

The United Nations–African Union Partnership and the Protection of Civilians



Andrew E. Yaw Tchie and Lauren McGowan | March 2025

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The landscape of peace operations in Africa has transformed over the past decade, including a marked increase in African-led peace support operations (PSOs). This trend has coincided with the drawdown of four large UN peacekeeping operations in Africa since 2017, while no new UN peacekeeping operation has been mandated since 2014.

Since the early 2000s, the AU and UN have evolved distinct, albeit parallel, conceptual and operational approaches to the protection of civilians (POC). While there are similarities in how the two organizations conceptually understand POC, the UN and AU have different operational approaches, and it is unclear how these could or should converge in the future, whether in the context of joint operations or a broader partnership within peace operations settings.

The primary differences between UN and AU approaches to POC lie at the operational rather than the conceptual level. The UN views POC in peacekeeping as a whole-of-mission objective, with military, police, and civilian components prioritizing POC and proactively protecting civilians. The AU, by contrast, has come to view itself as contributing to the protection of civilians primarily by neutralizing armed groups and establishing a protective environment. In effect, the AU has focused on peace enforcement as a way to provide security to enable other actors, including the UN, to undertake longer-term programming.

As a result, UN peacekeeping operations and African-led PSOs each have different comparative advantages and limitations. First, the AU and UN are at different moments of institutionalizing POC. Second, African-led PSOs tend to be more able and willing to use force to respond to outbreaks of violence and to contain aggressors. Third, UN peacekeeping missions with POC mandates have more robust civilian and police components. Fourth, African-led PSOs have less sustainable and flexible financing than UN peacekeeping operations, which means their respective POC capacities differ. Finally, UN peacekeeping operations and African-led PSOs have distinct entry points for linking POC to political processes.

To strengthen their partnership on POC moving forward, the two organizations should leverage these comparative advantages, acknowledge their respective limitations, and work toward an approach to POC that is tailored to each context. By enhancing existing mechanisms for collaboration through the 2017 UN-AU joint framework, both organizations can learn lessons from each other and refine their own approaches to better deliver protection outcomes.

To read the full policy paper visit: <https://bit.ly/3DLkeKH>

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Understandings of POC

- **UN DPO and AU PSOD should continue to hold collaborative discussions at the director, head of division, expert, and operational levels to facilitate understanding of the comparative advantages of both organizations on POC, as well as the challenges they face.** Personnel in both institutions need a clearer understanding of how their counterparts in the other conceptually understand and operationally approach POC. Each institution must be open to learning from the other to advance their partnership.
- **POC should be a central focus of efforts to implement the 2017 Joint Framework for Enhanced Partnership in Peace and Security.** While the implementation of Resolution 2719 will require further discussion on POC, not all African-led operations will draw on that framework. It is therefore important to center POC within the 2017 joint framework to allow the UN and AU to jointly develop and institutionalize POC as part of their overall partnership.
- **UN DPO and AU PSOD should share lessons and build each other's capacity based on their relative strengths and comparative advantages, drawing on other UN actors (such as OHCHR) as appropriate.** The UN should continue to support accountability and compliance related to POC in African-led PSOs and consider broadening its support to focus on strengthening community engagement. For its part, the AU could share the experience of African-led PSOs with undertaking civilian harm mitigation to explore how this could be adapted to UN missions with stabilization or protection mandates in kinetic environments.
- **The AU compliance team should continue to support REC-led operations in adhering to the AU POC policy.** The AU POC policy is a guide for REC-led operations, and, in principle, they should follow the policy since they are embedded within the African Standby Force. Supporting REC-led operations in adhering to the POC policy will help ensure harmonization, consistent application, and clear expectations around POC for operations undertaken by RECs/RMs.

Structures on POC

- **The UN and AU should create a joint lessons-learned mechanism in the UNOAU.** While the AU is already documenting and undertaking assessments of its operations, this could be done more systematically. A joint lessons-learned mechanism would conduct regular studies of joint UN-AU missions and African-led operations. Beyond identifying broader lessons learned, the mechanism could assess the effectiveness of efforts to implement POC policies. This would require enhancing the UNOAU's POC capacity. Versions of these assessments should be made publicly available to increase transparency and accountability.
- **UN DPO and AU PSOD should develop and implement a joint protection strategy when engaged in partnered operations.** The two institutions should put forward a holistic strategy for protection that emphasizes a rights-based approach, connects POC to a political strategy, and identifies linkages between organizational policies. The strategy should also address how both organizations will mitigate harm to civilians. Both organizations will need to work together to regularly analyze and assess protection needs to ensure their overall strategy and any activities are conflict-sensitive and adhere to "do no harm" principles.
- **UN DPO and AU PSOD should conduct a thorough joint POC assessment prior to any partnered deployments.** Such an assessment would need to take place prior to the development of the mandate, CONOPS, and ROE for a mission, including missions financed through Resolution 2719 or with the support of the UN. It should include a comprehensive assessment of POC that goes beyond a purely military assessment.
- **The AU Peace and Security Council and UN Security Council should engage in regular consultations on peace support operations, including on mandates.** Toward this end, they should systematically use existing structures for consultation between the two councils. These should also be supplemented with joint briefings, reports, and statements. This could help ensure that AU PSO mandates have precise and explicit language on POC rather than implicitly including POC through the framing of the mandate.