

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



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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. 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 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.

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.

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.

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. Integrating missions' POC work and political approaches creates opportunities for more strategic and sustainable POC and strengthens political processes by focusing on civilian safety. Ultimately, member states, the Secretariat, and missions need to adopt a broad understanding of politics that goes beyond formal agreements at the national level; 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 a document.

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Mapping and Analysis:

1. 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:

2. Special representatives of the secretary-general (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.

3. To better translate their strategic vision into 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.

4. 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:

5. 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.

6. 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:

7. 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:

8. 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.