- Member states should clarify what is meant by “political primacy in peacekeeping” and should expand conceptions of this term beyond formal agreements at the national level to include local-level processes.

Introduction

Support to political processes and the protection of civilians (POC) have been emphasized in recent independent reviews of peacekeeping and elevated by member states and the Security Council. Despite being foundational pillars of contemporary UN peacekeeping, these two priorities do not always fit together clearly in planning and operations.¹ Policy guidance and independent reviews make clear that politics and protection must be linked, yet within missions, POC is often considered in parallel to the mission's political work and is not always effectively incorporated into a political vision for the mission.²

The purpose of this report is to examine how UN peacekeeping missions' POC and political work are understood in relation to one another in terms of planning and operations and to consider opportunities for better integrating them, both formally and informally. While the "primacy of politics" is a broad concept that encompasses dynamics beyond the mission or country level, including politics among Security Council members and other international and regional actors, this report focuses specifically on the mission level. At the same time, this report takes a capacious view of politics to include not only formal political processes at the national level but also formal and informal processes that may take place in multiple spaces, including at the local level.

This report argues that missions' political and POC work should be better integrated and identifies key practical entry points as well as obstacles to such integration. Currently, coherence between politics and POC is clear in theory and policy, but in practice missions pursue protection and political tasks as separate lines of work, missing potential entry points to draw on their mutually enforcing capabilities. Such challenges to the strategic

integration of mandated tasks are not unique to political and POC work, but the prominence of these mandates and their potential tensions warrant particular attention.

The report begins by outlining the concept of political primacy and the elevation of POC within UN peacekeeping. It then identifies entry points for better connecting missions' political and POC work, including in mapping and analyses, planning and strategies, negotiated agreements, the creation of enabling environments, and local-level processes. The report also examines areas of friction between POC and missions' political work, in particular when the state is one of the main perpetrators of violence. It concludes with recommendations for member states, mission leadership, and other mission personnel to better integrate POC and politics.³

Why Focus on Politics and POC?

Missions' work to support political processes and protect civilians has become central to multidimensional peacekeeping mandates. In 2015, the High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations (HIPPO) emphasized the so-called "primacy of politics" in UN peacekeeping in response to the trend toward robust and militarized approaches that began in the 1990s and accelerated in the 2010s.⁴ The assertion that "political solutions should always guide the design and deployment of UN peace operations" was reiterated in 2018 as part of the Action for Peacekeeping (A4P) initiative and member states' Declaration of Shared Commitments on UN Peacekeeping Operations.⁵ While the primacy of politics has been largely uninterrogated conceptually, it is premised on the idea that support to a political process should serve as a reference point for missions' work in other

1 Ralph Mamiya, "Protection of Civilians and Political Strategies," International Peace Institute, May 2018.

2 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, p. ix; UN Department of Peace Operations (DPO), "The Protection of Civilians in United Nations Peacekeeping: Handbook," 2020, p. 23.

3 The findings draw on desk research and interviews with current and former UN staff, including mission leadership and personnel from missions' political affairs and protection components, as well as other substantive experts.

4 UN Doc. A/70/95-S/2015/446; Interview with member of HIPPO, August 2022; UN General Assembly and Security Council, *Report of the Panel on United Nations Peace Operations*, UN Doc. A/55/305-S/2000/809, August 21, 2000.

5 UN Doc. A/70/95-S/2015/446; Interview with member of HIPPO, August 2022; UN General Assembly and Security Council, *Report of the Panel on United Nations Peace Operations*, UN Doc. A/55/305-S/2000/809, August 21, 2000.

areas, including support to strengthening the security sector, the rule of law, human rights, and sustainable development.⁶ As noted by one former mission leader, while the UN has largely reduced the primacy of politics to the promotion of national peace agreements, it would be more usefully applied to a broader conception of politics, including the political roots or motivations of violence against civilians.⁷

At the same time, POC has become central to the mandates of UN multidimensional missions over the last two decades, growing in both scope and focus. Over this period, the Security Council has prioritized POC among mandated tasks.⁸ The secretary-general and member states have described a mission's ability to protect civilians as the "yardstick" by which mission success is measured, and failures to protect have in some cases eroded trust in peacekeepers and the UN more broadly.⁹ During the growth of POC mandates, the Security Council increasingly used mandate language that highlighted the use of force, while the Secretariat ever more volubly stressed protection through political dialogue and efforts to build an environment conducive to protection.

This section provides an overview of various understandings of the primacy of politics and POC, particularly as POC is envisaged vis-à-vis the mission's political work.

Understanding the Primacy of Politics

Since the release of the HIPPO report in 2015, member states have continued to reiterate their adherence to the so-called "primacy of politics," though this concept is not always well defined. The

Action for Peacekeeping (A4P) Declaration of Shared Commitments spends seven paragraphs highlighting the primacy of politics, though these pledges focus mainly on the relationship between peacekeeping stakeholders—such as the secretary-general, troop contributors, council members, and the host state—while elements of local politics are left to two paragraphs on sustaining peace.¹⁰

The primacy of politics, like the protection of civilians, is a diplomatically useful rubric because it can mean different things to different people. "Politics" can refer to at least three things in peacekeeping. First, it can refer to a "political approach," often contrasted with "other" approaches, such as stabilization or militarized peacekeeping. Second, it can refer to a high-level political strategy above the level of the mission. Finally, and central to this paper, "politics" can refer to mission-level action to develop, maintain, and implement political solutions to conflict, which are understood as necessary for consolidating peace and sustainably protecting civilians.

Regarding the first understanding of politics—as a "political approach"—the primacy of politics is often positively contrasted with a variety of "recent trends" in peacekeeping, from "stabilization" and "counterterrorism," to "militarized peacekeeping," to the protection of civilians.¹¹ Critiques of these trends all have merit, but contrasting them with political primacy does not always shed much light on how to improve peacekeeping. Indeed, some of the above approaches to peacekeeping developed as creative attempts to reach a political solution, or at least to establish consensus within the Security Council and with host states. A common thread of critiques is that these approaches become goals that substitute for a political solution to a particular

Missions often conceive of protection and political tasks as two separate lines of work, missing potential entry points to draw on their mutually enforcing capabilities.

6 Adam Day et al., "The Political Practice of Peacekeeping: How Strategies for Peace Operations are Developed and Implemented," United Nations University Centre for Policy Research and Stimson, 2020.

7 Written comment from former mission leader, November 2022.

8 UN Security Council Resolution 1894 (November 11, 2009), UN Doc. S/RES/1894.

9 UN Security Council, *Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict: Report of the Secretary-General*, UN Doc. S/2019/373, May 7, 2019.

10 Richard Gowan, "The Politics of Action for Peacekeeping," United Nations University Centre for Policy Research, February 19, 2019.

11 Jean Arnault, "A Background to the Report of the High-Level Panel on Peace Operations," in *Global Peace Operations Review: Annual Compilation 2015* (Center on International Cooperation, 2016); Louise Riis Andersen, "The HIPPO in the Room: The Pragmatic Push-Back from the UN Peace Bureaucracy against the Militarization of UN Peacekeeping," *International Affairs* 94, no. 2 (March 2018); Adam Day et al., "Assessing the Effectiveness of United Nations Peacekeeping in South Sudan / UNMISS," Report 2/2019, Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, 2019.

conflict, leaving missions strategically adrift; peacekeepers become focused on ancillary activities (detering spoilers, promoting the rule of law, investigating human rights abuses) that do not contribute directly to sustainable peace and may even make the conflict worse.

At the same time, there is little indication that the council intentionally crafted today's "stabilization" or "protection" missions with only those goals in mind; indeed, missions such as the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) and the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) are often left relying on what can appear to be predominantly military approaches when a conflict's political process stalls or breaks down. In this respect, such missions often pursue the basic approach of their more successful predecessors—creating a modicum of stability and security to, in the words of the Brahimi report, "create the space in which peace may be built"—yet are expected to maintain this approach for extended, seemingly open-ended periods of time.¹²

A second way of understanding the primacy of politics is to recognize it as an echelon of strategic engagement above the mission, at the level of the Security Council and key member states with influence over the conflict parties. When commentators and policymakers describe peacekeeping as a "tool to support political solutions," they are frequently implying that there is a larger political plan of which peacekeeping is usually only a small, if important, part.¹³ Critics of peacekeeping often bemoan that peacekeepers are now deployed to contexts with no peace to keep, but this is not necessarily a new or decisive phenomenon. The UN Truce Supervision Organization (UNTSO) was established to support a weak agreement, and there was essentially no agreement in place when the UN Operation in the Congo (ONUC) was deployed; yet "successful" missions such as the UN Observer Mission in El Salvador (ONUSAL) and the UN Transition Assistance Group (UNTAG) in Namibia also deployed to contexts with no or weak agreements.

Arguably, the Security Council has placed too much emphasis on conflict parties' formal promises of a political process in lieu of a real political strategy. This results in some missions, pressured to be seen as furthering a political solution, fruitlessly chasing the latest mediation exercise, even when all factors indicate that the parties are not interested in or capable of an agreement.¹⁴ This is not to deny the importance of a political process or a political solution, only to point out that these terms point toward undisputedly desirable goals while offering no guidance on how to reach them. It is then the "solution" part of "political solution" that is the operative, if unhelpful, element of the phrase.

From this second perspective, it is the Security Council, not mission leadership, that needs to ensure the primacy of politics. Historically, successful missions have often been in service of the coherent foreign policy goals of council members and other relevant states. The success of peacekeeping missions in Central America, Namibia, and Mozambique can be attributed in large part to the end of the Cold War and the resulting end of American and Soviet funding to parties in those conflicts. A mission's ability to further a political solution can thus depend on council members and other states acting coherently, using peacekeepers as one tool for a course of action upon which they have already decided.

Finally, the primacy of politics can be understood as a mission-level activity, pursued by the special representative of the secretary-general (SRSG) and special envoys to the region, the mission leadership team, and other staff, potentially with assistance from UN headquarters and member states' in-country diplomatic representatives. Statements from the UN Secretariat and HIPPO indicate that political primacy should translate into action by the mission as well as by member states. Many of the most successful peacekeeping missions were political actors, holding together political processes that would likely have fallen apart or consolidating

¹² UN Doc. A/55/305-S/2000/809, p. viii.

¹³ António Guterres, address to the opening ceremony of the 30th Ordinary Session of the Assembly of the African Union, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, January 28, 2018.

¹⁴ Potential examples include successive agreements in the Central African Republic (CAR), Darfur, and South Sudan, which many political analysts recognized as weak but special representatives of the secretary-general (SRSGs) had little choice but to promote and devote mission resources to supporting.

popular support for peace even where armed actors were skeptical. Even if it is beyond the power of a mission or SRSG to convince determined adversaries to lay down their arms, active political work at the mission level has historically been a key factor for success by any measure.

While no single interpretation of the primacy of politics is better or more complete, this report focuses on this third conception of politics because effective engagement in politics as a mission-level activity has been a common factor among all successful missions (see Box 1). This report takes a broad view of “the political,” including local mediation and both formal and informal local politics as well as national agreements. This report also focuses on the work of SRSGs even though, in modern missions, SRSGs and peacekeeping missions are rarely the only, or even the lead, third-party political actors on the ground. Many conflicts today have a complex web of political actors, from UN special envoys to African Union mediators to envoys from powerful member states. This variety of political engagement can bring added value but, like military forces, can also create its own burdens if actors are deployed without strategy or coordination. The African Union and scholars have both warned that mediation efforts can compete with each other, making it essential to establish clear roles.¹⁵ Assessing the added value of multiple political actors is a context-specific exercise, however, and a full examination of the relationship between various political envoys and POC is beyond the scope of this report. Nonetheless, SRSGs play a key role, even if they are only one political actor among many, in leveraging both their political and their POC mandates.

While the UN Security Council and member states have elevated POC and the primacy of politics as two central pillars of UN peacekeeping, it is not always clear how missions are expected to pursue these two sets of priorities together.

Understanding the Protection of Civilians

While the UN Security Council and member states have elevated POC and the primacy of politics as two central pillars of UN peacekeeping, it is not always clear how missions are expected to pursue these two sets of priorities together. The UN’s own policies and guidance reference the importance of linking POC with missions’ political strategies. For example, the 2019 Department of Peace Operations’ (DPO) policy on POC recognizes that “the most effective and sustainable way of protecting civilians is to ensure stability, peace and security through inclusive political processes and sustainable solutions to conflict.”¹⁶ The UN’s 2020

POC Handbook notes that mission leaders at all levels “must ensure that the protection of civilians is at the heart of the mission’s political strategy... and ensure that POC is mainstreamed into all plans and performance processes.”¹⁷ Yet at the mission level, this is not always

operationalized. Further, while POC and missions’ political objectives can complement each other in some areas, they may also come into friction, as outlined below.¹⁸ These potential frictions have not been fully interrogated by member states.

UN policies and guidance have thoroughly defined and conceptualized POC mandates in UN peacekeeping.¹⁹ The DPO policy includes five key elements: (1) POC is ultimately the primary responsibility of the host state, not the peacekeeping mission; (2) POC-mandated missions have a positive and prioritized task to protect that nonetheless can only be implemented within their resources and capabilities; (3) POC

15 See: Konrad Huber, “Conflict Analysis in Peace Processes: Pitfalls and Potential Remedies,” in *Managing Peace Processes: Process Related Questions: A Handbook for AU Practitioners* (Addis Ababa and Geneva: African Union and Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, 2013); Charles T. Hunt, “Case Study 3: Waiting for Peace: A Review of UNMISS’ Political Strategy in South Sudan,” in Day et al., “The Political Practice of Peacekeeping.”

16 UN DPO, *Policy: The Protection of Civilians in United Nations Peacekeeping*, UN Doc. 2019.17, November 1, 2019.

17 UN DPO, “The Protection of Civilians in United Nations Peacekeeping: Handbook,” 2020, pp. 5 and 26.

18 Mamiya, “Protection of Civilians and Political Strategies.”

19 The 2019 DPO policy on POC defines POC as “without prejudice to the primary responsibility of the host state, integrated and coordinated activities by all civilian and uniformed mission components to prevent, deter or respond to threats of physical violence against civilians within the mission’s capabilities and areas of deployment through the use of all necessary means, up to and including deadly force.” POC is commonly framed within the three tiers of protection, in which tier 1 refers to protection through dialogue and engagement, tier 2 is physical protection from violence, and tier 3 is creating a protective environment. For more on this, see: UN DPO, “The Protection of Civilians in United Nations Peacekeeping: Handbook.”

Box 1. A history of politically centered peacekeeping

Many proponents of the move to centralize politics in peacekeeping frame their goal as a return to a time when peacekeeping missions were politically engaged and solution-oriented.²⁰ The implication of a “return” to the primacy of politics suggests that there was an era when peacekeeping was fundamentally focused on political solutions. There is no such golden age in the historical record, however. The Security Council deployed the earliest peacekeepers with a clear political strategy—the very idea of peacekeeping was itself a creative political solution—but most of them, being purely military, lacked active political good offices. Indeed, the lack of a political end-state for missions such as UNTSO, the UN Military Observer Group in India and Pakistan (UNMOGIP), the UN Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus (UNFICYP) and the UN Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF) has resulted in their almost indefinite life span.²¹

The immediate post–Cold War period witnessed a peacekeeping renaissance. However, the political elements of the geostrategic position and approach of these successful missions varied greatly. Some of these missions, such as UNTAG and ONUSAL, deployed with strong support from key council members as well as commitment to a political agreement from the conflict parties; others, like the UN Transitional Administration for Eastern Slavonia, Baranja and Western Sirmium (UNTAES) and the UN Verification Mission in Guatemala (MINUGUA), deployed and operated with little dedicated attention from the council. Some missions had mandates with clear political benchmarks that remained constant, such as UNTAG’s electoral mandate; others evolved into more defined roles, such as ONUSAL’s evolution from a human rights monitoring mission in a conflict with “no peace to keep” to an active mediator and key supporter of elections and the integration of security forces; and others pursued more open-ended goals that resemble modern missions, such as the mix of demobilization and interposition with institution building pursued by MINUGUA, UNTAES, and the UN Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET). Some of these missions addressed conflicts whose resolution was hastened by the end of the Cold War, while others, such as the UN Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL), addressed conflicts that were exacerbated rather than ameliorated by the new geopolitical order. Thus, it is hard to find a common thread among these missions with respect to external political forces, whether from the council, relevant member states, or geostrategic currents.

Nonetheless, a commonality among missions that were deemed to be politically “successful” was the political action they took at the country level. All of these missions were led by a civilian official who has received at least some credit for their success, notably Martti Ahtisaari in UNTAG, Aldo Ajello in the UN Operation in Mozambique (ONUMOZ), and Alvaro de Soto in ONUSAL.²² The heads of these missions are all credited with exercising effective political judgment and preventing or resolving conflict. In most cases, they pursued effective politics through national-level engagement with the conflict parties, particularly host governments.

This emphasis on in-country political judgment does not mean, however, that these missions did not face the challenging choices between principles and expediency that sometimes confront peacekeeping missions with a POC mandate. Indeed, ONUSAL and MINUGUA both had strong human rights mandates, requiring careful political engagement by the head of mission. Many of these missions also understood politics as more than formal negotiations with the conflict parties. In the case of UNTAG, Ahtisaari recognized that the mission required legitimacy, which could only come through “engaging directly with the Namibian people, not simply with political elites.”²³ UNTAES similarly supported local-level political engagement between the ethnic Serb and Croat communities.

20 Arnault, “A Background,” p. 51; Day et al., “The Political Practice of Peacekeeping,” p. 8; Riis Andersen, “The HIPPO in the Room.”

21 This stems in part from the fact that many of them were premised on peace agreements or cease-fires that were rushed, partial, or incomplete. This is not to argue that these missions are ineffective (although others have made that claim; see Grieg and Diehl, below) but rather that it is difficult to see any significant political prioritization in these missions apart from their being grandfathered in to stagnant political processes. See: J. Michael Grieg and Paul F. Diehl, “Peacekeeping: A Barrier to Durable Peace?” *Yale Journal of International Affairs* (2012).

22 See several chapters in *The Oxford Handbook of United Nations Peacekeeping Operations*, Joachim Alexander Koops et al., eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Lise Morjé Howard, “United Nations Transition Assistance Group (UNTAG),” Mats Berdal, “United Nations Operation in Mozambique (ONUMOZ),” Lise Morjé Howard, “United Nations Observer Mission in El Salvador (ONUSAL),” and Funmi Olonisakin, “United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL).”

23 Howard, “United Nations Transition,” p. 298.

action comprises the full spectrum of activities from prevention to response; (4) POC action entails coordinated activity by all civilian and uniformed personnel and hence is not strictly military or civilian in nature; and (5) the use of force is authorized to protect civilians. This concept clarifies many past questions around POC mandates but leaves open two key questions relevant to the relationship between POC and politics: (1) whether a POC mandate can serve as an umbrella for a variety of “robust” military actions; and (2) whether POC is a means to an end or an end in itself.

Regarding the breadth of the POC mandate, experts and policymakers have argued that numerous “robust” peacekeeping actions fall exclusively within the POC mandate. When the Security Council authorized the UN Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo’s (MONUSCO) Force Intervention Brigade (FIB), for instance, legal experts argued that the mission’s Chapter VII POC mandate already allowed it to undertake the kind of “neutralization” envisioned for the FIB; the unprecedented “offensive” mandate was thus a political message to troop contributors rather than a new authorization to use force.²⁴ Commentators and mission staff have also noted that MINUSMA often engages in activities related to counterterrorism under the rubric of its POC mandate.²⁵

This report construes POC more narrowly than some of the above frames, with a focus on the substantive direction that a POC mandate provides rather than courses of action it may permit. This substantive direction includes a focus on the civilian population and a recognition of peacekeepers’ role in supporting their safety and security. This framing is important because

critiques of the prioritization of POC often equate a focus on POC with missions’ withdrawal from political processes and a militarized approach to peacekeeping.

While the trends of stabilization, militarization, and POC prioritization are concurrent and inform each other, their relationship is not necessarily causal, and they remain conceptually distinct. While POC advocates have frequently focused on improving peacekeepers’ military effectiveness—which they often view as a critical gap—they have also persuasively argued that stabilization and counterterrorism mandates create risks or threats to civilians.²⁶ Throughout the development of POC practice, policymakers and advocates have argued over whether the POC mandate is a means to an end or an end in itself.²⁷ The language used to define POC in peacekeeping, which was born from humanitarian language, carries strong implications that the POC mandate should not be instrumentalized in the pursuit of other objectives. This report, in accordance with DPO policy, recognizes that the POC mandate is not and should not be considered an end in itself; it is not enough for any mission simply to protect in the absence of a strategic objective.

Nonetheless, the POC mandate can still inform a mission’s larger objective by focusing attention on specific courses of action, creating new opportunities for engagement, and restricting the mission from taking certain actions. It may, in this regard, be compared to the human rights–based approach to development.²⁸ The human rights–based approach does not replace the goal of sustainable development, as merely respecting rights without supporting other aspects of development is not sufficient; instead, it directs development in a more positive direction (toward programs that promote

24 Scott Sheeran and Stephanie Case, “The Intervention Brigade: Some Legal Issues for the UN in the Democratic Republic of the Congo,” *International Peace Institute*, November 2014, pp. 16–19.

25 See: Adrian Gallagher, Charles T. Hunt, and Blake Lawson, “One Crisis, Multiple Norms: Strengthening Human Protection in Mali and the Sahel,” *IPI Global Observatory*, June 17, 2022.

26 See, for example: “The Kigali Principles on the Protection of Civilians,” available at https://r2pasiapacific.org/files/2942/2018_kigali_principles.pdf; Charles T. Hunt and Shannon Zimmerman, “Counter-Terrorism & Peace Operations: The Impact of UN Security Council Approaches to Tackling Terror in Pursuit of Peace,” *Securing the Future Initiative*, July 2022; Namie Di Razza, “Protecting Civilians in the Context of Violent Extremism: The Dilemmas of UN Peacekeeping in Mali,” *International Peace Institute*, October 2018.

27 See, for example: Welmoet Wels, “The Many Meanings of Protection of Civilians: A Truth Universally Acknowledged?” *IPI Global Observatory*, October 10, 2019; Joachim A. Koops and Christian Patz, “UN, EU and NATO Approaches to the Protection of Civilians: Policies, Implementation and Comparative Advantages,” *International Peace Institute*, March 2022, p. 2; and Ralph Mamiya, “Protection of Civilians Strategy: A Greater Role for the Council,” *Global Peace Operations Review*, January 14, 2016.

28 See: UN Sustainable Development Group, “Human Rights-Based Approach,” available at <https://unsdg.un.org/2030-agenda/universal-values/human-rights-based-approach#:~:text=Universal%20Values,-Principle%20One%3A%20Human&text=The%20human%20rights%2Dbased%20approach,promoting%20and%20protecting%20human%20rights>.

and protect international human rights) and creates limits on sustainable development (by recognizing that programs that do not respect rights are ultimately unsustainable). Similarly, the POC mandate focuses missions' efforts on civilians—thereby informing strategic objectives—and limits the ability of peacekeepers to ignore violence against civilians, no matter how expedient feigned ignorance may be.

Linking POC with Political Processes

There are at least three reasons why missions' POC and political work should be integrated. First, as alluded to above, sustainable protection can only be achieved by addressing the drivers of violence via a political solution. Second, political processes can be deeply destabilizing. In some cases, armed groups may ratchet up their use of violence against civilians in advance of a political process to increase their bargaining position.²⁹ In other cases, a political agreement may trigger increased violence, which has been shown to undermine implementation of the agreement.³⁰ Therefore, integrating a protection lens into a mission's political work may reduce risks to civilians. Third, connecting missions' POC work with a broader political strategy can help ensure that POC is undertaken more strategically. Because protection threats are usually much broader in scope than what a mission can address, anchoring POC within a political strategy can help focus the allocation of mission resources and reduce the risk of a reactionary approach to POC.³¹

While UN guidance and those interviewed for this research generally agree that POC and missions' political approaches should be linked, there are no mechanisms for systematically ensuring that this takes place. The purpose of this section is to explore some of the areas in which missions' POC and political work may be linked at a variety of levels.

While the international level can be important to political primacy, this report focuses on mission-level dynamics, including mapping and analysis, planning and strategies, negotiated agreements, creation of an enabling environment, and local-level dynamics.

Mapping and Analysis

Missions often focus on preventing and responding to physical violence when implementing their POC mandates, including by identifying hot spots where violence is taking place. However, one former mission leader noted that there is a gap when it comes to understanding the motivations for violence: "If you don't understand the motivation, it's hard to have a political approach to reduce this violence. This is where the political strategy of the mission should provide the foundation for a POC strategy. What I saw in most missions was the opposite—there is very rarely an understanding of the motivations for violence."³² For example, understanding whether violence is used as a form of predation, extraction, revenge, or as a result of collateral damage affects both the responses to that violence and the types of levers that may be effective in getting belligerents to the table. This was reiterated by a POC adviser who noted, "Armed groups target civilians for a given purpose; if you don't understand why this is taking place, you will not succeed."³³

Thus, mapping exercises that include an analysis of the motivations behind violence can help missions facilitate more sustainable protection and address the underlying drivers of conflict more broadly. This requires regular engagement to understand both the drivers of the conflict and the needs and desires of those affected, which should not be assumed to be uniform across a country.³⁴ It also requires an understanding of how violence and armed groups at the national level are connected to local-level violence. The results of this mapping can then form the basis of both the political strategy

29 See, for example: Reed M. Wood, and Jacob D. Kathman, "Too Much of a Bad Thing? Civilian Victimization and Bargaining in Civil War," *British Journal of Political Science* 44, no. 3 (July 2014).

30 Madhav Joshi, "A Comparative Analysis of One-Sided Violence and Civil War Peace Agreement Implementation," *Stability: International Journal of Security and Development* 9, no. 1 (2020).

31 Interview with MINUSMA personnel, July 2022; Interviews with integrated operations team members, July 2022; Interview with MINUSMA official, August 2022.

32 Interview with former MINUSCA leader, July 2022.

33 Interview with UN official, August 2022.

34 Interview with UN official, August 2022.

and the POC strategy.

While mapping exercises already take place within missions, they are usually not done jointly by those working on POC and political processes. For example, POC threat assessments and matrices are usually conducted and tailored to speak to a tactical or military audience and are separate from the political analysis conducted for mission leadership and for reporting to member states. While it may be appropriate for missions' POC and political components to produce uniquely formatted products that serve their specific needs, these should be based on a holistic analysis and common understanding of the context. The quarterly forward-looking assessments required by the DPO policy on POC could contribute to such a common understanding, but these are not systematically used by all mission components missions and are not always based on joint analyses. Joint mission analysis centers can also provide common analysis for missions but will only prioritize this kind of mapping if directed to do so by mission leadership.

Mapping exercises that include an analysis of the motivations behind violence can help missions facilitate more sustainable protection and address the underlying drivers of conflict more broadly.

Planning and Strategies

Interviewees repeatedly raised issues related to planning and strategy in discussing the interplay between politics and POC. They frequently cited an insufficient degree of holistic planning while also feeling burdened by the existing planning requirements. Many analyses of peacekeeping's core challenges have cited a lack of effective strategic planning. The Brahimi report made extensive recommendations to address what it portrayed as an acute planning deficit, and many scholars and policy analyses have referenced shortcomings in planning over the subsequent two decades.³⁵ For example, the landmark 2009 study on POC by the

UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO) focused on the lack of planning for POC in peacekeeping missions, and one of DPKO's earliest guidance tools was a framework for POC strategies.³⁶

As a result, all peacekeeping and large special political missions include strategic planner posts, and the Secretariat has moved forward with a number of initiatives over the past decade to strengthen mission planning. Currently, missions are required to develop a mission concept, which is "a statement of intent and strategy on how a field mission... plans to implement its Security Council mandate."³⁷ They are also required to create a mission-specific POC strategy, which is either a stand-alone document or integrated into the mission concept. The purpose of the POC strategy is to set out the required principles, strategic objectives, and benchmarks;

assess threats, risks, and capacity; and define the mission approach to POC.³⁸ Many missions also develop additional strategies, such as political strategies and communications strategies, though these are not currently required.

Some of these requirements have drawn criticism from mission leaders and working-level staff, and a number of interviewees viewed such processes as burdens that outweigh their value.³⁹ One former mission leader felt that the mission concept and mission plan are documents produced by and for headquarters in New York, with little connection to the realities of the mission on the ground.⁴⁰

These planning requirements, burdensome as they may be, are driven by two related but distinct concerns. First, formalized planning requirements give the UN Secretariat and the Security Council

35 See: UN Doc. A/55/305-S/2000/809, section IV; Sharon Wiharta, "Planning and Deploying Peace Operations" in *SIPRI Yearbook 2008: Armaments, Disarmaments and International Security* (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2008); Edward Burke and Jonathan Marley, "Walking Point for Peace: An Irish View of UN Peacekeeping," New York University Center on International Cooperation, June 2015, pp. 11, 13–14.

36 Victoria Holt, Glyn Taylor, and Max Kelly, "Protecting Civilians in the Context of UN Peacekeeping Operations: Successes, Setbacks and Remaining Challenges," UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations and the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Action, November 2009.

37 DPKO/DFS and DPA Guidelines, "The Mission Concept," 2014, para. 2.

38 UN Doc. 2019.17, para. 79.

39 Interview with members of integrated operations team, July 2022; Interview with former UN official, May 2022; Interview with UN official, August 2022.

40 Interview with former mission leader, July 2022.

oversight over missions. A written document such as a mission concept or POC strategy provides evidence that a mission is taking political, protection, and other factors (economic, humanitarian, etc.) into account. Second, a written document provides a concise, agreed articulation of mission goals, which can then be translated into tasks by mission managers. This is important because many peacekeeping missions are so large, and their lines of effort so diverse, that clear written goals are often essential to achieving unity of effort.⁴¹ Even where such written documents exist, cohesive action remains a constant challenge.

To enable adequate oversight and ensure that missions are planning for key aspects of their mandate, written products require the substantive engagement of the SRSG. Studies of strategy in the UN and in business circles have pointed to the central importance of leaders as a creative and visionary force behind strategy. What is key is not that a strategy is written but that leaders “grasp the issue.”⁴² It is not enough for an SRSG to “sign off” on a mission strategy, particularly when that strategy is a long, heavily consulted document. SRSGs and other mission leaders should, rather, be engaged as strategists.

One challenge to the idea of SRSGs as strategists-in-chief is the reality that many of them enter their roles with strong backgrounds in diplomacy but little experience leading large organizations, much less an organization with the unique mix of military and civilian capacities embodied by multidimensional peacekeeping. Beyond this lack of experience, as articulated by one former mission official, “There is little requirement for [SRSGs] to run their missions. Many show little interest in ‘whole-of-mission’ strategies. This often leaves the operational parts of the mission—civilian, military and police components, field offices—disconnected from the SRSG’s political work. This generally goes unchallenged by headquarters.”⁴³ The current system has advantages in recruiting experienced political actors who often bring the prestige of senior ministerial posts and a network of valuable

political connections, but it also creates challenges for mission management, even (or particularly) at the level of strategy.

Strategy is not, however, the one-off creation of a single person; strategy is an iterative process that adapts to changing circumstances, and strategy implementation is inherently iterative, requiring regular follow-up, with deadlines and accountability. Currently, peacekeeping operations have no standard processes or guidelines for following up on and implementing strategy. This results, in part, from SRSGs’ lack of incentives to address the management of mission operations, as noted above, as well as the lack of established tools at the mission level. Missions’ strategic planning units have frequently focused on annual budgetary reporting, a form of strategy that is often distant from a mission’s daily realities. They are also generally staffed only by civilians, unlike peacekeeping missions’ standardized joint operations centers, joint mission analysis cells, and joint logistics cells.

Negotiated Agreements

When missions are operating in a context where a cease-fire or other agreement is being negotiated, there may be an opportunity to support POC through their role in providing good offices and mediation. This may take place both in the lead-up to the formal process and during the negotiations. Advocating for POC in the lead-up phase may be important to set the stage for the formal process and because armed groups may escalate their use of violence against civilians during this stage to strengthen their bargaining position. DPPA’s 2022 Guidance on Mediation of Ceasefires notes the importance of this preparatory phase, during which mediators can advocate for the protection of civilians, work to create inclusive spaces that involve diverse sets of actors, and assess the types of violence that need to be addressed in the agreement.⁴⁴

Missions may also be able to advocate for the inclusion of protection-related language in negotiated agreements. One mission POC adviser

41 Interviews with UN officials, July and August 2022.

42 Holt, Taylor, and Kelly, “Protecting Civilians in the Context,” p. 9; Henry Mintzberg, “The Fall and Rise of Strategic Planning,” *Harvard Business Review* 72, no. 1 (1994).

43 Interview with former mission leader, July 2022.

44 UN Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA), “Guidance on Mediation of Ceasefires,” September 2022.

emphasized the importance of ensuring that POC language is included in an agreement both to increase its relevance to the conflict-affected population and to facilitate the mission's POC work.⁴⁵ While including this language is not a silver bullet to stop armed groups from perpetrating violence, it can create an entry point for missions to hold actors accountable.⁴⁶ This can be true for agreements at the national and local levels, as well as for agreements with neighboring countries in the case of regional conflicts.

In addition to generic language on the protection of civilians, agreements may include provisions for the protection of specific groups, such as women, the elderly, children, displaced individuals, or persons with disabilities. For example, the 2018 Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS) refers to the "protection needs of women, girls and vulnerable groups with special needs," as well as the "right of Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons to return in safety and dignity and to be afforded physical, legal and psychological protection."⁴⁷ Specific provisions on sexual violence may also be included. For example, the 2006 Pact on Security, Stability and Development in the Great Lakes Region commits its eleven regional signatories "to combat sexual violence against women and children through preventing, criminalizing and punishing acts of sexual violence."⁴⁸

There may be an opportunity for missions to advocate for POC as part of their role in providing good offices and mediation.

Including POC language in negotiated agreements at the national level requires that senior leaders understand protection threats and take these into account during the negotiation process. However, this does not always occur. In many cases, senior leaders view political processes as separate from POC, viewing POC as more of a technical issue

than a political one. Interviewees from multiple mission settings noted that senior leaders vary in their willingness and ability to engage with POC as part of political processes.⁴⁹ One POC adviser noted, "I tried very hard to get POC... included in the national process, but it's very difficult. We have to push hard and advocate for this to happen."⁵⁰ In such cases, one POC adviser noted the need to "lead up" by articulating protection needs in a way that senior leaders can understand and advocating for specific entry points.⁵¹ Another challenge is that senior leaders (and other parties) may not consider POC to be as important as other competing priorities. Moreover, missions increasingly are not among the leading actors in political processes, reducing their ability to shape the content of agreements.

Apart from formal political agreements, missions may also be able to use their political influence to broker frameworks and other agreements with national security forces and other armed groups, outlining prohibited forms of violence, particularly conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) and other forms of sexual- and gender-based violence (SGBV). For example, MONUSCO has worked with national authorities in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) to implement a zero-tolerance national action plan on CRSV, which has helped deter violations by state security forces.⁵² Similar efforts have been undertaken in South Sudan.

It is important to note that including POC language in national- or local-level agreements does not guarantee greater protection for civilians. Oftentimes, the key barrier to protection is not the lack of language to guide behavior and accountability but the signatories' lack of capacity or will to fulfill their civilian protection obligations and the

45 Interview with POC adviser, July 2022.

46 Jenna Russo, "UN Peacekeeping and Protection of Civilians from Sexual and Gender-Based Violence," International Peace Institute, May 9, 2022.

47 Intergovernmental Authority on Development, "Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan" (R-ARCSS), September 12, 2018, Chapters 2.1 and 3.1.

48 International Conference on the Great Lakes Region, "Pact on Security Stability and Development in the Great Lakes Region," December 14–15, 2006, Article 11.

49 Interviews with current and former POC advisers from UNMISS, MINUSMA, MINUSCA, MONUSCO, June 2022, July 2022, and August 2022.

50 Interview with POC adviser, July 2022.

51 Interview with POC adviser, August 2022.

52 Walter Lotze, "The Evolving United Nations Approach to Preventing and Addressing Conflict-Related Sexual Violence: Experiences from the Democratic Republic of the Congo," in Louise Olsson et al., "Peacekeeping Prevention: Strengthening Efforts to Preempt Conflict-Related Sexual Violence," *International Peacekeeping* 27, no. 4 (2020).

lack of enforcement mechanisms to hold them accountable.⁵³ Nevertheless, such language provides an important entry point for missions and other actors engaged in protection, and it should thus remain part of their efforts to link POC with political processes.

Enabling Environment

While political processes are important to help facilitate sustainable POC, protecting civilians can also help support political processes by creating an enabling environment in which an agreement and sustainable peace are more likely to take root. High levels of violence have been found to increase belligerents' resolve to continue fighting and in some cases can lead to cycles of violence and revenge.⁵⁴ For example, in both South Sudan and the DRC, armed group leaders have used acts of violence to incite revenge and increase mobilization.⁵⁵ High levels of human misery, including death and displacement, have been found to decrease the prospects for post-conflict peacebuilding, and post-traumatic stress disorder resulting from extreme levels of violence has been found to reduce individuals' willingness to pursue nonviolent resolutions to conflict.⁵⁶ As noted by one former mission leader from MINUSCA, extreme violence is a destabilizing

While political processes are important to help facilitate sustainable POC, protecting civilians can also help support political processes by creating an enabling environment in which an agreement and sustainable peace are more likely to take root.

factor that can incite fear and a resistance to settling the conflict: "Escalatory violence is extremely distracting in any political process; it's very hard for [belligerents] to make concessions while attacks are going on against their communities... Defusing this can be very important in creating [political] space."⁵⁷

The extent to which missions are able to lower overall levels of violence, however, varies, and evidence of peacekeepers' ability to deter or stop violence is mixed.⁵⁸ However, in cases where peacekeepers are able to mitigate escalatory violence, this could help create conditions more conducive to pursuing a political process, including at the local level. In other cases, protecting civilians can change the calculus of armed groups, making them more willing to come to the table. For example, in the Central African Republic (CAR), where armed groups use checkpoints to extort money and supplies, the mission worked to separate groups from this source of income. While the mission was not able to completely eliminate the checkpoint economy, it was able to reduce belligerents' ability to extract resources, driving down their income and increasing their willingness to engage in political processes.⁵⁹

Protecting civilians can also contribute to the

53 Interview with former mission leader, July 2022.

54 Allan Dafoe, Sophia Hatz, and Baobao Zhang, "Coercion and Provocation," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 65, no. 2-3 (2021); Nicholas Sambanis and Moses Shayo, "Social Identification and Ethnic Conflict," *American Political Science Review* 107, no. 2 (May 2013).

55 Jenna Russo, "The Protection of Civilians and the Primacy of Politics: Complementarities and Friction in South Sudan," *Journal of International Peacekeeping* 25, no. 1 (2021). For example, in a survey of White Army members in South Sudan, belligerents unanimously attributed their involvement in fighting to a desire for revenge for the killing of their community members, as opposed to the power struggle between political elites. See John Young, "Popular Struggles and Elite Co-optation: The Nuer White Army in South Sudan's Civil War," Small Arms Survey, July 2016.

56 Sambanis and Shayo, "Social Identification"; Phuong N. Pham, Harvey M. Weinstein, and Timothy Longman, "Trauma and PTSD Symptoms in Rwanda: Implications for Attitudes Toward Justice and Reconciliation," *JAMA* 295, no. 5 (2004).

57 Interview with former MINUSCA leader, July 2022.

58 For example, a 2014 evaluation by the UN Office of Internal Oversight Services found that, while missions did well in conducting POC activities aimed at prevention, when prevention failed, peacekeepers were largely ineffective at protecting civilians from imminent violence, as they were often reluctant to use force. UN General Assembly, *Evaluation of the Implementation and Results of Protection of Civilians Mandates in UN Peacekeeping Operations: Report of the Office of Internal Oversight Services*, UN Doc. A/68/787, March 7, 2014. More recently, Fjelde, Hultman, and Nilsson have found that peacekeepers can deter violence committed by non-state armed groups, though they are less effective at deterring violence committed by state actors. Hanne Fjelde, Lisa Hultman, and Desirée Nilsson, "Protection through Presence: UN Peacekeeping and the Costs of Targeting Civilians," *International Organization* 73, no. 1 (2019). Johansson and Hultman have found that peacekeepers are not effective at mitigating sexual violence, though large deployments of UN police with protection mandates are associated with lower risk of sexual violence perpetrated by rebel groups. Karin Johansson and Lisa Hultman, "UN Peacekeeping and Protection from Sexual Violence," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 63, no. 7 (2019). Some qualitative studies have recounted the ineffectiveness of peacekeepers in deterring violence, even that which is committed by rebel groups. For example, Sundberg, Day, and Stearns all document how non-state armed groups were not deterred by the presence of UN peacekeepers when carrying out violence against civilians in South Sudan and the DRC. Sundberg further finds that the UN peacekeeping presence had no effect on the frequency of mass displacement or the number of displaced in South Sudan. Ralph Sundberg, "UN Peacekeeping and Forced Displacement in South Sudan," *International Peacekeeping* 27, no. 2 (2020); Adam Day, "The Best Defence Is No Offence: Why Cuts to UN Troops in Congo Could Be a Good Thing," United Nations University, May 15, 2015; Jason Stearns, "Is MONUSCO Doing a Good Job at Protecting Civilians?" *Global Peace Operations Review*, December 2016.

59 Interview with former MINUSCA leader, July 20, 2022. However, the leader noted that while the strategy was somewhat effective, it was "quickly abandoned" with changes in mission leadership.

“protection-participation nexus” by enabling certain groups, including women and minorities, to safely participate in political processes. While the protection-participation nexus has in some cases been overlooked, there is growing recognition that participating in a political process can increase individuals’ vulnerability, including to gender-based violence.⁶⁰ By recognizing this vulnerability and providing protection, missions may help facilitate a more inclusive political process, which can increase the chances for its success and durability. Facilitating women’s meaningful participation at both the national and local levels is also in line with the A4P initiative and the women, peace, and security agenda and has been embraced by DPO as “a political imperative to achieve inclusive and sustainable peace outcomes.”⁶¹

Peacekeepers who work at the local level regularly weave together POC and political processes in a way that is not seen at the national level.

Local-Level Processes

While the above sections pertain to both the national and local levels, the “political process” is often perceived as referring to a formal, track-one process at the national level. However, in reality, politics happen at all levels, both formally and informally. Missions are increasingly involved in local-level mediation and other types of conflict resolution, and several mission mandates have specific language related to local conflict resolution and mediation.⁶² This trend is in part an intentional response to the “local turn” in peacebuilding, but it is also the result of missions sometimes being edged out of crowded political spaces at the national level. In such cases, missions may choose to adopt the strategy of “more peace at any level,” as termed by the former SRSG of UNMISS.⁶³

Whatever the motivation, focusing on local-level politics, in coordination with the national level, was noted by several interviewees as crucial to consolidating peace. One official argued that dealing only with national-level politics reflects a sort of “arrogance,” neglecting “the importance and weightiness of local concerns. They have life and death concerns that have nothing to do with the national-level political process.”⁶⁴ In other cases, there may be direct ties between local and national violence, as in South Sudan and CAR, which requires linking the two levels.⁶⁵

One former mission leader also cited a local focus as an important part of missions’ efforts to take a more “societal approach” to their work. As he described it, while “the senior leadership of the mission is

often looking for the high-level process,” his team tried to ask, “How can we make things better for the broader society?”⁶⁶ An increased focus on local politics is thus important to correct the imbalance of narrow, state-centric approaches and to take into account the needs and wishes of local community members.

Peacekeepers working at the local level regularly weave together POC and political processes in a way that is rare at the national level. There are several reasons why this may be the case. In some instances, mission leaders view their political role as “high politics,” disconnected from the more technical work of POC. One interviewee noted that at the national level the process is “heavy,” and “sometimes the solutions pushed at the national level are not conducive to actually solving the problem.”⁶⁷ While elite bargains may be required for the longer-term consolidation of peace, they

60 Catherine Turner and Aisling Swaine, “At the Nexus of Participation and Protection: Protection-Related Barriers to Women’s Participation in Northern Ireland,” International Peace Institute, June 16, 2021.

61 For more on this, see: UN DPO, “Women Transforming Peace in Peacekeeping Contexts,” October 2020; For more on the protection-participation nexus, see: Turner and Swaine, “At the Nexus of Participation and Protection.”

62 As of October 2022, this includes the missions in CAR (MINUSCA); Mali (MINUSMA); the DRC (MONUSCO); and South Sudan (UNMISS). For more on this, see: UN DPPA, “Engaging at the Local Level: Options for UN Mediators: DPPA Practice Note,” September 2022. See also: Arthur Boutellis, Delphine Mechoulan, and Marie-Joëlle Zahar, “Parallel Tracks or Connected Pieces? UN Peace Operations, Local Mediation, and Peace Processes,” International Peace Institute, December 2020.

63 Day et al., “The Political Practice of Peacekeeping.”

64 Interview with former mission leader, July 2022.

65 Boutellis, Mechoulan, and Zahar, “Parallel Tracks or Connected Pieces?”

66 Interview with former mission leader, July 2022.

67 Interview with POC adviser, July 2022.

tend to be more elusive and may offer less immediate benefits for community members.

Conversely, at the local level, mission personnel noted that POC and political processes are often understood as being inextricably linked, with fewer degrees of separation between what is being negotiated politically and violence affecting civilians. At the local level, peacekeepers often have more agency to put forth practical ways to address grievances and facilitate solutions. One POC adviser noted that the “local level is very much linked to protection—it’s a very conducive environment to do these activities... Local peace agreements are POC issues.” For example, this adviser described how the mission created weapon-free zones as part of local peace agreements, ensuring that individuals can easily get to the market, access schools and hospitals, and “live their lives.”⁶⁸

Yet the nature of local political processes is only one part of the story; local-level mission personnel also more often view POC as central to their work compared to their national-level colleagues. For example, one UN official described how civil affairs personnel working with local communities regularly see themselves as “part of POC,” whereas political affairs personnel at the national level often do not.⁶⁹ In this sense, it is not only the different nature of national and local-level processes that facilitates linkages between POC and politics; it is also the willingness and ability of mission personnel to engage with POC in political settings.

Local-level activities such as support for community cohesion and mediation processes can help resolve conflicts and reduce violence against civilians. Such activities often fit within DPO’s POC framework (protection through dialogue and engagement) and may include, for example, informal dialogues within or between communities, conflict-resolution workshops, and mediation.

For example, in South Sudan, the mission has facilitated agreements between farmers and herders to allow for herders’ safe passage and to respond to violations in a way that prevents retaliatory attacks that can escalate violence.⁷⁰ Other missions have similarly facilitated agreements related to transhumance corridors, while in the DRC, MONUSCO has supported intercommunal dialogues related to land access, which is a significant driver of violence.⁷¹

In some cases, these local-level processes can produce written agreements with specific language on POC. For example, an agreement between farmers and herders in Mali commits the parties to “guarantee the physical safety and the free movement of people, goods, and livestock” and requests the state to “support their efforts... to ensure the safety of people and property.”⁷² In CAR, a local-level agreement commits the parties to creating a “calm and peaceful environment which allows the free passage of goods and aid workers... [and] guarantees respect and protection of the traveling farmers, agricultural areas, crops, etc.”⁷³

In spite of such efforts, challenges remain, including that local efforts are not always connected to a mission’s work at the national level or across field locations. These and other challenges are discussed in further detail in the next section.

Challenges to Linking POC and Politics Processes

Missions’ efforts to link POC and politics have continued to face challenges. This section will discuss these challenges, including areas of friction between efforts to protect civilians and promote political solutions, as well as gaps at the mission level.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Written comment from UN official, November 2022.

⁷⁰ Interview with members of UNMISS civil affairs division, January 21, 2022.

⁷¹ UN Security Council, *United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo: Report of the Secretary-General*, UN Doc. S/2021/987, December 1, 2021, para. 40.

⁷² “Humanitarian Agreement between Breeders, Farmers, and Dozo Hunters in the Djenné Circle—1 August 2019,” Chapter 1, Article 1, and Chapter 3, available at <https://www.peaceagreements.org/viewmasterdocument/2237>.

⁷³ “Peace Agreement between the Goula and Peuhl Communities,” 2018, available at <https://www.peaceagreements.org/viewmasterdocument/2189>.

Engaging with State Perpetrators of Violence

While POC and political processes can be mutually reinforcing at the national level, there are also some areas of friction, in particular when state forces are among the main perpetrators of violence. POC mandates instruct peacekeepers to protect civilians from violence “irrespective of the source,” including state actors. Yet efforts to hold state perpetrators accountable are often in tension with the need to maintain host-state consent for the peacekeeping presence. This challenge was cited by interviewees as one of the primary areas of friction between POC and political processes at the national level. In the same way that violence against civilians may be committed for political purposes, protecting civilians from that violence is also viewed as political. This is particularly the case when civilians are viewed as aligned with the opposition, as with many of the civilians sheltering in the POC sites in South Sudan. In these cases, missions’ efforts to protect civilians and hold perpetrators accountable can reduce their level of diplomatic access and undermine host-state consent for their presence. Thus, mission personnel can face tensions between implementing their POC mandates and their political objectives.

Efforts to hold state perpetrators accountable are often in tension with the need to maintain host-state consent for the peacekeeping presence.

UNMISS is one example of a mission whose POC activities have created friction between the mission and the government, reducing the mission’s access to government actors and its involvement in the political process. As noted by a former UNMISS official, some mission personnel have felt pressure to build relationships with “unsavory state actors” to get access to the government.⁷⁴ Individuals were forced to weigh trade-offs between holding perpetrators accountable and trying to get into the good graces of national counterparts. Another individual from UNMISS noted that they have been questioned by some member states as to why

they did not engage in “robust actions” when faced with blockages to patrols and obstruction by government forces. According to the interviewee, “In principle, we can [engage in robust actions], and it’s in the mandate to use necessary force. However, the outcome of that would be a trade-off. UNMISS hasn’t done this out of consideration of its relationship with the government. We need to seek their cooperation in protection of the mandate.”⁷⁵

Similarly, MINUSMA personnel cited friction between the need to engage with the state in the political process and to hold perpetrators accountable for violations. “In Mali, you have a political process ongoing... At the same time, you had civilian attacks going on. Everyone was so programmed on their side to address the political process... They would turn a blind eye to everything else that was going on to achieve this political objective.”⁷⁶ In spite of some pressure from member states to cut off interaction with perpetrators of violence against civilians, several interlocutors maintained the

importance of keeping diplomatic channels open. One individual from MINUSMA argued, “I still believe we should try to stay close and support [the armed forces of Mali], because if you are not close to them, you will not have visibility of what’s going on.”⁷⁷

An interviewee in CAR similarly noted, “The last MINUSCA mandate says we have to find a way to work with the security personnel. How are we going to do that with the [Human Rights Due Diligence Policy]? We have some member states bilaterally who are advising us not to engage with them, yet we have to report to the secretary-general on how we are doing our mandate. It puts us in a crazy stuck position.”⁷⁸ In trying to balance these priorities, one official noted the importance of targeted accountability, holding specific perpetra-

⁷⁴ Interview with former UN official, June 2022.

⁷⁵ Interview with UN official, July 2022.

⁷⁶ Interview with former MINUSMA official, June 2022.

⁷⁷ Interview with MINUSMA official, August 2022.

⁷⁸ Interview with MINUSCA official, July 2022.

tors accountable without pulling back from the mission's overall work with national forces.⁷⁹ Overall, interviewees stressed the need to weigh carefully the dual priorities of holding perpetrators accountable and maintaining diplomatic channels.

Extending State Authority without Accountability

A second and related potential area of friction stems from the UN's state-centric approach to peacekeeping and its tendency to conflate political support with extending state authority. The state is the primary actor responsible for protecting civilians, and state authority is essential to consolidating peace. However, in cases where the state is a perpetrator of violence or there is a lack of trust between the state and society, simply bolstering state authority may not enhance civilian safety or contribute to durable peacebuilding.⁸⁰ As noted by Shannon Zimmerman, "By their very nature, peace operations deploy to states whose authority and legitimacy are contested."⁸¹ Therefore, efforts to support the state's role in providing protection must move beyond extending territorial control and focus on building legitimacy, ensuring accountability, and rebuilding the social contract.

While mission personnel may conceptually agree with this emphasis on both state power and state legitimacy, it can be difficult to support from a programmatic perspective. One mission official noted that DPO has not provided adequate guidance on how to support the extension of state authority. Another former mission leader stated that "no one [within UN peacekeeping] really knows how to support the extension of state authority," as it is based on the "insurmountable

dilemma" of balancing the use of force with the need to rebuild the social contract.⁸² None of these are quick or easy processes, and the role for peacekeepers in them remains unclear.

Further, efforts to extend state authority have sometimes relied predominantly on military operations to neutralize non-state armed groups. In some cases, undertaking military operations can be an important "stick" to get groups to the table. When the use of force is connected to a political process, such tactics may prove to be effective. However, this connection is not always made. In the DRC, for example, the mission's support to offensive operations has not been well connected to the regional political agreement.⁸³ While in some cases this is due to a lack of integrated planning, it may also result from the mission not having the level of political access needed.

At the same time, using military operations as part of a broader peacekeeping strategy can increase the risk of violence against civilians. While robust approaches to peacekeeping are sometimes couched as a tool to enhance civilian protection, there is evidence that military operations can increase the risk of violence against civilians in the short term and often do not lead to enhanced security in the medium to long term.⁸⁴ This has been displayed in the DRC, where, despite years of ongoing military operations by the mission and national forces, civilian safety in the eastern region has not increased.⁸⁵ More broadly, a number of scholars have noted the overall ineffectiveness of stabilization approaches to peacekeeping, including their privileging of "a state-centric capacity-building agenda at the expense of a more inclusive and localised approach."⁸⁶

⁷⁹ Interview with POC advisor, August 2022.

⁸⁰ Cedric de Coning, John Karlsrud, and Paul Troost, "Towards More People-Centric Peace Operations: From 'Extension of State Authority' to 'Strengthening Inclusive State-Society Relations,'" *Stability: International Journal of Security and Development* 4, no. 1 (2015).

⁸¹ Shannon Zimmerman, "Defining State Authority: UN Peace Operations Efforts to Extend State Authority in Mali and the Central African Republic," *Stability: International Journal of Security and Development* 9, no. 1 (2020).

⁸² Interview with MINUSMA official, November 2022; Written comment received from former mission leader, November 2022.

⁸³ Jenna Russo, "Protecting Peace? Analyzing the Relationship between the Protection of Civilians and Peace in UN Peacekeeping Settings," City University of New York, June 2022.

⁸⁴ Charles T. Hunt, "All Necessary Means to What Ends? The Unintended Consequences of the 'Robust Turn' in UN Peace Operations," *International Peacekeeping* 24, no. 1 (2017). See, for example, the FIB's mandate, which is framed as contributing to the extension of state authority and the protection of civilians. UN Security Council Resolution 2098 (March 28, 2013), UN Doc. S/RES/2098.

⁸⁵ Denis M. Tull, "The Limits and Unintended Consequences of UN Peace Enforcement: The Force Intervention Brigade in the DR Congo," *International Peacekeeping* 25, no. 2 (2018); Jenna Russo, "Militarised Peacekeeping: Lessons from the Democratic Republic of the Congo," *Third World Quarterly* 42, no. 12 (2021).

⁸⁶ David Curran and Charles Hunt, "Stabilization at the Expense of Peacebuilding in UN Peacekeeping Operations: More Than Just a Phase?" *Global Governance* 26, no. 1 (2020), p. 11. See also: Russo, "Protecting Peace?"; Hugo De Vries, "The Ebb and Flow of Stabilization in the Congo," Rift Valley Institute, 2016.

Linking POC and Politics in the Absence of a Formal Process or amid Ongoing Violence

One of the primary challenges missions face is how to ensure political primacy in contexts where there are high levels of ongoing violence or when conditions are not “ripe” for a political process. In such contexts, interviewees noted that it may be difficult for missions to have their POC work guided by a clear political strategy, though there was some difference of opinion on this. Some individuals noted that, even when a formal political process is stalled, the mission should still work to plant seeds for a future process, as protecting civilians can help the mission gain the trust of the parties to the conflict (though it can also create political tensions, as noted above).

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Others noted that when the national-level process is stalled, this creates opportunities for the mission to focus more on the local level. This was particularly referenced in the case of Mali, where the mission was only marginally involved in the formal negotiations between the government and armed groups, yet there was low-level political work “going on all the time.”⁸⁷ Another former mission leader pointed out that it would be faulty to interpret the lack of a formal negotiation process as a lack of a political process. They argued that we should “refrain from referring to armed groups ‘entering into a political process.’ They’re already in a political process. Everyone is already negotiating,” even though there is fighting going on.⁸⁸

In other cases, interviewees felt that when the political process is stalled or when violence is high, it becomes very difficult for the mission to connect its POC work to a political strategy. For example, in

Mali, when violence started breaking out in the center of the country and peacekeepers were getting attacked, one individual described the mission’s POC efforts as “just trying to survive. There [was] nothing strategic about connecting POC and the political.”⁸⁹ One member of an integrated operational team similarly commented that “an articulated political strategy is [only] possible when there is a political process. We have three big missions that are essentially stabilization missions that don’t have a clear political process. All we can do is damage control.”⁹⁰ In commenting on the situation in CAR, one UN official noted, “In MINUSCA, they are just running behind so many crises all the time; they don’t really have the space to think about how to link an articulated political strategy with protection... It’s very emergency thinking.”⁹¹ Thus, in cases where the mission is operating in crisis settings, peacekeepers may struggle to plan and implement POC activities that are connected to the current and future political dynamics.

Allocating Resources

In some cases, POC and missions’ political objectives can come into friction due to the allocation of resources, including competing priorities among mission leadership, the time and attention of mission personnel, and material resources.⁹² In such cases, POC and politics may be viewed as competing with one another. In addition to POC being elevated as a strategic priority in several mission settings, the Security Council’s decision to prioritize POC among mandated tasks applies to the allocation of resources (though this is not necessarily practiced on the ground).⁹³ As noted by Adam Day and Charles Hunt, “The gravitational pull of PoC can distract attention and scarce resources from other, often interdependent, priori-

87 Interview with former MINUSMA official, June 2022.

88 Interview with former MINUSCA leader, July 2022.

89 Interview with former MINUSMA official, June 2022.

90 Interview with member of integrated operations team, July 2022.

91 Interview with UN official, August 2022.

92 Adam Day and Charles T. Hunt, “Distractions, Distortions and Dilemmas: The Externalities of Protecting Civilians in United Nations Peacekeeping,” *Civil Wars* 24, no. 1 (2022).

93 Day et al., “The Political Practice of Peacekeeping”

ties.”⁹⁴ For example, in South Sudan, maintenance of the POC sites was estimated to consume more than 50 percent of mission resources in terms of time, funding, and personnel up until the year 2018.⁹⁵ While, as noted above, protecting civilians may help create conditions more conducive to achieving a political solution, mission resources are finite, and the allocation of such a significant portion of resources could pull attention away from other important activities. Day and Hunt also cite a view held among many MONUSCO officials and experts that “MONUSCO’s overriding focus on PoC had detracted from its potential work on the political process,” including because its attention was drawn to reacting to crises rather than forward planning in a more strategic manner.⁹⁶

At the member-state level, including within the Security Council, some officials expressed a sense of competition between the focus on POC and political primacy. They noted that protection priorities can get diminished in relation to political priorities, in particular given member states’ strong emphasis on the primacy of politics. One POC adviser relayed their impression that mission leadership and member states are “driving the political engagement, and protection tends to get relegated.”⁹⁷ This sentiment was echoed by an official from headquarters, who argued that in some cases, political priorities are being promoted to the exclusion of protection concerns.⁹⁸ Conversely, other officials noted that the “cottage industry” surrounding POC, including the presence of advocacy groups, has led there to be an extreme focus on POC, which can pull attention away from missions’ political objectives.

Addressing Local-Level Challenges

While peacekeepers have had relatively greater success linking POC and political solutions at the

local level than the national level, two key challenges remain. First, local efforts often remain disconnected from the mission’s overall political strategy. Mission leadership is not always tuned in to what is going on at the local level, though this can vary widely by individual leader. Because senior leaders often view their work as centering on the national-level process, some rarely visit field locations and they may not have a nuanced understanding of local conflict dynamics.

As noted by one official from MINUSMA, “Most of our colleagues never step out of Bamako. They never leave their area and explore the field offices. They need to go and understand... but they are very focused on the national and they are not really able to understand what is going on.”⁹⁹ Another official noted that mission leaders need to make more of an effort to understand what is happening across the diverse contexts where missions are deployed.¹⁰⁰ Some officials also had a sense that personnel in field offices “were not taken seriously because we were talking to local actors and they [mission leadership] were more interested in the voices of leaders at the table. This is common at different missions.”¹⁰¹ This dynamic can be compounded by pressure from the Security Council and other member states, which may also be focused on a national-level process.

However, some positive examples were cited. For example, an official from MINUSCA recalled how a former head of political affairs had made a concerted effort to get out of the mission’s headquarters to engage directly with people, including local politicians and community members, and used this as a way to link local- and national-level political processes.¹⁰² Another official noted that the POC components of the missions in both CAR and the DRC had arranged joint protection patrols that included senior mission leaders and national counterparts. In undertaking these

94 Day and Hunt, “Distractions, Distortions and Dilemmas.”

95 UN Security Council, *Special Report of the Secretary-General on the Renewal of the Mandate of the United Nations Mission in South Sudan*, UN Doc. S/2018/143, February 20, 2018.

96 Day and Hunt, “Distractions, Distortions and Dilemmas.”

97 Interview with POC adviser, August 2022.

98 Interview with UN official, May 6, 2022.

99 Interview with MINUSMA official, August 2022.

100 Interview with POC adviser, August 2022.

101 Interview with MINUSMA official, August 4, 2022.

102 Interview with former MINSUCA official, June 2022.

patrols, leaders gained a better understanding of the security dynamics outside the capital, which “[gave] them the opportunity to help lead the response.”¹⁰³

Second, in addition to connecting local-level efforts with the national-level strategy, there is a need to improve connections among field offices. One interviewee described how it often seems that each field office is creating its own political strategy, but it is not clear how these all fit together or connect with the national-level strategy. According to this individual, “The field offices have been quite good in developing their own strategies and work. [However], this makes for a disjointed mission, which is focused in many different places.”¹⁰⁴ There have been some exceptions to this. For example, UNMISS has been cited as a mission that has developed linkages between heads of field offices and the head of mission.¹⁰⁵

Conclusion

The primacy of politics and POC have been upheld by member states as central pillars of peacekeeping, but they are too often understood separately in mission planning and programming. UN policies and guidelines articulate the need for missions to integrate their POC and political work; however, this rarely happens, particularly at the national level. Integrating missions’ POC work and political approaches creates opportunities for more strategic and sustainable POC and strengthens political processes by focusing on civilian safety. There are a number of entry points for missions to integrate POC and political approaches more effectively, but attempts at integration have proven challenging.

Ultimately, member states, the Secretariat, and missions need to adopt a broad understanding of politics that goes beyond formal agreements at the national level. Too often, missions’ political work is

framed almost exclusively in terms of mediation between elites, even when such agreements are weak and key players are uncommitted.¹⁰⁶ Other politically charged engagement, such as local work by civil affairs sections, human rights divisions, heads of offices, or other actors, is too often framed as technical and peripheral to national-level engagement. This is not to deny the importance of conflict resolution between the most militarily significant actors, but improving the mutually reinforcing relationship between POC and politics requires understanding politics as a process that contributes to nonviolent political mechanisms and reduced violence against civilians rather than simply signatures on an agreement.

The following are recommendations for member states, mission leadership, and other mission personnel to better integrate their POC and political work across the entry points outlined above.

Mapping and Analysis

- **Mission leaders should ensure that mapping and analyses are conducted jointly** by mission personnel working on POC and politics to ensure that POC and political strategies are based on common objectives and understandings. Such analyses should be data-driven and evidence-based and should include a mapping of the drivers of violence such that POC and political approaches can target those drivers to facilitate more sustainable protection.

Planning and Strategies

- **SRSGs and headquarters should take ownership of, and clearly and consistently communicate to mission staff, mission concepts, mission plans, POC strategies, and political strategies.** These documents are necessary but not sufficient for effective planning.
- **To better translate their strategic vision into**

Member states, the Secretariat, and missions need to adopt a broad understanding of politics that goes beyond formal agreements at the national level.

¹⁰³ Interview with POC adviser, June 2022.

¹⁰⁴ Interview with former MINUSMA official, May 2022.

¹⁰⁵ Hunt, “Case Study 3: Waiting for Peace.”

¹⁰⁶ Written statement from former mission leader, November 2022.

actionable plans, mission leaders should establish joint mission planning cells. These cells should include representatives from all mission components—civilian, military, and police—and support effective mission management by linking high-level planning for specific mandated tasks with the mission’s overall strategic vision.

- **Heads of POC and political components (or their equivalents) should anchor their individual strategies in the central mission concept, plan, or strategy to ensure all components are working toward a common goal.** Political heads should ensure that POC is properly integrated into the mission’s political strategy, anticipating areas of complementarity and friction between political and protection goals, as well as opportunities to mitigate potential friction. Likewise, the POC strategy should be guided by the mission’s political objectives, ensuring that the two are working toward complementary aims with the understanding that achieving a political solution to the conflict is necessary to achieve sustainable protection.

Negotiated Agreements

- **During the lead-up to a formal negotiation process, SRSGs should advocate for the protection of civilians, especially in cases where armed groups may ratchet up their use of violence to increase their bargaining position.** This can include advocating for more inclusive negotiation spaces that include women and marginalized groups, whose involvement help make the process more successful. Advocating for temporary special measures, including quotas, can help ensure the participation of women.
- **Mediators should advocate for specific**

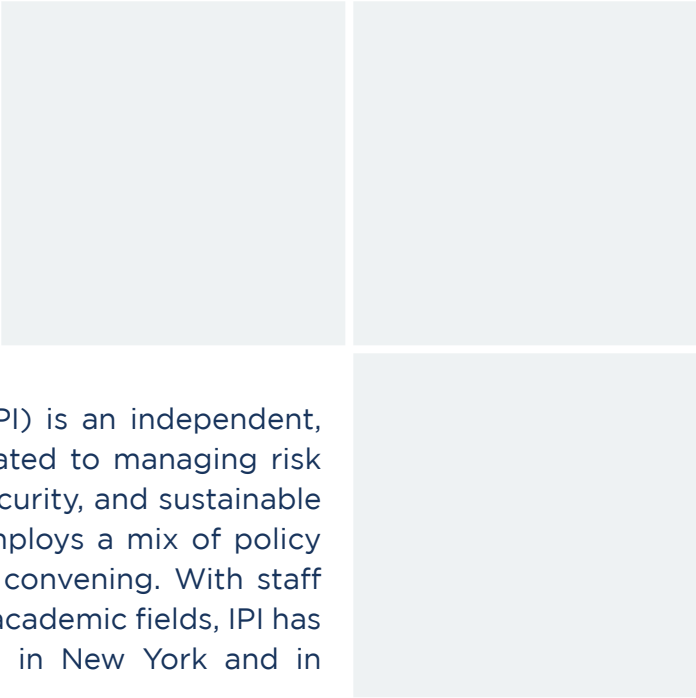
language on POC within negotiated agreements, including language on the protection of specific groups, such as women, the elderly, and displaced persons, as well as protection from sexual and gender-based violence. Toward this end, SRSGs may also engage other political actors such as special envoys, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), the SRSGs for sexual violence in armed conflict and children and armed conflict, and the special adviser on genocide and the responsibility to protect.

Creating an Enabling Environment

- **Mission personnel in charge of planning and implementing POC should look for entry points to enhance the protection-participation nexus.** These protection efforts should target women and other vulnerable groups whose participation may increase an agreement’s chances for success.

Local-Level Processes

- **Senior mission leaders and member states should broaden their focus on the “political” beyond national-level formal processes to include the local level.** When crafting a mission’s political strategy, mission leaders should connect the mission’s national-level political work with the work of its field offices and remain engaged with local-level political processes as an important part of the mission’s strategic approach. Member states and senior leaders should also expand their conception of politics within mandates and strategic planning documents to understand politics as a process that contributes to nonviolent political mechanisms and reduces violence against civilians rather than simply signatures on an agreement.



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