

Engaging with Communities

The next challenge for peacekeeping

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Police Adviser for the African Union – United Nations Hybrid Operation in Darfur (UNAMID) goes on patrol in Zam Zam Camp for Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) near El Fasher, North Darfur, Sudan. 20 October 2010. UN Photo/Olivier Chassot.

Civilians in countries ravaged by armed conflict continue to bear the brunt of ongoing hostilities, and both governments and international peacekeeping operations are too often failing to prevent atrocities. Efforts made by peacekeeping missions in conflict-affected regions, such as the Democratic Republic of Congo and southern Sudan, show that it is possible to do more, even within existing constraints. But much more needs to be done. While there is no substitute for political will, peacekeeping missions can save lives by engaging more effectively with the communities they are trying to protect.

Summary

The protection of civilians from the worst ravages of war is a dilemma that international bodies have sought to address for decades.

However, despite lessons learned from the atrocities of Rwanda and Srebrenica, among others, civilians are still not only adversely affected by armed conflict; they are too often directly targeted.

Ultimately, national governments must have the will and capacity to protect their citizens, and nationally driven peace building and security sector reform processes need to be supported more than ever. In the interim, international peacekeeping remains a critically important and unique tool for protecting civilians and can mean the difference between life and death for thousands of vulnerable people.

Where governments are unable or unwilling to fulfil their responsibility to protect civilians, peacekeeping operations may be mandated to provide direct protection to civilians under imminent threat of physical violence. In such circumstances, communities have a legitimate expectation that the presence of peacekeepers means that they will be protected. Failures by governments or peacekeepers to protect civilians, when they do occur, come at an enormous human cost.

Protecting civilians is no easy task, in particular, when violence is ongoing, numbers of peacekeepers and resources at their disposal are limited, and the most vulnerable communities are located in remote, isolated areas. The absence of interpreters, including female interpreters, makes it difficult to understand the concerns of communities and to effectively address the specific needs of women and children.

These challenges are further compounded by the inconsistencies in interpretation of civilian protection mandates and practices on the ground across peacekeeping missions. The understanding and commitment to protection of civilians varies widely from one senior in-country mission leadership to another. At the field level, individual battalions vary enormously in their willingness to engage with communities and to take robust action, and too often civilian staff is unwilling to be based in remote or isolated communities. A lack of clear guidelines and poor training and preparation of personnel means that too many peacekeeping units arriving to their country of deployment do not know what protection of civilians means or how it is to be delivered.

Moreover, international peacekeeping is coming under increasing pressure, with barriers arising to the daily performance of missions' work and even, as in Chad, to their presence on the ground. Too often, peacekeeping missions cannot rely on systematic political backing from the UN Security Council to ensure that they are able to perform effectively and to access politically sensitive locations.

UN peacekeeping reform processes acknowledge many of these problems and are currently looking at how to 'meet the challenges of today and tomorrow',¹ including how to ensure peacekeeping mandates translate into 'effective efforts on the ground'.² Efforts are being made to address the need for clear direction to peacekeeping missions in fulfilling their mandate to protect civilians. Recent Security Council resolutions have stressed the protection of civilians should be a priority for peace keeping missions,³ and have focussed on specific steps towards that goal as well as assessment and implementation of best practices.⁴

Despite these laudable initiatives, impact is slow to be felt on the ground by those who need it most – be it a Congolese woman in the Kivus or a Sudanese woman in Darfur. Yet, the perspective most often missing from discussions on protection of civilians has been that of the very people the peacekeepers are mandated to protect. Communities are the most qualified to assess the impact of peacekeepers' work on their own safety, have the most to gain from the successes, and the most to lose when missions fall short. Despite this, affected communities are rarely involved in the design, implementation or assessments of UN peacekeeping missions.

This report aims to support efforts to improve peacekeeping missions' efforts to better protect civilians. It highlights how engagement with communities is critical to managing expectations, to building trust between peacekeepers and communities and to ensuring peacekeepers are better able to understand and respond to threats to civilians in a given location. The nexus between the international community's efforts to protect civilians and the people who need their protection is often in remote and isolated locations; this report therefore reviews a number of recent initiatives undertaken by peacekeepers that show promise in improving communication between peacekeepers and communities and in the protection of civilians, and identifies the key factors that influence their success or failure in the eyes of communities.

The study draws on Oxfam's extensive protection experience and presence in conflict-affected communities. It is supported by field-based research in southern Sudan and the DRC, including interviews and focus group discussions with women and men in affected communities.

Trying to address what communities want and need

Communities interviewed were united in their desire for more dialogue and communication with peacekeepers. Without this dialogue, peacekeeping missions miss crucial information and may lose the trust of the population. Communities, humanitarians and peacekeepers have therefore welcomed the inclusion of Community Liaison Interpreters who build relations with communities and help peacekeepers to better understand the concerns of the local population.

Initiatives that seek to improve civilian protection include different types of patrols – night patrols, market patrols, firewood patrols – which communities indicate are highly valued. For example where the UN peacekeeping mission in Congo, MONUSCO, started conducting patrols along a dangerous road to a market in north Kivu, hundreds of people were once again able to go to market to sell and buy produce in safety.⁵ Similarly, firewood patrols conducted by peacekeepers in Darfur allowed hundreds of women at risk of attack to collect firewood more safely.

Emergency hotlines, trialled in DRC and Chad, which enable communities to directly call peacekeeping bases have also facilitated better communication between communities and peacekeeping missions. While there have been teething issues, communities have indicated their support for this initiative.

Some missions have endeavoured to develop mechanisms to better obtain and share information for more effective analysis of threats. These include the use of Joint Protection Teams, which bring together civilian and military personnel, and reporting matrixes. There have also been efforts to combat impunity through Joint Verification Teams. The peacekeeping mission in Chad (MINURCAT), which has now withdrawn under government pressure, provided support to a community police force (the DIS), with some communities reporting that they felt safer as a result of its presence. MINURCAT's efforts in strengthening local police forces also have important lessons for wider security sector reform efforts.

These initiatives have had mixed success on the ground, but those that communities perceive to be most effective in improving their security have a number of common characteristics. These include:

- responding to direct requests from communities or to specific identified protection needs;
- developed by peacekeepers on the ground to address specific needs and gaps, often in consultation with communities;
- creating links between communities and peacekeepers, and between peacekeepers and other actors in the field;
- obtaining, channelling, and using information effectively; and
- combining the strengths of a variety of actors (civilian and military, humanitarians and communities) to make best use of the different skills and capacities that they bring to the task.

Recommendations to improve protection of civilians by peacekeepers

The initiatives discussed in this paper demonstrate that much-needed, concrete steps are being taken to improve the protection of civilians, but these initiatives have had mixed success and met with mixed reviews from communities. Much more needs to be done to maximise peacekeeping missions' effectiveness in protecting the most vulnerable people from violence. Even within existing constraints, there is more that peacekeeping missions can do today to enhance their ability to protect civilians. Providing effective protection in the

field requires an ongoing dialogue between initiatives developed in the field, and their evaluation, development and institutionalisation from the top.

- Peacekeeping missions must engage communities from the earliest phases of preparation for deployment and must continue through the life of the mission.
- Missions must ensure that different parts of the mission (civilian, military, police) work together effectively. At the field level, there must be civilian personnel of sufficient seniority that their input and recommendations will be heeded.
- Missions need to develop public communications strategies to ensure that communities are aware of the role, activities, and limitations of the mission.
- UNSC must demand accurate assessments of achievement. Such assessments should be based on measurable indicators. Communities' perception of their own safety is a critical measure of how effective protection strategies are⁶ and should be incorporated into these assessments.
- The UNSC must be prepared to provide robust political support to enable missions to access vulnerable communities and to fulfil their civilian protection mandate.
- UN member states need to allocate adequate human and technical resources to support measures for protection of civilians.
- DPKO needs to ensure appropriate recruitment (in particular of women) as well as training and deployment of civilians in the field.
- Missions must ensure that tools and initiatives developed and/or implemented at field level have clear objectives and include mechanisms for measuring impact, including through consultation with the community. These should be evaluated so they can be appropriately adapted to other relevant contexts.
- DPKO needs to institutionalise and systematise best practices and ensure necessary resourcing for these to continue.

Notes

¹ DPKO/DFS Non-Paper (2009), 'A new Partnership Agenda: Charting a new Horizon for UN Peacekeeping', New York: United Nations, p.III.

² DPKO/OCHA (2009), 'Protecting Civilians in the Context of UN Peacekeeping Operations', New York: United Nations. (Hereinafter "OCHA/DPKO Report")

³ See, *inter alia*, UNSC Resolution 1888 (2009), para 19.

³ See, for example, UNSC Resolution 1856, para. 6 and UNSC Resolution 1925 para 11: 'Emphasizes that the protection of civilians ... must be given priority in decisions about the use of available capacity and resources...' S/RES/1856 (2008) and S/RES/1925 (2010).

⁴ See, for example, Security Council Resolution 1894, para. 26. S/RES/1894 (2009), 11 November 2009. Also SC/RES/1925 (2010), para. 12(f).

⁵ Oxfam interviews with MONUSCO and INGOs, 17–18 July 2010, Kitchanga, North Kivu, DRC.

⁶ The DPKO/DFS Operational Concept on the Protection of Civilians in United Nations Peacekeeping Operations (2009, para. 25) advises that, 'an important element in determining whether the mission is meeting the objectives articulated in its protection strategy includes seeking regular feedback from the local communities it serves.'

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