

# The Primacy of Politics at the Local Level in UN Peace Operations

Allard Duursma and Jenna Russo



**Cover Photo:** UNMISS's civil affairs division conducts a workshop entitled "Youth Engagement in Promoting Social Cohesion and Resilience for IDPs in Yei River State," October 18, 2017. Nektarios Markogiannis/UNMISS.

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**IPI Publications**

Albert Trithart, *Editor and Research Fellow*

Felix Romier, *Editorial Intern*

**Suggested Citation:**

Allard Duursma and Jenna Russo, "The Primacy of Politics at the Local Level in UN Peace Operations," International Peace Institute, February 2025.

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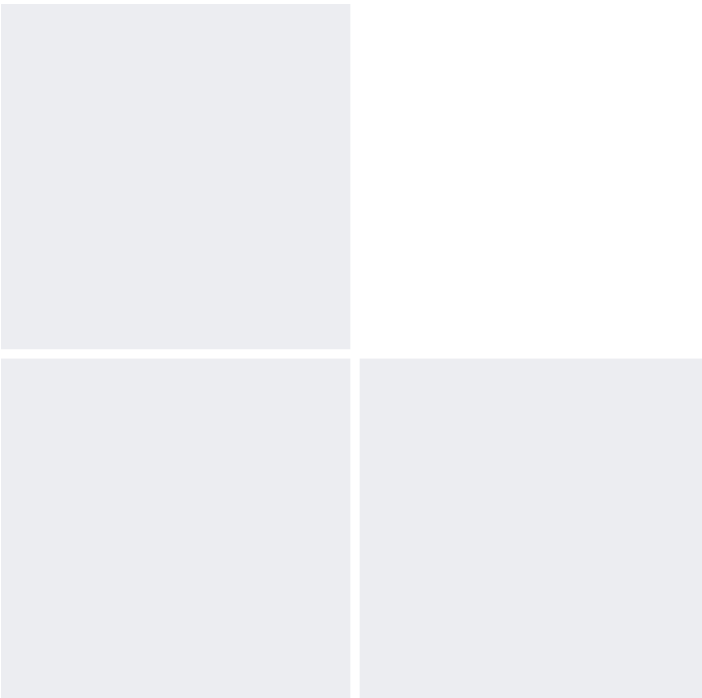
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**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

IPI owes a debt of gratitude to its many donors for their generous support. This research and publication are part of IPI's workstream on the Action for Peacekeeping Plus (A4P+) initiative, funded by the Kingdom of the Netherlands.

The authors would like to express their sincere gratitude to Juhi Srivastava for her outstanding support throughout this project. They are also deeply thankful to Marco Donati, Tamasha Mpyisi-White, Margaux L'Herbette, and Sara Hellmüller for their insightful feedback on earlier drafts of this report. Finally, the authors extend their appreciation to the civil affairs personnel who generously took the time to engage with them, especially Hiroko Hirahara and Gibril Turay.



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## ABBREVIATIONS

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A4P	Action for Peacekeeping
APPR	Political Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation
CAR	Central African Republic
CLA	community liaison assistant
DDR	disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration
DRC	Democratic Republic of the Congo
DSRSG	deputy special representative of the secretary-general
HIPPO	High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations
MINUSCA	UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in CAR
MONUSCO	UN Organization Stabilization Mission in the DRC
POC	protection of civilians
QIP	quick-impact project
R-ARCSS	Revitalized Agreement for Resolution of Conflict in South Sudan
RC/HC	resident coordinator/humanitarian coordinator
SPLM	Sudan People's Liberation Movement
SPLM/A-IO	Sudan People's Liberation Movement-in-Opposition
SRSG	special representative of the secretary-general
UNAMID	UN-African Union Mission in Darfur
UNMISS	UN Mission in South Sudan
UNOCI	UN Operation in Côte d'Ivoire



## Executive Summary

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The “primacy of politics” has become a central tenet of UN peacekeeping. This reflects a broad recognition that peacekeeping operations should be deployed in support of a political solution to conflict. In practice, however, the primacy of politics is often narrowly understood as referring to formal, national-level political processes. This overlooks the fact that politics also happens at the local level, both formally and informally. It is critical for UN peace operations to address these local-level politics. Local-level conflicts account for a large share of conflict-related deaths in peacekeeping contexts. They are also closely tied to national-level peace efforts. This has led UN peace operations to become increasingly involved in supporting local peace processes.

While finding local political solutions is a collaborative effort within UN peacekeeping operations, the civil affairs component plays a crucial role. The role of civil affairs personnel varies, depending on missions’ differing mandates and strategic priorities, leadership, structures, and operating environments. Nonetheless, their local political engagement often includes conducting local mediation; increasing participation, including of women, youth, and underrepresented groups; supporting local conflict resolution; building the capacity of civil society actors; and building and supporting local state and non-state institutions.

The work by civil affairs personnel has repeatedly been found to increase local peace agreements’ prospects for success. Nonetheless, peacekeepers have sometimes been critiqued for pursuing “one-off” approaches to local-level political engagement without following up to ensure peace is sustainable. To make local peace more sustainable, peace operations need to empower local actors to devise and implement local solutions. They also need to ensure that local solutions address conflict drivers related to the political economy. In addition, local

processes need to be aligned with processes at the national level.

Beyond engaging with local and national officials and other stakeholders outside the mission, civil affairs components also need to integrate their local-level political work with other mission components. This includes not only vertical integration to ensure that local-level political strategies are connected to the overarching strategy of mission headquarters but also horizontal integration with other field offices. They also need to work closely with the head of the field office and other substantive and uniformed components.

To effectively balance their top-down mandates with grassroots engagement, member states, mission leaders, and civil affairs personnel should consider the following recommendations:

- **Member states** should adopt a definition of the primacy of politics that encompasses both formal and informal processes at both the national and subnational levels. The Security Council should also continue incorporating tasks related to local political processes into mission mandates, and the General Assembly should adequately resource these mandates.
- **Mission leaders** should craft political strategies that are both top-down and bottom-up. This requires consulting regularly with field offices and reflecting local dynamics in national-level political efforts. They should also ensure coordination between mission components, including civil-military coordination.
- **Civil affairs personnel** should systematically map stakeholders at the national and subnational levels to understand how they fit together. They should also map the political economy of local conflicts and form partnerships to target the drivers of these conflicts.





## Introduction

Over the past ten years, the “primacy of politics” has become a central tenet of the UN approach to peacekeeping. While not formally defined by the UN or member states, the primacy of politics is based on the principle that support to a political process “should guide the design and deployment of UN peacekeeping operations.”<sup>1</sup> While the idea behind peacekeeping has always been to deploy military forces in support of a political solution, the actual promotion of political solutions has been far from standard throughout the history of UN peacekeeping missions.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, in recent years, the primacy of politics has been revitalized, gaining prominence with the publication of the 2015 report of the High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations (HIPPO), which underscored the vital role of peacekeepers in supporting political solutions.<sup>3</sup> The 2018 Action for Peacekeeping (A4P) Declaration of Shared Commitments similarly underscores the importance of seeking political solutions to armed conflicts, reinforcing the commitment of UN peacekeeping operations to “stronger engagement to advance political solutions to conflict and to pursue complementary political objectives and integrated strategies.”<sup>4</sup> More recently, the secretary-general’s New Agenda for Peace and the Pact for the Future both reiterate a commitment to the primacy of politics as the guiding objective for UN peace operations.<sup>5</sup>

While it would seem that the primacy of politics has the potential to be broad in application, it is often narrowly understood by the UN and member

states as support to national-level political processes, with heavy emphasis on the signing of a formal agreement between parties.<sup>6</sup> Yet politics happens at different levels, both formally and informally, and the work of peace operations to support local or subnational political processes can play a critical role in facilitating peace. In locations where communities endure high levels of armed violence, peace operations’ efforts to support peace at the local level often significantly contribute to stability and reconciliation. While some analysts have previously critiqued the UN for taking a top-down approach that is inattentive to local dynamics,<sup>7</sup> more recent research indicates that peacekeepers are increasingly involved in helping to facilitate local peace with positive effect.<sup>8</sup>

The primacy of politics is often narrowly understood by the UN and member states as support to national-level political process.

Moreover, although some scholars continue to critique the UN for not engaging in peace efforts at the local level,<sup>9</sup> the academic debate has at least in part moved on by

focusing not on whether the UN engages locally but rather on how its local engagement can achieve positive effects.<sup>10</sup>

The purpose of this report is to examine how the primacy of politics applies to the local level in UN peacekeeping settings. It does so by assessing how UN peacekeeping missions help to forge and sustain local political solutions to armed conflict, with a specific look at the role of missions’ civil affairs components. The first section makes the case for the primacy of politics at the local level. The second section considers how UN peace operations implement the primacy of politics at the local level, looking at the mandates and activities of civil affairs personnel within UN peacekeeping settings. The

1 UN Peacekeeping, “Action for Peacekeeping: Declaration of Shared Commitments on UN Peacekeeping Operations,” August 16, 2018, para. 4.

2 Govinda Clayton and Han Dorussen, “The Effectiveness of Mediation and Peacekeeping for Ending Conflict,” *Journal of Peace Research* 59, no. 2 (2021).

3 UN General Assembly and UN 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.

4 UN Peacekeeping, “Declaration of Shared Commitments.”

5 United Nations, “A New Agenda for Peace,” July 20, 2023; UN General Assembly Resolution 79/1 (September 22, 2024), UN Doc. A/RES/79/1.

6 Jenna Russo and Ralph Mamiya, “The Primacy of Politics and the Protection of Civilians in UN Peacekeeping,” International Peace Institute, December 2022.

7 Séverine Autesserre, *The Trouble with the Congo: Local Violence and the Failure of International Peacebuilding* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

8 Allard Duursma, “Peacekeeping, Mediation, and the Conclusion of Local Ceasefires in Non-State Conflicts,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 67, nos. 7–8 (2022).

9 Most prominently, see: Séverine Autesserre, “The Crisis of Peacekeeping: Why the UN Can’t End Wars,” *Foreign Affairs*, December 11, 2018; Séverine Autesserre, *The Frontlines of Peace: An Insider’s Guide to Changing the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021).

10 For instance, see: Sara Hellmüller, *The Interaction Between Local and International Peacebuilding Actors* (Springer International Publishing, 2017); 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.

third section focuses on the sustainability of local political solutions, paying special attention to partnerships with local, national, and international actors. The fourth section examines how various mission components and field offices devise and implement political strategies and how these strategies are integrated into the overall political strategy of the mission.

The report focuses on the work of the UN in South Sudan while also drawing on examples from other mission settings, including Liberia, Chad, Mali, the Central African Republic (CAR), Darfur, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). In addition to a desk review of policy documents and academic studies, the findings are based on interviews conducted with UN personnel and stakeholders in local peace processes, including via a field visit to the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS).<sup>11</sup>

## Making the Case for the Primacy of Politics at the Local Level

It is notoriously difficult to pinpoint what is meant by “local.” One useful definition put forward by Paul Williams focuses on the “political terrain” on which a conflict is waged. Williams defines “local warscapes” as armed conflict related to the substate, politico-geographic context. This type of conflict can be contrasted with national-level armed conflict, which is focused on the institutions of state power.<sup>12</sup> By “local,” Williams primarily refers to conflict occurring within a geographically limited area and driven by immediate, localized causes, such as disputes over land, resources, or identity. This way of understanding “local” aligns with a 2017 UN report that defines local conflict as “violence or the risk of violence centered at the subnational level.”<sup>13</sup> In this context, “centered at the subnational level” implies that both the dynamics and the consequences of the conflict are largely confined to a specific region or community rather than

extending to broader national or international factors.

The primacy of politics at the local level has three elements.<sup>14</sup> First, it suggests that the use or threat of force by peacekeeping military personnel can only be an effective tool for peacekeeping if it is part of a clear political strategy to resolve and prevent conflict at the local level. Second, it means that the UN Security Council has a role to play when considering local political solutions and that responding to local conflicts should be within the mandate of UN peacekeeping operations. Third, it means that peacekeeping operations should search for political solutions to local conflicts by effectively and creatively engaging with both host-state authorities and non-state actors, as well as by addressing underlying social tensions.

However, a key difference between searching for a national-level solution and a local-level solution in the context of peace operations is that while the UN special representative of the secretary-general (SRSG) typically leads the efforts to search for a political solution at the national level, efforts aimed at forging local political solutions are most often led by different mission field offices. Moreover, rather than focusing on addressing an overarching, national-level conflict—for example, armed fighting between government forces and a rebel group—the primacy of politics at the local level often involves resolving many smaller, localized conflicts. This does not mean that the many different responses to local conflicts are not relevant for addressing the overarching conflict. On the contrary, as the final section of this report will show, there are often clear linkages between local- and national-level conflicts.

## The Importance of Local-Level Engagement

A key reason why the resolution of local conflicts is important for peacekeeping missions is simply that a large share of fatalities in countries where

11 Interviews for this research project were conducted between June and December 2024. The authors also drew on interviews conducted for prior research.

12 Paul D. Williams, *War and Conflict in Africa* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), p. 44.

13 Tom O’Byrne, Sara Rendtorff-Smith, and Marco Donati, “The Role of United Nations Peacekeeping Operations in Addressing Local Conflicts: A Study of Practice,” United Nations, 2017, p. 11. See also: Aditi Gorur and Madeline Velluro, “Local Conflict, Local Peacekeeping,” Stimson Center, January 2017, p. 7.

14 These three elements are highlighted by Russo and Mamiya in a study on the relevance of the primacy of politics for the protection of civilians. See: Russo and Mamiya, “The Primacy of Politics.”

peacekeeping operations are deployed take place in the context of local conflicts. While armed conflict in peacekeeping contexts in the 1990s was mainly between government forces and rebel groups—including, among others, in Namibia, Mozambique, and Angola—from 2000 onwards it typically involved many local conflicts between non-state armed groups. In fact, this type of conflict accounts for half of all battle deaths in peacekeeping contexts in African countries in the period 2000–2020.<sup>15</sup> Local conflict resolution is thus one of the biggest challenges facing contemporary peacekeeping operations.

Furthermore, even from a national-level perspective, it is important to address local conflicts for at least three reasons. First, continued local conflict can jeopardize national-level peace efforts.<sup>16</sup> As a recent study on UNMISS highlights, “While the regional/national level political process is a *sine qua non*, a key lesson from UNMISS is the need to understand the links between the local and national politics/conflict, and how risks and opportunities may present themselves in both spheres.”<sup>17</sup> Second, local peace processes can serve as a building block for national-level peace processes when no national-level agreement is in place. For instance, the 2016 Non-Aggression and Community Reconciliation Pact between the predominantly Christian Boeing and the predominantly Muslim PK5 neighborhoods of Bangui showed that armed conflict between Muslim and Christian communities could be resolved peacefully.<sup>18</sup> Third, local conflict resolution can also contribute to the implementation of elite pacts at the national level after a national-level agreement has been concluded. For instance, during a meeting held two years after the signing of a local reconciliation pact among communities in northeastern CAR, a government official stated that

even though this was a local agreement, it was “not a negligible one” because it “complements the overall peace process.”<sup>19</sup>

In response to the growing number of local conflicts and the apparent link between local and national-level conflicts, it seems that a consensus has emerged among policymakers that the promotion of local political solutions should be part of mission mandates. For instance, in 2023, the Special Committee on Peacekeeping Operations (C-34) requested the secretary-general to “provide guidance to peacekeeping operations on how missions can better support community-based mechanisms with a view to supporting sustainable political solutions, where mandated.”<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, as outlined below, the Security Council has increasingly included language within mission mandates that tasks peacekeepers with addressing local conflict.<sup>21</sup>

## The UN’s Role at the Local Level Over Time

UN peacekeeping operations’ support to local peace processes is not new. UN peacekeeping personnel supported local peace processes in Somalia and Liberia in the 1990s.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, although the UN has been heavily criticized for not responding to local conflicts in the DRC in the early 2000s,<sup>23</sup> there have been several instances where UN peacekeeping personnel engaged in robust military action or diplomatic activities in local conflicts—for instance, to stop armed fighting between the Hema and Lendu communities in Ituri in the early 2000s. Dan Fahey, an expert on the Ituri conflict, concludes that the UN succeeded in bringing peace to Ituri through robust military and diplomatic actions.<sup>24</sup>

15 Allard Duursma, “Non-State Conflicts, Peacekeeping, and the Conclusion of Local Agreements,” *Peacebuilding* 10, no. 2 (2022).

16 UN Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, “UN Support to Local Mediation: Challenges and Opportunities,” November 17, 2020, p. 9.

17 Adam Day et al., “Assessing the Effectiveness of the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS),” Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, March 2019.

18 Interview #9; Interview #10.

19 Angela Pascale Koyakangui, “Centrafrique : Evaluation du pacte de réconciliation des communautés de Nord-Est à Bangui,” Oubangui Médias, January 30, 2023, available at: <https://oubanguimedias.com/2023/01/30/centrafrique-evaluation-du-pacte-de-reconciliation-descommunautes-de-nord-est-a-bangui/>.

20 United Nations, *Report of the Special Committee on Peacekeeping Operations, 2023 Substantive Session*, UN Doc. A/77/19, February 20–March 17, 2023, para. 90.

21 See also: Sara Hellmüller, Xiang-Yun Rosalind Tan, and Corinne Bara, “What Is in a Mandate? Introducing the UN Peace Mission Mandates Dataset,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 68, no. 1 (2024).

22 Ken Menkhaus, “International Peacebuilding and the Dynamics of Local and National Reconciliation in Somalia,” *International Peacekeeping* 3, no. 1 (1996); Adekeye Adebajo, *Liberia’s Civil War: Nigeria, ECOMOG, and Regional Security in West Africa* (London: Lynne Rienner, 2002).

23 Autesserre, *The Trouble with the Congo*.

24 Dan Fahey, “The Trouble with Ituri,” *African Security Review* 20, no. 2 (2011).

However, local conflict dynamics are much more on the radar of contemporary peacekeeping missions than before.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, unlike in Somalia, Liberia, and the DRC in the early 2000s, peacekeeping personnel in contemporary peace operations are typically explicitly mandated to respond to local conflicts. In 2009, the UN Mission in CAR and Chad (MINURCAT) became the first peacekeeping operation mandated to support local peace processes. The Security Council mandated the mission to “support the initiatives of national and local authorities in Chad to resolve local tensions and promote local reconciliation efforts.”<sup>26</sup> In 2010, the UN–African Union Mission in Darfur (UNAMID) was also mandated to support local conflict-resolution mechanisms. In 2014, the Security Council confirmed “support to the mediation of community conflict, including through measures to address its root causes” as one of UNAMID’s three strategic priorities.<sup>27</sup>

Quantitative research clearly shows that while local peace processes in general are likely to fail, support from peacekeeping operations increases their prospects for success.

Similarly, the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in CAR (MINUSCA) was mandated not only to help the government of CAR to stabilize the country through robust action but also to provide political support for efforts to establish lasting peace.<sup>28</sup> Subsequent Security Council resolutions on MINUSCA also explicitly highlighted local conflict resolution as a priority task alongside advancing national reconciliation.<sup>29</sup> As a result, MINUSCA has adopted a comprehensive strategy to support inclusive dialogue and reconciliation processes at the local level.<sup>30</sup>

When UNMISS was created in 2011, it was mandated from the beginning to “facilitate inter-communal reconciliation in areas at high risk of conflict,” and these activities were recognized as “an essential part of long-term state-building activity.”<sup>31</sup> The UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) was another mission mandated to support local peace processes from the start of the mission in 2013.<sup>32</sup>

While the UN Organization Stabilization Mission in the DRC (MONUSCO) lacked an explicit mandate to become involved in local peace processes for some time, it frequently did so in practice,<sup>33</sup> and in 2017 the Security Council requested the mission to support and undertake local mediation efforts.<sup>34</sup>

## Evidence for the Effectiveness of UN Peacekeeping Support to Local Peace Processes

There is a tendency to either romanticize peacemaking at the local level or largely dismiss these efforts.<sup>35</sup> Yet the empirical evidence is more nuanced. Like national-level peace processes, peace processes at the local level are not linear. Local conflict parties can shift from entering negotiations and concluding agreements to abandoning agreed arrangements, wholly or partially, starting new negotiations, or recommitting to previously concluded agreements. In other words, setbacks are to be expected during local peace processes.

25 Duursma, “Non-State Conflicts, Peacekeeping, and the Conclusion of Local Agreements.”

26 UN Security Council Resolution 1861 (January 14, 2009), UN Doc. S/RES/1861.

27 UN Security Council Resolution 2148 (April 3, 2014), UN Doc. S/RES/2148.

28 John Karlsrud, “The UN at War: Examining the Consequences of Peace-Enforcement Mandates for the UN Peacekeeping Operations in the CAR, the DRC and Mali,” *Third World Quarterly* 36, no. 1 (2015); UN Security Council Resolution 2217 (April 28, 2015), UN Doc. S/RES/2217.

29 See, for instance: UN Security Council Resolution 2387 (November 15, 2017), UN Doc. S/RES/2387; UN Security Council Resolution 2552 (November 12, 2020), UN Doc. S/RES/2552.

30 Marie-Joëlle Zahar and Delphine Mechoulan, “Peace by Pieces? Local Mediation and Sustainable Peace in the Central African Republic,” International Peace Institute, November 2017.

31 UN Security Council Resolution 2155 (May 27, 2014), UN Doc. S/RES/2155.

32 Another priority task of MINUSMA was “support to the resolution of local and intercommunal conflicts.”

33 Gorur and Velturo, “Local Conflict, Local Peacekeeping,” p. 11.

34 UN Security Council Resolution 2348 (March 31, 2017), UN Doc. S/RES/2348.

35 See: Joshua Craze, “Give Peace a Chance: Séverine Autesserre’s Apologia for International Peacebuilding,” *The Baffler*, November 11, 2021; Joshua Craze, “‘And Everything Became War’: Warrap State since the Signing of the R-ARCSS,” Small Arms Survey, December 2022.

Quantitative research clearly shows that while local peace processes in general are likely to fail, support from peacekeeping operations increases their prospects for success. Drawing on a dataset that covers non-state conflicts in Africa between 1989 and 2019, Allard Duursma finds that the involvement of peacekeeping personnel in negotiations significantly increases the likelihood that a local cease-fire is concluded.<sup>36</sup> Zooming in on UNAMID in Darfur, the involvement of peacekeeping personnel in negotiations prolongs the time until violence reoccurs.<sup>37</sup> In addition, focusing on the impact of social cohesion workshops organized by the UN Operation in Côte d'Ivoire (UNOCI), Hannah Smidt finds that these workshops significantly reduced levels of communal violence in the subsequent months.<sup>38</sup> Available statistical evidence thus points to the positive impact of UN peacekeeping personnel on local conflict resolution. Several case studies also point to the positive impact of UN peacekeeping on the prospects for local conflict resolution. For instance, Sara Hellmüller shows how UN peacekeepers created safe spaces in Ituri for community members to meet to discuss issues that they considered important for the local peace process.<sup>39</sup>

## Implementing the Primacy of Politics at the Local Level

Finding local political solutions is a collaborative effort within UN peacekeeping operations, with civil affairs teams typically playing a crucial role (see Box 1). The purpose of this section is to understand how civil affairs personnel in UN peacekeeping operations interpret and apply the primacy of politics at the local level. This includes the processes by which they craft and implement local-level political strategies and the factors that create variation in these processes among mission settings, including differences in mandates, mission structure, and mission leadership, as well as contextual differences in their operating environments.

## How Civil Affairs Components Support the Primacy of Politics

Civil affairs personnel frequently describe themselves as the “eyes and ears” of the mission at the local level, facilitating the mission’s engagement with local officials, community members, and representatives of local armed groups, including those who may be left out of a formal peace process.

Table 1 provides an overview of several current and recent missions’ mandated tasks that civil affairs personnel aim to implement through their work, many of which they undertake in collaboration with other mission sections. This overview is not exhaustive, as civil affairs components can undertake a range of tasks in support of various mandated objectives.

## Understanding and Implementing the Political Role of Civil Affairs

While civil affairs personnel implement and support many similar tasks across missions, there is some variation in how they understand and implement their political role. This variation is driven by missions’ differing mandates and strategic priorities, leadership, structures, and operating environments. For example, MONUSCO’s work is largely driven by its strategic priority to protect civilians, and most civil affairs-related tasks fall under that priority. Individuals interviewed from MONUSCO thus framed their work primarily in terms of facilitating POC as opposed to supporting a political process. Conversely, a key priority of the mission in South Sudan is to support the peace process, including preparations for upcoming elections. Thus, the work of UNMISS’s civil affairs component is largely centered on the mission’s mandate to facilitate local political engagement and boost local knowledge of and support to the formal political process. In contexts like CAR, and previously in

36 Duursma, “Peacekeeping, Mediation, and the Conclusion of Local Ceasefires.”

37 Allard Duursma, “Making Disorder More Manageable: The Short-Term Effectiveness of Local Mediation in Darfur,” *Journal of Peace Research* 58, no. 3 (2020).

38 Hannah M. Smidt, “United Nations Peacekeeping Locally: Enabling Conflict Resolution, Reducing Communal Violence,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 64, nos. 2–3 (2019).

39 Sara Hellmüller, *The Interaction between Local and International Peacebuilding Actors*. The same conclusion has been reached by Fahey. Fahey, “The Trouble with Ituri.”

### Box 1. The role of UN civil affairs

As per the 2008 UN policy directive that defines and conceptualizes the work of civil affairs components, the goal of civil affairs is to support the government and population in fostering conditions for sustainable peace.<sup>40</sup> The 2012 Civil Affairs Handbook states that civil affairs personnel “build relationships with key actors who can affect the peace process.... Interlocutors range from local government officials, elders and traditional leaders to a wide spectrum of non-institutional actors, including civil society organizations, media, the business sector, IDPs [internally displaced persons] and members of the general population.”<sup>41</sup>

The preponderance of national staff among civil affairs personnel compared to other substantive sections of UN peacekeeping operations makes civil affairs components particularly well suited to engage with this wide range of actors. The ratio of international to national staff in civil affairs is around 1 to 3. These national staff typically include many community liaison assistants (see Box 7).

Civil affairs is mandated to fulfill three core roles. First, civil affairs personnel are responsible for cross-mission representation, monitoring, and facilitation at the local level. This is often their primary role, with officers representing the mission and liaising with local stakeholders on mission operations and activities. They monitor local conditions to support the mission’s political and operational work and provide conflict analysis, early warning, and progress updates on mandate implementation. They also gather data to inform mission-wide strategies and support local-level coordination among different parts of the mission.<sup>42</sup>

A second core role of civil affairs is confidence-building, conflict management, and support to reconciliation at the local level. Civil affairs personnel support the development of social conditions conducive to peace. They engage in reconciliation and conflict-resolution activities, facilitate dialogue between groups, conduct outreach, and support civil society efforts to build peace.<sup>43</sup>

The third core role is to support the restoration and extension of state authority by supporting the development of political space for legitimate governance at the local level. This can involve promoting civic education, organizing political fora, and assisting in dialogues between the population and the government. They also provide operational support to local-level state institutions to enhance governance and institutional capacity.<sup>44</sup>

While these three roles can be separated on paper, they are interconnected in practice. For instance, by training government officials on conflict management, civil affairs personnel in UNOCI both supported the restoration and extension of state authority and strengthened the capacity of government officials to manage conflict more effectively. Civil affairs personnel in MINUSCA and UNMISS conduct similar capacity building on a more ad hoc basis.

Although the protection of civilians (POC) was not explicitly mentioned in the original policy directive on civil affairs, the three core roles of civil affairs are closely interconnected with POC.<sup>45</sup> The second core role of civil affairs clearly falls under tier 1 of the UN’s POC approach (protection through dialogue and engagement), while the third core role clearly falls under tier 3 (establishing a protective environment). Moreover, the early warning work of civil affairs contributes to the mission’s work under tier 2 (physical protection from violence). In other words, the core roles of civil affairs all contribute to POC in UN peacekeeping operations.

40 UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations and Department of Field Support (DPKO/DFS), “Policy Directive: Civil Affairs,” April 2008, para. 4. See also: UN DPKO/DFS, “Civil Affairs Handbook,” March 2012.

41 UN DPKO/DFS, “Civil Affairs Handbook,” p. 131.

42 UN DPKO/DFS, “Policy Directive: Civil Affairs,” para. 10.

43 Ibid.

44 Ibid.

45 UN DPKO/DFS, “Civil Affairs Handbook,” pp. 53–55.

Table 1. The political role of civil affairs

Mission	Mandated Task
<b>MONUSCO</b> Resolution 2666 (2022)	<b>POC</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Undertake local mediation to prevent the escalation of violence and to counter hate speech, misinformation, and disinformation</li> <li>• Enhance community engagement through strategic communications</li> </ul>
<b>MINUSCA</b> Resolution 2759 (2024)	<b>POC</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support and undertake local mediation to prevent the escalation of violence</li> <li>• Enhance interaction with civilians to support POC and strengthen early warning</li> </ul> <b>Support to the extension of state authority</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support the rapid extension of state authority over the entire territory of CAR, including through advising, mentoring, and monitoring</li> </ul> <b>Good offices and support to the peace process</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase participation of political parties, civil society, women, victims and survivors of sexual violence, youth, faith-based organizations, internally displaced persons, and refugees in the peace process</li> <li>• Undertake local conflict resolution and ensure the full, equal, meaningful, and safe participation of women, including through support to local dialogue and community engagement</li> <li>• Support the efforts of the government to address transitional justice, marginalization, and local grievances as part of the peace and reconciliation process, including through local dialogue with armed groups and civil society leaders</li> </ul>
<b>UNMISS</b> Resolution 2729 (2024)	<b>POC</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Facilitate the prevention, mitigation, and resolution of intercommunal violence through support to community-led peace dialogue processes and foster sustainable local and national reconciliation</li> </ul> <b>Support to the peace process</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assist in the full, equal, meaningful, and safe participation and effective engagement of women, civil society, youth, and other marginalized groups in the peace process</li> <li>• Support the conduct of elections, voter education programs for the prevention of and response to election violence, and training and dialogue among all political stakeholders</li> </ul>
<b>MINUSMA</b> Resolution 2640 (2022)	<b>Support to implementation of the political agreement and transition</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Facilitate dialogue and mediation at the national and local levels among all stakeholders, encourage and support the full implementation of the peace agreement, and support the political transition</li> <li>• Help the transitional government raise awareness on the content and objectives of the peace agreement</li> <li>• Assist in holding free and fair elections</li> </ul> <b>Support to stabilization and restoration of state authority in the center</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Facilitate the return of state presence, authority, and basic services in the center, including coordination with local and regional communities, groups, and military and civilian authorities</li> </ul> <b>POC</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strengthen community engagement and protection mechanisms, community outreach, reconciliation, mediation, and support to the resolution of local and intercommunal conflicts</li> </ul>

Haiti, where mission mandates prioritize the extension of state authority, civil affairs components support the extension of state authority at the subnational level, for example by liaising with local political authorities and supporting institution building.<sup>46</sup> At the same time, POC is also a key focus in CAR, particularly in addressing intercommunal violence linked to transhumance.

Missions' differing structures can also create variation, including depending on whether the mission's political affairs component has personnel situated in field offices. In UNMISS, for example, the political affairs division is only present in mission headquarters; thus, some civil affairs personnel described their role as the representation of political affairs at the local level. However, this is not the case in all contexts, including in CAR, and previously in Mali, where political affairs officers are also present in field offices.

Civil affairs personnel frequently describe themselves as the “eyes and ears” of the mission at the local level.

There is also variation in the pillar of the mission in which civil affairs personnel are situated. For example, in MONUSCO, the civil affairs component is situated within the protection pillar, as the mission does not have a political pillar as most missions do. According to one former mission official, this has prevented the mission from having a clear “center of power” around its political work, which is further exacerbated by the fact that the mission headquarters is in Kinshasa, while most field-level work takes place in the country's eastern regions, some 1,500 kilometers away.<sup>47</sup> Conversely, in MINUSCA, the civil affairs component falls under the deputy SRSR/resident coordinator/humanitarian coordinator (DSRSG/RC/HC), while in UNMISS, and previously in MINUSMA, it sits under the DSRSG for political affairs. While integration between civil affairs and political affairs can be more difficult in cases where civil affairs does not fall within the political pillar, one official from MINUSCA noted that there are

benefits and drawbacks to each arrangement. For example, the situation of MINUSCA's civil affairs component under the DSRSG/RC/HC helps facilitate coordination with humanitarian and development actors.<sup>48</sup>

In addition to mission structure, the role of leadership can influence the political work of civil affairs, including leaders' attitude toward the work of field offices and the extent to which they integrate field-based initiatives into the mission's broader political strategy. In UNMISS, for example, because the current DSRSG for political affairs has a background in civil affairs, some officials indicated he is better attuned to the importance of local engagement and the work of civil affairs.<sup>49</sup> Further, in recognition of the strong linkages between national and subnational dynamics in South Sudan, UNMISS leadership has instituted several mechanisms to facilitate integration between the field offices and mission headquarters.

However, this is not the case in all settings. Other civil affairs and field office personnel described feeling isolated from mission headquarters. One former MINUSMA official recalled that they “were not taken seriously because we were talking to local actors and [mission leaders] were more interested in the voices of leaders at the table. This is common at different missions.”<sup>50</sup> A former mission leader from MINUSCA similarly recalled how “the senior leadership of the mission is often looking for the high-level process” even though “violence is often more dispersed and fragmented than this.”<sup>51</sup>

## Devising Local Political Strategies

While civil affairs components frequently support political processes, one common critique is that these activities are sometimes implemented as one-off engagements, lacking

46 Interview #2.

47 Jenna Russo, *Protecting Peace? How the UN's Protection of Civilians Contributes to Peace Process* (Palgrave Macmillan, forthcoming).

48 Written response from MINUSCA official, received December 13, 2024.

49 Conversations at UNMISS civil affairs retreat in Juba, November 2024.

50 Interview, June 17, 2022.

51 Interview, July 20, 2022.



follow-through.<sup>52</sup> Thus, ensuring that such work is guided by a political strategy can make it less reactive and more sustainable.

Interviewees emphasized that the mandate is always the starting point when devising local political strategies. From there, however, missions vary in how they facilitate strategic planning, including the extent to which they integrate local strategies into their national-level strategy. In most missions, leadership at mission headquarters first crafts a mission-wide strategy, which personnel in field offices then interpret and adapt to fit within the local context. Thus, the process is both top-down and bottom-up, with a centralized, overarching strategy that becomes tailored to local contexts.

As one MONUSCO official noted, while “it’s always hard for missions to filter the policies from the national level to the provincial or territorial level, we are obliged to develop a bottom-up approach.... We have our civil affairs guidelines at the national level, but each field office has to adapt those policies to its own reality because... there are some policies that are not adaptable to some field offices.”<sup>53</sup> For example, in Ituri, community-based armed groups are fighting one another in support of their own communities, while local armed groups in Goma have teamed up to fight against the M23, which they view as a foreign armed group.<sup>54</sup> These contexts require unique responses at both the strategic and the tactical levels.

One UNMISS official similarly described how regional variations in political and conflict dynamics require tailored approaches. For example, their approach may differ from one area to another depending on whether the ruling party, the opposition, or a coalition holds political leadership. According to this UNMISS official, “The different dynamics make it necessary for us to develop political strategies that ensure we don’t

run into problems with local authorities and communities.”<sup>55</sup>

While missions have previously been critiqued for not always having clearly articulated political strategies,<sup>56</sup> interviewees from multiple missions expressed how planning of political strategies has improved in recent years. For example, in UNMISS, mission leaders have a written political strategy anchored in six tracks of engagement in line with the mission’s mandated strategic priorities.<sup>57</sup> Based on this strategy, mission leaders have articulated priority areas for the engagement of civil affairs personnel, including addressing subnational insecurity through dialogue and engagement, supporting implementation of the peace agreement, and promoting civic space and climate security.<sup>58</sup>

In MINUSCA, one official similarly described how the SRSG has created an overarching political strategy that each mission entity and field office uses to develop its own individual workplan. The official described this as a “watershed” moment for MINUSCA in terms of its planning, given that the mission did not previously have an articulated political strategy to guide its work.<sup>59</sup> MONUSCO also developed an integrated workplan in 2023, which one official described as “very clear and well-articulated,” though “the challenge is now implementation.”<sup>60</sup>

## The Sustainability of Local Political Solutions: Ownership, Partnerships, and Local-National Linkages

As noted above, in some cases, peacekeepers have been critiqued for pursuing “one-off” approaches to local-level political engagement without following

52 Day et al., “Assessing the Effectiveness of UNMISS.”

53 Interview #3.

54 Ibid.

55 Interview #7.

56 Russo and Mamiya, “The Primacy of Politics”; Adam Day et al., “The Political Practice of Peacekeeping: How Strategies for Peace Operations Are Developed and Implemented,” UN University, September 2020.

57 On file with the authors.

58 Presentation at the UNMISS civil affairs retreat in Juba, November 2024.

59 Interview #10.

60 Interview #3.

up in the long term to ensure that peace is sustainable.<sup>61</sup> This can occur due to a lack of staff and resources and because mission leadership may only turn their attention to local conflicts when they result in a significant number of deaths. This means that support from peacekeeping operations is often reactive and not sustained over a longer period.<sup>62</sup>

Many interviewees emphasized three conditions they believe to positively influence the prospects for reaching sustainable local political solutions. First, local actors need to own the processes and solutions. This means that UN peacekeeping personnel need to empower local actors to devise and implement the solutions. Second, local solutions need to address conflict drivers related to the political economy. Third, local processes need to be aligned with processes at the national level. This section looks at how these three conditions shape the sustainability of local political solutions.

In some cases, peacekeepers have been critiqued for pursuing “one-off” approaches to local-level political engagement without following up in the long term to ensure that peace is sustainable.

## Empowering Local Stakeholders

Official UN policy defines national ownership as an operational necessity for sustainable peacebuilding.<sup>63</sup> Within the context of peace operations, ownership is similarly seen as crucial for implementing the mandate. Both the HIPPO report and the A4P Declaration of Shared Commitments emphasize the importance of the UN engaging with both national authorities and non-state actors to find political solutions.<sup>64</sup>

The importance of both national and local ownership is also generally a cornerstone of the political strategy of UN peace operations. In CAR, for instance, the partnership framework between MINUSCA and the Ministry of Humanitarian Action and National Reconciliation is based on the

principle that the mission can provide support, but peace depends first and foremost on the conflict parties and local communities themselves.<sup>65</sup> To this end, civil affairs personnel help to coordinate among local stakeholders, including communities, civil society organizations, and local state authorities, to ensure they actively participate in local peace processes, exchange information, and collaborate toward common objectives.

Local ownership is not only about the involvement of a wide range of local actors in internationally sponsored peacebuilding activities but also about the quality and degree of this involvement.<sup>66</sup> Thus, although UN peacekeeping personnel sometimes

assume the role of facilitator or mediator, they often try to enable local facilitators and mediators to play a leading role in guiding negotiations, building trust, and promoting reconciliation to address deep-rooted grievances.<sup>67</sup> This means that civil affairs

components primarily act as enablers, supporting and strengthening local efforts and capacity to manage and resolve conflict.<sup>68</sup> Accordingly, ensuring local ownership is often a conscious strategy pursued by civil affairs personnel to make solutions sustainable. As a MINUSCA staff member reflected,

The UN is good in mediating agreements but much less good in sustaining or implementing these agreements. The UN has to be conscious of being an outsider. This means that we need to find a balance between maintaining effectiveness, on the one hand, and making sure to not drive the entire process yourself and ensure sustainability, on the other hand.<sup>69</sup>

61 Jana Krause, “Stabilization and Local Conflicts: Communal and Civil War in South Sudan,” *Ethnopolitics* 18, no. 5 (2019).

62 O’Byrne, Rendtorff-Smith, and Donati, “The Role of United Nations Peacekeeping Operations in Addressing Local Conflicts,” p. 18.

63 UN General Assembly and UN Security Council, *Report of the Secretary-General on Peacebuilding in the Immediate Aftermath of Conflict*, UN Doc. A/63/881-S/2009/304, June 11, 2009; UN General Assembly and UN Security Council, *Civilian Capacity in the Aftermath of Conflict: Independent Report of the Senior Advisory Group*, UN Doc. A/65/747-S/2011/85, February 22, 2011.

64 UN Doc. A/70/95-S/2015/446; UN Peacekeeping, “Declaration of Shared Commitments.”

65 MINUSCA, “TPS SRSG—Signing Ceremony of the Partnership Framework between MINUSCA and the Ministry of Humanitarian Action and National Reconciliation (MAHRN),” November 14, 2018.

66 Sarah B. K. von Billerbeck, “Local Ownership and UN Peacebuilding: Discourse versus Operationalization,” *Global Governance* 21, no. 2 (2015).

67 O’Byrne, Rendtorff-Smith, and Donati, “The Role of United Nations Peacekeeping Operations in Addressing Local Conflicts,” p. 5.

68 UN DPKO/DFS, “Civil Affairs Handbook,” p. 169.

69 Interview with MINUSCA official, January 17, 2019.

There are at least two major advantages of including local actors as mediators in peace processes aimed at resolving local conflicts. First, local actors are typically highly familiar with the specific issues driving the conflict, which can help them craft effective solutions and foster consensus. Second, local mediators—including, for example, traditional leaders, religious leaders, and local authorities—can often draw on their legitimacy (see Box 2).<sup>70</sup>

Ensuring local ownership comes with several challenges. Local actors often lack the logistical capabilities necessary for effective peacebuilding.<sup>71</sup> Accordingly, as soon as the UN is no longer providing support to a peace process, local actors typically struggle to arrange logistics. Another major challenge is that in some peacekeeping contexts, it is difficult for peacekeeping personnel to find legitimate local actors with whom they can cooperate.<sup>72</sup> Local actors may also shift their priori-

### Box 2. UNMISS support for local ownership in the Panawur-Panaguong peace process

Between 2016 and 2018, UNMISS played an important role in supporting a local peace process between the Panawur and Panaguong Dinka subclans in Lakes state. This conflict, rooted in historical land disputes, resource competition, cattle raiding, and weak governance, escalated into violence in 2016, leaving dozens dead and many displaced.

UNMISS prioritized local ownership by identifying influential figures within these communities. A stakeholder analysis revealed the critical role of a spear master, a respected spiritual leader among the youth in the cattle camps who encouraged youth to raid cattle. Recognizing his influence, UNMISS engaged the spear master, convincing him to work toward peace by appointing him as the chairperson of a newly formed thirteen-member peace and reconciliation committee. The civil affairs officer who was closely involved in this process reflected on how this came about:

I started by studying and mapping influential people in the community, and we identified a spiritual leader who was deeply respected by the youth in the cattle camps. We approached him and said, “We want you to lead this.” We made him the chairperson of a local peace committee. He needed some prestige, so we told him, “Form the committee, and you will be the chair.” We provided motorbikes for the members and sometimes gave them money to buy bulls for peace ceremonies. By letting them lead these efforts, they felt ownership. The spiritual leader could proudly say, “I’m the one who did this,” and that sense of pride drove him to play a key role in the peace process.<sup>73</sup>

Through the peace and reconciliation committee, UNMISS facilitated dialogue between the communities, culminating in a peace agreement in June 2018. To sustain this peace agreement, UNMISS peacekeepers conducted regular patrols, and civil affairs personnel established a peace monitoring team and coordinated with the human rights division to ensure justice for crimes committed during the conflict.

UNMISS complemented these efforts with initiatives to address the root causes of the conflict, including a quick-impact project to improve water access and a sensitization campaign that reached over 2,000 individuals. Reconciliation was further promoted by a “sports for peace” event in Cueibet in September 2018 during which both communities publicly declared an end to their conflict, slaughtered a bull as part of a traditional reconciliation ceremony, and played a soccer match. The spear master was given the honor of kicking off the match together with the governor. Reflecting on this soccer match, an UNMISS civil affairs officer stated, “The spear master was visibly very proud of this moment. He felt appreciated for his role in the peace process.”<sup>74</sup>

70 Interview #1.

71 Simon Chesterman, “Ownership in Theory and in Practice: Transfer of Authority in UN Statebuilding Operations,” *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 1, no. 1 (2007), p. 7.

72 O’Byrne, Rendtorff-Smith, and Donati, “The Role of United Nations Peacekeeping Operations in Addressing Local Conflicts,” p. 36.

73 Interview with UNMISS official, November 15, 2024. Confirmed in other interviews: Interview with South Sudanese official, November 18, 2024; Interview with UNMISS official, November 15, 2024.

74 Interview with UNMISS official, November 15, 2024. Confirmed in interview with South Sudanese official, November 18, 2024.

ties or behavior based on what they perceive as the expectations or resources of the UN rather than focusing on sustainable, locally driven solutions. Moreover, UN involvement in the process might lead local actors to expect the mission to devise solutions rather than to engage in forging solutions themselves. Similarly, UN involvement might displace, undermine, or overshadow local initiatives rather than strengthening them. If the UN takes on too much responsibility in peace processes, local actors may become less proactive or even abandon their own efforts. As noted by a UNMISS civil affairs officer:

Sometimes, communities can assume that it is the job of the UN to implement resolutions they have made at peace dialogues. When this happens, we invest more time to emphasize that the resolutions are theirs and in their capacity to achieve.<sup>75</sup>

Similarly, a MINUSCA civil affairs officer working in Bossangoa noted,

In February 2019, the peace and reconciliation committee was set up by the government. Seven people were elected by the community. Since this committee was set up, I purposively no longer led discussion on peace and reconciliation.... I had to wait roughly five months before they finalized their action plan. The final plan was a good plan. I just had to be patient during these five months, because they needed [to] take ownership.<sup>76</sup>

Finally, it can be challenging for the UN to decide which local actors to work with. For instance, a local peace process facilitated by the NGO Peace Canal and a Lou Nuer spiritual leader persuaded Lou Nuer, Bor Dinka, and Murle leaders to sign the Pieri peace agreement in 2021. However, the Jonglei state governor was largely hostile to this process because he saw the spiritual leader's role as undermining his own authority.<sup>77</sup> As a result, UNMISS had to strike a balance between supporting the implementation of the peace

agreement and maintaining good relations with the governor.

## Addressing Local Conflict Drivers and Cooperating with Development Actors

Several peacekeeping missions have mandates that reference the “root causes” of conflicts. However, it is not always clear whether peacekeeping operations are able to address the root causes of conflict. Indeed, a UN report on local conflict highlights how the circumscribed mandates of peacekeeping missions are somewhat at odds with “the limited range of political tools available to peacekeepers to induce political will and support to address local conflicts’ root causes.”<sup>78</sup>

However, many civil affairs personnel suggested that supporting sustainable local conflict resolution does require addressing the drivers of local conflict.<sup>79</sup> These drivers often, though not always, relate to local political economies and are associated with socioeconomic actors within communities rather than political actors. Thus, even in contexts where national agreements are in place, these agreements may not address the issues that drive local conflicts, and formal political actors may struggle to control such local dynamics. Because of this, local solutions that address these local economic interests are imperative to achieving peace.

For instance, one weakness of the 2019 national-level peace agreement in CAR is that it fails to address local conflict dynamics. As a UN information analyst strongly put it,

The national level is more centered towards political issues. If you read the 2019 agreement and the previously concluded national-level agreements, there is almost nothing on the reasons why the fighting continues, there is nothing on the economy, and there is nothing on natural resources and illegal mining. So

75 Samira Y. Salifu, “People for Peace: Building Consensus among Local Communities for Peaceful Coexistence in South Sudan with Francis Shuei,” UNMISS, August 8, 2023.

76 Interview with MINUSCA official, January 29, 2020.

77 Joshua Craze, “A Pause Not a Peace: Conflict in Jonglei and the GPAA,” Small Arms Survey, May 2023, p.6.

78 O’Byrne, Rendtorff-Smith, and Donati, “The Role of United Nations Peacekeeping Operations in Addressing Local Conflicts,” p. 18.

79 For example, interviews #2, #3, #8, #14, and #15.

unfortunately, if you do not address these issues, then the armed groups that are pretending to be political actors—while in reality they are more likely criminal gangs that extort as much as they can—will continue to fight to take as much as they can.<sup>80</sup>

By contrast, many of the sixty local peace agreements concluded in CAR since 2013 do address local conflict drivers.<sup>81</sup> While the provisions included in these local agreements vary widely, many of them address a recurring set of local issues, including: (1) local power-sharing between armed groups and communities; (2) the free movement of people to access basic services and economic activities; (3) sharing of natural resources; (4) confidence-building measures between combatants to end hostilities; (5) the establishment of follow-up committees; (6) the

return of displaced people to their places of origin; (7) conflict transformation through the promotion of a culture of peace; (8) the formation of weapon-free zones; (9) voluntary disarmament by encouraging members of armed groups to join community violence reduction programs; and (10) the restoration of state authority. Beyond these “formal” provisions, many of the agreements provide economic incentives to end the violence (see Box 3).

In addition to supporting deals that are economically beneficial to all parties involved, UN peacekeeping missions can “expand the pie” by generating tangible benefits for local communities, often referred to as peace dividends. One way peacekeeping operations can generate tangible benefits is through quick-impact projects (QIPs), which represent a small but not insignificant

### Box 3. A local peace process in Nana-Bakassa and Kouki

In 2017, MINUSCA facilitated a local peace process to end violent reprisals over cattle raids between anti-Balaka and ex-Séléka factions in Nana-Bakassa and Kouki. MINUSCA used shuttle diplomacy to engage local authorities, spiritual leaders, and parliamentarians to mediate tensions. This was followed by face-to-face negotiation and the signing of a declaration of commitment to nonviolence and peace in June 2017. The agreement addressed key grievances, such as freedom of movement and the cessation of armed activity, fostering improved security and economic interaction.

The parties remained committed to the agreement in large part because of the way it divided revenues generated from taxing cattle traders between the anti-Balaka and the ex-Séléka.<sup>82</sup> A civil affairs officer explained the positive impact of cooperation on transhumance corridors following the agreement:

The main thing we achieved with this agreement was to get the commitment to peace of the commanders. Charly [the local anti-Balaka commander] and Allabib [the local commander of the ex-Séléka in Ouham] managed to find a mutually beneficial arrangement. By getting them committed, they did not allow their elements to conduct any attacks.<sup>83</sup>

Another UN staff member in the Bossangoa field office illustrated how this cooperation looked in practice:

Whenever Allabib sends cattle into [the] anti-Balaka-controlled area in Ouham to sell the cattle, he calls Charly with his satellite phone in order to make sure nothing happens to his cattle. They then come to an agreement about how much of the share is paid to Charly. Charly then gives part of this money to the men, allowing the herders to move through their area.<sup>84</sup>

80 Interview with MINUSCA official, January 27, 2020.

81 On file with the authors.

82 Interview with MINUSCA official, January 28, 2020.

83 Interview with MINUSCA official, April 28, 2021.

84 Interview with MINUSCA official, January 30, 2020.

budget line peacekeepers can use to support reconstruction, peacebuilding, and reform.<sup>85</sup> Typically limited to \$50,000, QIPs are modest when compared to the funding available from large international development actors such as the World Bank. However, their advantage lies in their flexibility; they can be directed toward individual projects in specific areas rather than being distributed across the entire country.

A telling example of how missions can use QIPs in the context of a local peace process was the peace process between the Christian-dominated Boeing and the Muslim-dominated PK5 neighborhoods of Bangui. One of the most contentious issues in the negotiations leading up to the 2016 agreement ending the conflict was the reopening of a Muslim cemetery that had been closed due to violence.<sup>86</sup> To make the signing and implementation of the agreement more attractive, MINUSCA used a QIP to hire 200 youths, 100 from the Christian community and 100 from the Muslim community, to start working together to weed the grounds and prepare to reopen the cemetery.<sup>87</sup>

In addition to using QIPs, civil affairs components often coordinate with the wider international development community to ensure international development projects supplement peacebuilding efforts. As one UNMISS civil affairs officer noted,

Our resources and technical expertise are limited, which is why forging strong partnerships with external actors is essential. Collaborating with the UN country team, donors, and NGOs allows us to address the underlying issues and root causes of conflict, helping to sustain our gains.<sup>88</sup>

In addition to supporting deals that are economically beneficial to all parties involved, UN peacekeeping missions can “expand the pie” by generating tangible benefits for local communities.

For instance, the World Bank started cash-for-work road clearance and local infrastructure enhancement activities in CAR in mid-2016. This project involved hiring 250 workers in each of the subprefectures across CAR.<sup>89</sup> The project positively influenced the implementation of a 2017 local peace agreement in Kaga-Bandoro that MINUSCA’s civil affairs component was supporting.<sup>90</sup> A MINUSCA staff member at the field office in Kaga-Bandoro highlighted how the construction of a road helped to anchor the peace:

The local peace agreement and the agreements with armed groups in Kaga-Bandoro allowed for UNOPS [UN Office for Project Services], the agency implementing service provisions, to construct a large highway road from Kaga-Bandoro to Ndele and Vakaga on the borders with South Sudan. We were able to construct bridges along the road axis.... This opened up easy access for goods and movement of people along the way. Economic activity is one main factor that can pull Muslims and Christians together.<sup>91</sup>

This positive assessment of the local agreement is shared by many community members in Kaga-Bandoro. A local youth leader noted, “Development has helped with improving relations between communities.”<sup>92</sup>

However, this sort of coordination between peacebuilding and development actors is not always possible due to turf issues that arise when these actors compete for influence and control, sometimes leading to fragmentation. Moreover, limited funding remains a challenge, and it is not always possible for civil affairs personnel to get

85 Kseniya Oksamytna, *Advocacy and Change in International Organizations: Communication, Protection, and Reconstruction in UN Peacekeeping* (OUP Oxford, 2023), pp. 156–193. O’Byrne, Rendtorff-Smith, and Donati, “The Role of United Nations Peacekeeping Operations in Addressing Local Conflicts,” p. 18.

86 Interview #9; Interview #10.

87 Interview with youth leader and local peace committee member, June 20, 2023; Interview with local leader, June 24, 2023.

88 Interview #6.

89 UN civil affairs situation report, April 14, 2016; UN civil affairs situation report, July 8, 2016.

90 MINUSCA, “Note sur la portée et l’impact de la Charte pour la paix et la réconciliation à Kaga Bandoro,” September 18, 2017.

91 Interview with MINUSCA official, June 15, 2023.

92 Interview with youth leader, June 15, 2023.

development partners on board. For instance, a UNMISS civil affairs officer explained how he tried to create water catchments in a specific region to prevent large-scale cattle migration and related conflicts:

We try to reach out to development partners, but this is not always viable. Since I started in 2018, we've been trying to get a water catchment built but haven't found any partner to support [it]. But we're trying to work with local partners to see how we can do this. If we had the resources, we would have addressed it a long time ago, but the problem is money.<sup>93</sup>

The generation of peace dividends is thus not without challenges. However, generating peace dividends is important—without them, communities might not see the tangible benefits of a peace agreement.

National-level actors who benefit from ongoing violence often disrupt local peace processes. This makes it more challenging for UN peacekeeping personnel to support these processes.

## Linking the Local with the National

Local conflicts are typically not entirely local. While local conflicts usually do not feature significant direct involvement from state actors, government officials or other types of elites often enable such conflicts or may indirectly support the local conflict parties. This support is typically driven by self-interest, as elites exploit these conflicts to consolidate their power, manipulate local grievances, and further their own political or economic agendas. In fact, as noted in a UN report, “It is not unusual for influential political leaders at the national or even regional levels to serve their agendas by manipulating existing local-level tensions such as those between herders and farmers, or exploiting struggles between customary

authorities.”<sup>94</sup> In South Sudan, for instance, “local” communal conflicts in Jonglei in 2020 were closely intertwined with national-level conflicts between elites.<sup>95</sup>

Local conflicts are more difficult to resolve if they are linked to national-level or regional conflicts.<sup>96</sup> National-level actors who benefit from ongoing violence often disrupt local peace processes. This makes it more challenging for UN peacekeeping personnel to support these processes. For instance, as noted by a former civil affairs officer in MINUSMA, “We often don't see progress at the local level because the conflicts on this level are being manipulated from the capital. This was true in the central region in Mali like Mopti.”<sup>97</sup>

Two contrasting examples from South Sudan further highlight the limitations of a local-only, civil affairs-led approach to resolving conflicts. In Rumbek and the

surrounding area, the civil affairs team engaged with local NGOs and community leaders to facilitate peace conferences addressing intercommunal violence driven by cattle-raiding, marriage disputes, and assassinations of local leaders. These efforts, including the resolution of the Panawur-Panaguong conflict, were relatively successful due to the violence being largely disconnected from broader national issues (see Box 2).<sup>98</sup> By contrast, the intercommunal conflicts between Dinka pastoralists and Fertit farmers in and around Wau were exacerbated by the national civil war dynamics, especially after Nuer soldiers who were part of the armed opposition sought refuge in Fertit communities. This led the Dinka-dominated government in Juba to view the Fertit communities with suspicion and accuse them of collaborating with opposition forces, which fueled retaliatory

93 Interview #15.

94 O'Bryan, Rendtorff-Smith, and Donati, “The Role of United Nations Peacekeeping Operations in Addressing Local Conflicts,” p. 4.

95 Nuer youth militias received backing from the Sudan People's Liberation Movement-in-Opposition (SPLM/A-IO) and high-ranking officials who supplied arms to Lou Nuer fighters. Similarly, Greater Bor Dinka elites provided funding and arms to bolster their militias, while Murle militias were armed and supported by Dinka National Security Service officers from Greater Bahr el Ghazal, driven both by their rivalry with the Bor Dinka and by a desire to weaken the SPLM/A-IO by targeting Lou Nuer. The fighting resulted in over 1,000 casualties, widespread displacement, and famine conditions in parts of Pibor. UNMISS and UN Human Rights, “Armed Violence Involving Community-Based Militias in Greater Jonglei: January–August 2020,” March 2021, p. 1.

96 Duursma, “Non-State Conflicts, Peacekeeping, and the Conclusion of Local Agreements.”

97 Interview #2.

98 Interview #6.

attacks. Disputes over political power and the division of states by the national government further inflamed tensions. Efforts by the civil affairs team in Wau to mediate peace through local dialogues were undermined by these national issues as violence continued unabated.<sup>99</sup>

The example from Wau underlines the importance of linking the local and national levels. While it is a challenging task, UN peacekeeping personnel can try to mitigate the negative effect of national-level elites on local conflict. In Wau, for example, this could involve inviting Juba-based officials to local dialogue events to meet with communities. Peacekeeping personnel could even try to get government officials on board to support the local peace process.<sup>100</sup> The UN is in a good position to coordinate with national-level actors that have a stake in local peace processes. In addition to field offices, they also have access to the highest circles of national-level decision making via the headquarters of the mission.<sup>101</sup> By comparison, community leaders, civil society activists, local government officials, or other local peacemakers are less well placed to engage powerful spoilers that live far away from the actual violence.<sup>102</sup> As a UNMISS civil affairs officer noted,

There are multiple layers of political influence over intercommunal conflicts. Reaching an agreement between those two communities will not have a lasting impact. We have to engage... with the state-level politicians and with the national level all at the same time. Without this multilayered engagement, any solution will not have a lasting impact. This is a very intensive process to undertake.<sup>103</sup>

An example of such engagement can be found in MONUSCO's efforts to mediate a local peace agreement in Kalehe. After civil affairs personnel realized that some government officials in the

capital were helping to drive the conflict, UN peacekeeping personnel flew a team of local mediators to the capital to meet with these officials and include them in the mediation process. This helped to facilitate an agreement.<sup>104</sup>

UN personnel can also collaborate with government officials, either by enabling them to support local peace processes or by reinforcing their existing peace support efforts. In CAR, for example, MINUSCA provided logistical support that allowed parliamentarians and members of the government to become involved with and provide support to local mediation initiatives.<sup>105</sup> This enabled the involvement of parliamentarians in the signing ceremony of the 2018 Markounda cease-fire agreement in Ouham. As a civil affairs officer reflected,

We encouraged [the parliamentarians] to come because when people take a commitment in public in the presence of authorities, we believe they will take it more seriously. Bringing in member-state authorities was a way for us as the mediation team to show we were taking the peace process very seriously.<sup>106</sup>

Even in cases where elites are not interfering in local conflicts, it can be helpful to bring in influential elites to pressure the local conflict parties to compromise. A UNMISS civil affairs staff member in Lakes state reflected on the importance of bringing in elites from the capital:

We think about who needs to be present and we start our involvement—we facilitate them coming to the state. We inform headquarters, which supports us to have outreach and have them come to the state. We have done this on a number of occasions. Headquarters are always ready to ensure that we use the mission assets to facilitate these kinds of programs.<sup>107</sup>

99 Gorur and Velturo, "Local Conflict, Local Peacekeeping," p. 23.

100 Interview #4. See also: UN Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, "UN Support to Local Mediation," p. 12.

101 *Ibid.*, p. 5.

102 Sarah Brockmeier and Philipp Rotmann, "Civil Affairs and Local Conflict Management in Peace Operations," Global Public Policy Institute, 2016, p. 55.

103 Interview #18.

104 Brockmeier and Rotmann, "Civil Affairs and Local Conflict Management in Peace Operations," pp. 16–17.

105 Zahar and Mechoulam, "Peace by Pieces?," p. 39.

106 Interview with civil affairs officer, April 28, 2021.

107 Interview #6.



Finally, as noted at the start of this report, the primacy of politics at the local level is also about contributing to the implementation of elite pacts that have been concluded at the national level. Peace at the local and national levels should thus be seen as mutually reinforcing. Indeed, numerous local peace efforts in South Sudan have supported the implementation of the 2018 Revitalized Agreement for Resolution of Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS). For instance, in August 2020, UNMISS civil affairs personnel in Western Bahr el Ghazal organized a day-long event to sustain the momentum of the peace process. The primary objective was to broaden engagement in and comprehension of the R-ARCSS among various political stakeholders, including representatives from the SPLM and SPLM-IO, religious leaders, community representatives, and members of civil society in the region.<sup>108</sup> Similarly, a meeting facilitated by UNMISS together with the state ministries of local government, law enforcement, and peacebuilding in Malakal in April 2022 focused on

fostering durable peace through inclusive dialogue among communities with a history of conflict. A key topic of this meeting was how to implement the R-ARCSS at the local level.<sup>109</sup>

Local peace processes have also played a crucial role in supporting the national-level peace process in CAR. Prior to a new rebellion breaking out in late 2020, a civil affairs officer within MINUSCA pointed out that fighting in CAR was likely to persist despite a national-level agreement because state officials or national-level leaders of armed groups generally have little influence over local commanders.<sup>110</sup> As a staff member in the office of the DSRSG in MINUSCA reflected,

MINUSCA puts a lot of emphasis on the local. There is a recognition that the conflict is highly localized, so only leading a national-level mediation process with some commanders would not lead to progress on the ground. Solely focusing on the national level alone would be useless. The local level is crucial for

#### **Box 4. A political forum to prepare for elections at the local level in South Sudan**

The UNMISS civil affairs component is playing a crucial role in preparing South Sudan for elections. As part of this work, UNMISS has organized the Political Forum initiative, designed to prepare for national elections at the state level by fostering dialogue among political parties, civil society, and key stakeholders. Facilitated jointly by civil affairs and other civilian components of UNMISS in each state, it addresses critical issues such as electoral processes, political inclusivity, and the legal and institutional frameworks needed for credible elections. It also focuses on practical issues such as accessing areas where other political parties are dominant and responding to violence during elections.<sup>111</sup>

UNMISS civil affairs personnel cite the Political Forum as an example of how local engagement can have a positive influence on national-level dynamics. For instance, one civil affairs officer noted,

[The Political Forum] was the first time different stakeholders in the state came together under the theme of opening up civic and political space for the upcoming elections. The stakeholders had never come together under one roof—civil society, political parties, institutions, traditional leaders, academia, women, youth, and state government. They talked openly about all these political issues. It was organized and funded by civil affairs with political and electoral affairs in mission headquarters.... The government now signed an order for all institutions to ensure that the process is conducive to an open political and civic space. This came as a result—a tangible outcome of the political forum.<sup>112</sup>

108 UNMISS, "Civil Society, Political Stakeholders, Community Leaders in Western Bahr El Ghazal Attend UNMISS-Organized Peace Forum, Find Ways to Work Together despite COVID-19," press release, August 3, 2020.

109 UNMISS, "Joint UNMISS and State Government Forum in Malakal Leads to Action Plan for Peaceful Coexistence from Five Counties," press release, April 11, 2022.

110 Interview #16.

111 Interview #13; Interview #14.

112 Interview #13.

implementation. So, at the local level, the challenge is to tailor national-level solutions to extremely localized situations.<sup>113</sup>

It is therefore not a coincidence that following the signing of the 2019 Political Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation (APPR), the president issued a decree establishing an implementation committee to monitor the APPR and contribute to its implementation at the local level. In the wake of the APPR, several local agreements have at least partially contributed to its implementation at the local level (see Box 5).

However, the outbreak of the rebellion led by the Coalition of Patriots for Change in 2020 has severely undermined earlier local efforts to implement the APPR in CAR. Before these developments, local actors had been working to translate national commitments into local solutions.

However, the resurgence of national-level armed conflict and the growing influence of foreign security actors shifted the focus away from these localized peace efforts. With the government prioritizing military responses over political engagement, the space for local initiatives shrank, and dialogue efforts with armed groups or community leaders became secondary to security operations. This shows once more that national-level dynamics can undermine local peace processes.

## Integrating Civil Affairs Work across the Mission

In addition to engaging with local and national officials and other stakeholders outside the mission, civil affairs components also need to integrate their work with other mission

### Box 5. The Gambo-Pombolo peace agreement

The Gambo-Pombolo peace agreement, signed in March 2019, highlights how local accords can operationalize the APPR framework in CAR. This peace process, facilitated by MINUSCA, began in late 2018 with letters from the mayors of Gambo and Pombolo requesting reconciliation talks. MINUSCA helped establish twelve-member peace committees in each town, which laid the groundwork for mediated dialogues led by the subprefect and supported by MINUSCA. The peace process progressed through several meetings, culminating in a roundtable in Bangassou involving twenty-six participants, including four women, who discussed security, reconciliation, and local development.

The resulting agreement explicitly referenced the APPR as its overarching framework and required violations to be reported to the APPR's implementation committee. By June 2019, the agreement was extended to the village of Ngandou, covering the entire subprefecture. This local process helped to address conflicts in the sorts of geographically remote areas that often lie outside the reach of national-level peace deals. As a MINUSCA civil affairs coordinator noted,

The leaders of armed groups like to state that their armed group has a clear hierarchical command, but the guys that are part of armed groups at the grassroots level in remote areas typically operate virtually independently on the ground. They do not necessarily take instructions from the national-level leaders. So, instead of waiting for a national-level peace deal to be implemented, they are happy to engage in a local peace process if it serves their local interests.<sup>114</sup>

A member of the implementation committee explained, “We persuaded more than 230 combatants to hand in their weapons and integrate into the DDRR [disengagement, disassociation, reintegration, and reconciliation] process while continuing to sensitize youth to join these efforts.”<sup>115</sup> This dual approach linked national frameworks with local realities, enhancing the APPR's impact on the ground.

113 Interview with MINUSCA official, January 17, 2019.

114 Interview with MINUSCA official, June 21, 2023.

115 Interview with implementation committee member, June 22, 2023.

components. This includes not only vertical integration to ensure that local-level political strategies are connected to the overarching strategy of mission headquarters but also horizontal integration with other field offices. Further, as the mission's primary interlocutor at the local level, the civil affairs component works closely with the head of the field office and other substantive and uniformed components of the mission to implement political efforts at the local level. This section considers the successes and challenges of civil affairs components' efforts to integrate their work both vertically and horizontally, as well as with other substantive and uniformed components.

## Vertical Integration with Mission Headquarters

As noted above, there is variation among missions in the extent to which the local work of the civil affairs component is integrated into strategic and political planning at mission headquarters. Interviewees from UNMISS field offices provided an overall positive picture of how they work with mission headquarters as well as with their colleagues in other field offices, including through several mechanisms that the mission has formalized in recent years. These include UNMISS's integrated response mechanism, which brings together the joint operations center (JOC), joint mission analysis center (JMAC), and other mission components to discuss and formulate joint responses to pressing issues, including those reported from the field offices.<sup>116</sup> During the regular senior mission management meeting, mission leaders also discuss urgent issues raised by field offices to harmonize and consolidate priorities, which they then share and discuss with field office officials.<sup>117</sup>

An official from MONUSCO similarly cited "strong cooperation" between the field offices and mission headquarters, noting that in most mission settings, the office of the chief of staff coordinates

regular inputs from field offices that are reported to mission leadership.<sup>118</sup> However, not all interviewees painted such a positive picture. For example, one official from MINUSCA described challenges that arose when mission headquarters has different priorities than field offices, which can disrupt efforts to integrate local and national strategies.<sup>119</sup> They recounted times "where there has not been enough understanding from mission leadership of the urgency in some contexts in the field, and field colleagues don't get support in a timely manner. Only when things completely degenerate do they get the attention and resources they need."<sup>120</sup> In other cases, field office personnel felt that mission headquarters were out of touch with the needs and realities of the field. As one official from MINUSMA recalled,

Most of our colleagues never step out of Bamako; they never leave their area and explore the field offices.... They are very focused on the national level, and they are not really able to understand what's going on. This linkage is, most of the time, missing. They don't know the voices, needs, or priorities of the local populations.<sup>121</sup>

To facilitate vertical integration, some civil affairs components arrange for mission leaders to meet directly with representatives of local communities. In South Sudan, and previously in Mali, for example, the SRSGs have had regular discussions with community members. In the DRC and CAR, joint protection teams that include representatives of the national government have visited local communities to better understand local dynamics that affect the broader political process.<sup>122</sup>

## Horizontal Integration across Field Offices

When it comes to mission field offices integrating their political approaches horizontally, or among field offices, one UNMISS official described that

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116 Interview with MINUSCA official, January 27, 2020; Interview #17.

117 Interview #12.

118 Interview #2.

119 Interview #16.

120 Interview #5.

121 Interview, August 4, 2022.

122 Interview, June 22, 2022.

while coordination has always occurred, the office of the chief of staff established a field coordination office several years ago, which organizes weekly meetings with all field offices. This allows officials to discuss issues that may affect multiple field offices, such as an armed group operating in multiple prefectures or potential risks related to seasonal cattle migrations (see Box 6).<sup>123</sup> Similarly, in MONUSCO, the head of civil affairs holds monthly meetings with civil affairs personnel from all field offices. At the technical level, the mission has weekly meetings with focal points on thematic issues, such as the restoration of state authority, that include civil affairs personnel and representatives from other relevant sectors.<sup>124</sup> Such efforts help to ensure that the political approaches of field offices are coherent and feed into the mission's larger political strategy.

Some officials described more ad hoc approaches to

collaboration among field offices. For example, in MINUSCA, one official noted that heads of field offices may occasionally visit other offices to see what is happening and share experiences.<sup>128</sup> An official from MONUSCO described how civil affairs components share lessons learned among field offices and how, in some cases, best practices from one field office can trickle up to inform broader mission policy:

We see a challenge and we figure out how to overcome that challenge.... If we find a best practice, we share it with other field offices.... Even the idea of community liaison assistants started locally and then was implemented throughout the entire mission and then to other missions. It all started with an incident.... We noted gaps and, by addressing these gaps, we started a policy that has now spread.<sup>129</sup>

#### **Box 6. UNMISS's facilitation of pre-migration conferences**

One area where different field offices in South Sudan have cooperated is the organization of cattle migration conferences. Before the start of the cattle migration season, UNMISS typically organizes several pre-migration conferences aimed at reducing conflict and fostering peaceful coexistence during seasonal cattle migrations. These conferences bring together representatives of pastoralist and farming communities, local authorities, traditional leaders, and other stakeholders to address potential sources of tension before the migration season begins. The conferences focus on facilitating dialogue to agree on migration routes, access to water and grazing areas, and the prevention of cattle raiding and property destruction. Participants identify potential flashpoints and agree on conflict-resolution mechanisms, such as the deployment of local peace committees or joint monitoring teams to oversee adherence to the agreements.

Crucially, since cattle migration routes cross state borders, there has been strong cooperation and coordination between field offices to plan these conferences.<sup>125</sup> As one civil affairs officer noted, "We understood that the dynamics of these three states were similar and interrelated. There was no way we could resolve problems in a particular state without taking into consideration what was happening in the other states. The best examples of such problems are transhumance-related conflicts and cross-border cattle raiding."<sup>126</sup>

Many UNMISS staff members agree that pre-migration conferences have proven effective in mitigating violence associated with cattle migration and fostering trust between communities.<sup>127</sup>

<sup>123</sup> Interview, June 22, 2022.

<sup>124</sup> Interview #2.

<sup>125</sup> Interview #7; Interview #8; Interview #12.

<sup>126</sup> Interview #7.

<sup>127</sup> Interview #7; Interview #8; Interview #12.

<sup>128</sup> Interview #10.

<sup>129</sup> Interview #3.

## Integration with Other Substantive Components

Because civil affairs components are often the primary representatives of the mission at the local level, they work closely with other substantive components to implement mandated tasks. Civil affairs personnel also often benefit from a higher level of trust from community members than personnel from other components, which is critical for implementing mandated tasks such as supporting the protection of civilians or brokering local peace agreements.

Collaboration between civil affairs and political affairs is critical to implementing the primacy of politics at the local level. This relationship is particularly important in South Sudan, where the mission does not have political affairs personnel in its field offices, but where there are strong linkages between national and subnational political dynamics. One UNMISS civil affairs officer described this collaboration positively, noting, “If we don’t work with them, they have no way of knowing what’s happening at the grassroots level.”<sup>130</sup> At the same time, because elites in Juba often influence local conflict dynamics, the civil affairs component also needs the support of political affairs and mission headquarters, which can place pressure on elites. The mission’s work at the national and local levels is thus complementary.

One official from MONUSCO described the civil affairs component as having “a crosscutting role within the mission because we’re the ones engaging with the communities. By getting this trust, you have the trust of the armed groups because they are affiliated with these communities. You also have the trust of the authorities. We’re spearheading the process, but we bring the other sections with us and distribute the tasks.”<sup>131</sup> The official described how when civil affairs personnel engage with local armed groups, they may bring along disarmament,

Collaboration between civil affairs and political affairs is critical to implementing the primacy of politics at the local level.

demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) officers who can sensitize these armed groups about the DDR program, as well as child protection officers to discuss the release of children. Human rights officers may also present evidence on violations and accountability measures that will be pursued if the violations continue. This process does not always operate smoothly, however, with the official noting that “when the process is led by civil affairs, [other mission components] see it belonging to civil affairs and they prefer to operate in silos. They think they have their own mandate... but if everyone can own the process and take it as a mission process, that makes more sense.”<sup>132</sup> Thus, while many missions have struggled with integration, several interviewees viewed the civil affairs component as a natural intersection for the work of multiple mission components.

In terms of coordination between the different substantive components at the field office level, the head of field office plays a crucial role. They are tasked with coordinating among the various components of a UN peacekeeping mission at the field level. As the most senior UN representative in a designated area, they foster collaboration between civilian, military, and police sections. By guiding joint planning processes and overseeing resource allocation, the head of field offices streamlines operations and reduces duplication of efforts. Their leadership ensures that local-level activities align with the broader strategic objectives of the mission, helping to maintain a unified, mission-wide approach.<sup>133</sup>

## Civil-Military Integration

Civil affairs and military components of peacekeeping operations are mutually dependent on one another. When civil-military integration among peacekeepers operates at its best, both components offer each other comparative advantages that contribute to more effective

<sup>130</sup> Interview #18.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

<sup>133</sup> Interview #7; Interview #13.

mandate implementation. Civil affairs personnel have a level of expertise on and trust from communities that troops often lack given their frequent rotations. Their longer-term presence and deep knowledge of local dynamics can also help to ensure that the work of the force is guided by a strategic approach. At the same time, civilian components working toward devising and implementing local political solutions often rely on the force component. As acknowledged in a UN report, “Peacekeeping forces can be leveraged to either protect civilians at risk from local conflicts, or to create situations conducive to intercommunal dialogue.”<sup>134</sup> The military can also provide civilian personnel access to hard-to-reach or insecure areas.

An official from UNMISS provided a positive example of how their field office engages in weekly patrol planning meetings during which the civilian and military components identify priority areas to patrol. For example, in January 2024, the field office identified a strategic location for a peace dialogue between Nuer and Murle communities. However, the mission had not previously been able to access the area due to its remote location. Thus, the military conducted an advance mission to establish a temporary base and create a protective environment for both the peacekeepers and the dialogue participants.<sup>135</sup> The official further described other contexts where the military carries out long-duration patrols in remote areas for one to two weeks at a time, building the confidence of communities and helping civil affairs personnel to reach remote places where youth, community leaders, and potential spoilers are located. The official recounted a recent experience where they met with over 300 armed youth in a remote location: “They could have overpowered us, but they didn’t do this.... We were able to tell the youth to please put their arms aside when coming to the

When civil-military integration among peacekeepers operates at its best, both components offer each other comparative advantages that contribute to more effective mandate implementation.

dialogue, and they complied. We never could have reached that place without [the UNMISS military].”<sup>136</sup>

MONUSCO officials similarly cited the importance of cooperation between the military and civil affairs components in implementing political objectives, particularly given the extent to which the mission has developed a two-track approach to engaging local armed groups with military and nonmilitary approaches. While the local administration has prioritized military operations to root out non-state armed groups, with the support of the mission’s uniformed component, the civil affairs component is working with local authorities to engage communities and members of armed groups to agree on a cease-fire and encourage armed elements to engage with the government.<sup>137</sup>

Yet interviewees from several missions also cited multiple barriers to civil-military integration. First, troop-contributing countries often include caveats in their rules of engagement, which can inhibit the responsiveness of their troops to fluid conflict

dynamics. As one MONUSCO official noted, “The military has a clear mandate, which is to engage militarily with the armed groups... but when the CLAs tell the troops where to move, it depends on the contingents—some are flexible and respond to alerts from the CLAs, but some have to get clearance from the very top of their hierarchy, which delays our response.”<sup>138</sup> This can undermine the efforts of civil affairs personnel to engage in time-sensitive activities such as mediation and conflict resolution.

Second, some interviewees cited issues with the chain of command, including uniformed components’ resistance to receiving instructions from civilian leaders. According to one official, “They have a military perspective to things and coordination tends to be a challenge mainly

134 O’Byrne, Rendtorff-Smith, and Donati, “The Role of United Nations Peacekeeping Operations in Addressing Local Conflicts,” p. 19.

135 Interview #14.

136 Ibid.

137 Interview #3.

138 Ibid.

### Box 7. Community liaison assistants

Following a 2008 massacre of civilians in the DRC that took place in proximity to the UN mission, the civil affairs component convinced mission leadership of the need for individuals who could serve as an interface between uniformed peacekeepers and local communities.<sup>139</sup> This led to the creation of community liaison assistants (CLAs), national staff who deploy with uniformed contingents to improve local knowledge and facilitate communication with community members. Subsequently, the use of CLAs has spread to other mission settings, and the information they provide is considered invaluable not only for the military but also to complement the work of the civil affairs component.

While CLAs have become institutionalized in the larger UN peacekeeping missions, military components are not always aware of the role of CLAs or how to maximize their potential. While interviewees stressed the value of CLAs as “one of the main tools the mission relies on to interact with the local population and to solve problems,”<sup>140</sup> in some cases CLAs may not be optimally integrated into the military component.<sup>141</sup> This can be due to the military’s lack of understanding of the role CLAs are meant to play or, in some cases, its resistance to receiving civilian colleagues in military bases—a particular problem for women CLAs.<sup>142</sup> Yet where CLAs are effectively integrated into military contingents, interviewees stressed the value they add in helping the force during patrols and other forms of community engagement.

because they will only take instructions from their chain of command. They will sit in meetings with civilians, but they will only take action when they have instructions from military leadership.”<sup>143</sup> At times, getting clearance from military leadership can take days, preventing the mission from responding to situations in a timely manner.<sup>144</sup> An official from UNMISS made a similar observation:

The military sector commander tends to see first and foremost his boss as the force commander. At this level, we have a head of field office, whose job is to coordinate everything. When the intentions of the force commander and the head of field office line up, there is no problem. But sometimes there’s a difference in opinion.... This can affect our conduct of business at the field office level.<sup>145</sup>

The official cited an example where the sector commander decided to deploy a long-duration patrol in response to nearby cattle-raiding but did not alert the civil affairs team or undertake forward planning with the local authorities. When

confronted, the commander stated that because they had instructions from the force commander, they did not need to coordinate with civil affairs. The situation was eventually rectified, and UNMISS leadership subsequently tasked field offices to develop stronger integrated planning modalities: “We decided to formulate ways to better collaborate—what tasks are best performed by who, how, and when.... All of these things went into the new contingency plan, and now things are working a lot better.”<sup>146</sup>

A third challenge is that military components usually lack deep awareness of local contexts and cultures given their short rotation cycles. In some contexts, civil affairs personnel cited behavior by members of the military that caused friction with community members or showed a disregard for mission practices. In one case cited by an official from UNMISS, “There was a senior military observer in Bentiu, and he was complaining that he wanted to go to the IDP camp, but I told him that he couldn’t. He didn’t have any business going in

139 Interview #7; Interview #13.

140 Interview #1.

141 Interview #3; Interview #4; Interview #9.

142 Interview #3.

143 Interview #5.

144 Ibid.

145 Interview #7.

146

there as a military person because he would scare the people. The police were already there doing their job. He kept getting upset and couldn't understand. He felt he could go wherever he wanted, but it caused problems."<sup>147</sup>

## Conclusion and Recommendations

This report underscores the critical importance of UN peacekeeping operations prioritizing political solutions at the local level. By examining how the primacy of politics is applied to subnational contexts, it highlights the indispensable role of civil affairs components in fostering sustainable peace. When effectively integrated into broader mission strategies, the localized approaches of civil affairs personnel not only address immediate conflict drivers but also contribute to the durability of national-level agreements. These efforts demonstrate that the success of peacekeeping operations hinges on balancing top-down mandates with grassroots engagement, underscoring the interconnectedness of local and national dynamics.

Based on these findings, the following recommendations are made to member states, mission leaders, and civil affairs personnel:

### Member states

- **Define the primacy of politics broadly:** Member states and policymakers should adopt a definition of the primacy of politics that is intentionally broad and encompasses both formal and informal political processes at the national and subnational levels.
- **Include support to local political processes in mission mandates:** The UN Security Council should, as appropriate, continue incorporating tasks related to local political processes into mission mandates. This includes tasks related to conducting local mediation; increasing

participation, including of women, youth, and underrepresented groups; supporting local conflict resolution; building the capacity of civil society actors; and building and supporting local state and non-state institutions.

- **Adequately resource missions' local-level work:** To support such mandates, and in recognition of how effective peacekeepers can be at the local level, the General Assembly should adequately resource the work of missions at the local level, particularly the work of civilian components. This includes providing funding for QIPs, which can foster trust and contribute to conflict prevention and resolution.

### Mission leaders

- **Develop political strategies that are both top-down and bottom-up:** Mission leaders should craft political strategies that clearly articulate how missions will implement the primacy of politics in their context. This strategy should incorporate both national and subnational political efforts and should thus be crafted in partnership with field office representatives. Field offices should tailor these strategies to their context based on a profound understanding of the local conflict dynamics to guide local engagement.
- **Consult regularly with field offices:** Mission leaders should implement mechanisms to regularly hear from field office officials and incorporate local political developments into the mission's national-level strategy. Regular interaction between mission headquarters and field office personnel can help prevent the sort of reactive approaches that occur when mission leaders only become aware of situations at the moment of crisis.
- **Reflect local dynamics in national-level**

The success of peacekeeping operations hinges on balancing top-down mandates with grassroots engagement, underscoring the interconnectedness of local and national dynamics.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid.



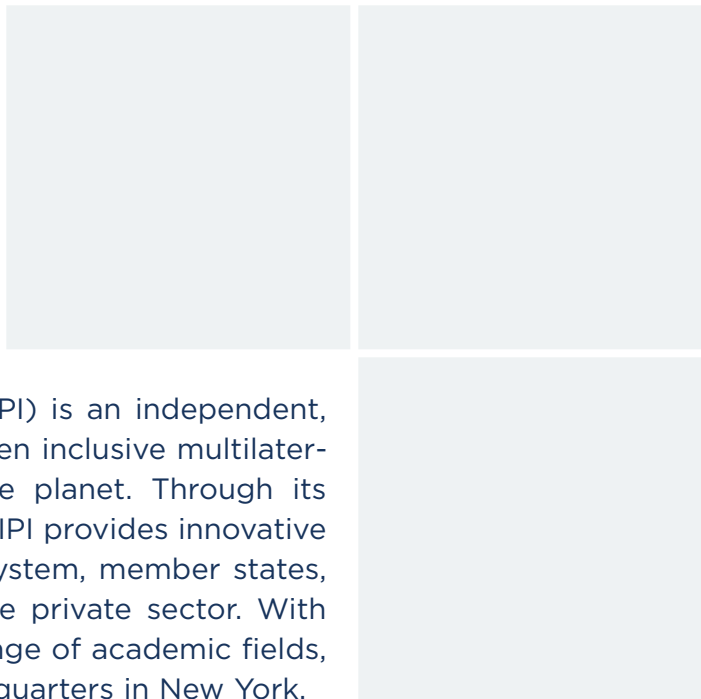
**political efforts:** When implementing their good offices or political mandates, SRSGs should incorporate a view of local dynamics and an understanding of how national and subnational political dynamics relate. This may involve regularly interacting with field offices, visiting local areas, or engaging in direct discussions with community members (which can also help build trust in the mission). Mission leaders can draw on the expertise of civil affairs personnel to coordinate these efforts.

- **Ensure coordination between mission components:** Mission leaders should encourage coordination and planning between different mission components to ensure that local efforts are linked to national processes and vice versa, to the extent possible.
- **Promote civil-military coordination:** Mission leaders, including heads of field offices, should promote civil-military coordination frameworks that ensure a shared understanding of objectives, particularly in conflict-sensitive areas of work. Regular joint planning sessions at mission headquarters and

in field offices and integrated training programs could mitigate misunderstandings and maximize the effectiveness of both components.

#### **Civil affairs personnel**

- **Map stakeholders at all levels:** Civil affairs personnel should systematically undertake a comprehensive mapping of stakeholders at the national and subnational levels to understand how they fit together and how to leverage mission engagement at all levels.
- **Form partnerships to target the drivers of local conflicts:** Civil affairs personnel should map the political economy of local conflicts to understand how they can target the drivers of conflict and facilitate sustainable solutions. Because it will likely be beyond the capacity or scope of the mission to fully address the root causes of conflict, missions should seek to empower and work alongside national and local actors, as well as other UN and non-UN stakeholders who may be better situated to do so.



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