

# *FBA Brief 01/2018*

## *Putting Civilians First* **NGO Perceptions and Expectations of UN Peacekeeping**

NGOs and UN peacekeeping operations increasingly operate in a shared domain. NGOs commonly rely – at least partly – on UN peacekeepers for access and security, but they also express concerns about this. Yet remarkably little is known about what are their main concerns and how widespread they are. Even more importantly, what can be done to address them? This FBA Brief, written by members of one of the FBA's research working groups, examines the answers to those questions.

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### SUMMARY

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- › Even though NGOs and UN peacekeeping missions increasingly operate in a shared domain with overlapping objectives, NGOs regularly perceive collaboration with UN peacekeeping missions as problematic.
- › Effective protection of civilians is seen as the core peacekeeping task, and strict adherence to the principle of distinction as essential to maintain the legitimacy and security of NGO activities.
- › NGOs worry about increased militarization of UN peacekeeping, but they are often only vaguely acquainted with the police and civilian components of UN peacekeeping. They do not expect the local population to distinguish peacekeeping missions and other UN agencies, funds and programmes, much less different components of peacekeeping missions, and even other international humanitarian actors.
- › NGOs are generally critical of quick impact projects (QIPs), which are often seen as wasteful and distorting. Instead community engagement projects should be well prepared and long-term with a clear understanding of the local situation.

### INTRODUCTION

Peacekeeping strives to provide security and stability in post-conflict countries often plagued by underdevelopment and poor governance. The UN Sustaining Peace strategy highlights that its peace and security efforts need to complement its developmental and humanitarian work, and the UN

increasingly recognizes the importance of local peacekeeping.<sup>1</sup> Local peacekeeping emphasizes interactions between local communities, civil society organizations and the UN peacekeeping mission. The protection of civilians within a secure and stable local environment indeed minimizes conflict risks and supports an inclusive peace.

NGOs and UN peacekeeping operations (PKOs) therefore increasingly operate in a shared domain with overlapping objectives. NGOs commonly rely – at least partly – on UN peacekeepers for access and security, but they also express concerns about civil-military relations. Yet remarkably little is known about what are their main concerns and how widespread they are. Even more importantly, what can be done to address them? How can UN peacekeeping operations support, where in line with their mandate, the work of NGOs to foster local peace and stability?

To address these questions, our project consisted of in-depth desk review of NGO and UN documents and policies, conducting thirteen semi-structured interviews with NGO personnel based in London as well as in the field, and leading a workshop with eighteen participants. In total, thirteen NGOs that operate in the sub-Saharan regions with on-going UN peacekeeping missions were consulted.<sup>2</sup>

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Key findings are:

- NGOs highly value their independent role and distinctiveness from UN peacekeeping missions.
- NGOs associate peacekeeping in first instance with its military component and are often critical of its military culture. The civilian and police components of peacekeeping missions are more positively valued, but there is limited awareness of their work.
- QIPs are perceived as often being wasteful and risking to undermine the more long-term local engagement of NGOs.
- NGOs worry about the association of the UN PKO with national governments and its coercive institutions. Dwindling local support for the government and the UN peacekeeping mission over time is seen as hindering the ability of NGOs to operate, particularly when supporting the government is perceived as part of the peacekeeping mandate.
- Humanitarian NGOs are more positive about PKOs and emphasize the importance of security provisions and logistic support. NGOs that work primarily with local civil society organizations are more critical.

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*“Under the principle of distinction, all involved in the armed conflict must distinguish between the persons thus defined (the combatants) and civilians. Combatants must distinguish themselves (i.e., allow their enemies to identify them) from all other persons (civilians), who may not be attacked nor directly participate in the hostilities.”*

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ICRC 2016, ‘How does Law Protect in War?’

#### SAVING LIVES TOGETHER: NGO–UN COLLABORATION

The Sustaining Peace strategy acknowledges the complexity of UN involvement in high-risk post-conflict countries. Ideally, the civilian, military and policing components of UN peacekeeping missions complement each other and adapt as the situation on the ground evolves. Ultimately, peacekeeping and peacebuilding are political processes involving national as well as local actors. Similarly, NGOs working in (post-)conflict situations not only differ greatly in size and resources, professionalism, experience, and reputation, they also tend to specialize in fields such as the delivery of humanitarian and emergency aid, advocacy, security, human rights, community building, health and infrastructure, etc. Actual experience with UN entities varies accordingly.

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1. UN Deputy Secretary General Amina Mohammed, 29/8/2017, “Sustaining peace strategy must cover entire peace continuum”.  
2. The interviewees responded on personal title and their answers do thus not reflect any official NGO policy position.

Regardless of their willingness and opportunities offered to cooperate with UN peacekeeping missions, all interviewees insisted on the importance of the principle of distinction for being able to work safely and effectively in conflict-affected regions. NGOs stress the need to (be seen as) working independently in order to maintain the trust of local population as well as any armed and unarmed local actors. Some, but not all, NGOs value that UN peacekeeping missions can provide logistic and security support to gain access to remote or insecure areas.

NGOs agree that the principle of distinction also applies to UN peace and security mandate (the 'black' UN or the UN PKO) as contrasted with developmental and humanitarian work of UN missions (the 'blue'<sup>3</sup> or developmental and humanitarian UN entities). Cooperation with the latter, or even police and civilian components of the peacekeeping mission, is more common, but only desirable and acceptable when its implementation remains clearly separate from the military component of the peacekeeping operation. Humanitarian operations by UN peacekeepers are generally perceived as short-term and counter-productive. Interviewees expressed concerns about peacekeepers accompanying blue UN operations or making use of equipment branded as blue UN. They are aware that the local population is much less likely to make such clear distinctions. At the same time, since armed units, including UN peacekeepers, are commonplace in (post-)conflict environments, civil-military engagement is a priority for many NGOs.

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Interviewees commonly commended the work of OCHA and emphasized the importance of OCHA's perceived independence and civilian culture. UNDSS and OCHA lead Saving Lives Together, a framework for security provision between the United Nations and NGO partners. OCHA also publishes guidelines for civil-military engagement that are mission specific and which apply the principle of distinction.

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*“Especially because many armed groups are against the government [CAR] and the UN peacekeeping mission is supposed to support the government. So for the armed groups, they are an actor in the conflict. If we would work with the government, we’d be considered as spies by the armed groups. We need to take some distance from the UN peacekeeping mission.”*

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UN developmental and humanitarian entities such as UNHCR, UN Women and UNDP build partnerships with NGOs in humanitarian and protection clusters. The coordination meetings within the protection clusters provide NGOs with updated information about the security situation as well as opportunities for advocacy of prioritizing protection of civilians and actions against SGBV. NGOs consider the UN generally more accessible than national politicians. Several interviewees mentioned increased patrols in areas where NGOs had identified security concerns. Serious concerns remain however about perceived lack of openness from UN (military) peacekeepers and, at the same time, worries that information provided by NGOs may be sensitive.

Several interviewees emphasized that the UN should be given credit for their work in often very difficult circumstances. They felt that in particular the accomplishments of peacekeepers get little recognition. At the same time, a number of specific concerns undermining cooperation with UN PKOs were raised repeatedly.

- First of all, interviewees noted that the UN regularly falls short in its core mandate to protect civilians. Specifically, NGOs worry about not knowing about possible caveats made by specific UN contingents and whether the UN can be relied upon to respond.
- Secondly, some interviewees expressed the concern that locals (or at least particular groups) often do not accept the presence of the UN. The local acceptance of peacekeepers is seen as declining sharply over time and in response to perceived ineffectiveness to guarantee security. Our academic research supports these perceptions.<sup>4</sup>

3. 'Blue' and 'black' refers to the color of the lettering used by the UN on their vehicles etc.

4. Ruggeri, Andrea, Ismene Gizelis and Han Dorussen (2013). 'Managing Mistrust: an Analysis of Cooperation with UN Peacekeeping in Africa', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 57(3), 387 – 409.

- If the UN PKO becomes a party to the conflict, or at least becomes perceived as such by some armed factions, any association with the PKO jeopardizes the ability of NGOs to operate and even risks the security of field workers. Interviewees mentioned these concerns particularly for more robust peacekeeping by MONUSCO since 2013, and MINUSCA's cooperation with transitional authorities in the Central African Republic. NGOs advocate the signing of civil-military guidelines by MINUSCA in line with guidelines agreed with MONUSCO previously.

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*“Our best ties are with the civilian section for sure because most of the time with civilian affairs and human rights and political affairs, but mostly civilian affairs actually, we have common interests.”*

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## SUPPORTING LOCAL PEACEKEEPING

The UN encourages engagement with local communities and civil society organizations viewing it as critical to the implementation of UN PKO mandated tasks. The deployment of Civil Affairs officers and implementation of quick impact projects (QIPs) has made UN peacekeeping more visible at the local (village or neighbourhood) level. Also, the impact of security sector reform – for example, UNPOL training local police and advocating community policing – is felt first of all at the local level. Our academic research has found that peacekeepers are deployed in response to conflict events, although often with significant delay. Peacekeepers also reduce the duration of conflict locally.<sup>5</sup>

Regardless, respondents were often unaware of UN Civil Affairs work or unclear about their particular responsibilities. Access to and contact with Civil Affairs officers and other civilian UN entities was however generally seen as positive, or even very positive in individual cases. In contrast, all were critical of the contributions and long-term impact of QIPs implemented as part of UN PKOs. Although some respondents recognized that they occasionally make the presence of peacekeepers more acceptable to the local populations, QIPs are believed to weaken the distinction between civilian and military aspects of UN involvement. QIPs were often dismissed as short-term projects and as part of a ‘winning hearts and mind’ or exit strategy. They risk undermining the humanitarian work by NGOs at the local level, and the long-term investments that NGOs have made.

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*“If you are going to work in peacebuilding the Civil Affairs section within MONUSCO does all the local and provincial dialogue. So if you want to gain access to that you have to work with them. (...) Civil Affairs plays a huge part in MONUSCO in supporting community dialogue.”*

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Security and stability at the local level are seen as necessary to provide humanitarian aid effectively. Several NGOs include community peacebuilding as part of their activities. Moreover, all NGOs consider contact with civil society organizations as important, for example, to guarantee continuity of activities or as part of human rights monitoring. There is a notable difference in the awareness of the work of Civil Affairs and UN police (UNPOL) among humanitarian NGOs: some interviewees highlighted the importance of the Civil Affairs section within MONUSCO, while in other cases interviewees had only limited knowledge about Civil Affairs and the UNPOL. NGOs working on community security had more experience in working with UNPOL, while only for specific missions (e.g., MONUSCO) did interviewees have any experience with Civil Affairs.

Interviewees were aware that their praise and concerns often reflected good or bad experiences with particular individuals. Where respondents had engaged with UNPOL or Civil Affairs, they were generally seen as more accessible and their civilian – rather than military – approach as more compatible with the work of NGOs. A recurring theme was that the relatively small number of UN police officers and Civil Affairs workers deployed made it difficult for them to have a notable impact.

The work of UNPOL and Civil Affairs is perceived as supporting the government or transitional authorities – in line with our findings of more cooperation between the

5. Ruggeri, Andrea, Han Dorussen and Ismene Gizelis (2017). 'Winning the Peace Locally: UN Peacekeeping and Local Conflict', International Organization, 71 (1): 163 – 185, and 'On the Frontline Every Day? Subnational Deployment of United Nations Peacekeepers', British Journal of Political Science, forthcoming.

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*“Mandate-wise they [UNMISS] can’t do community policing. They can’t do police reform, they are not allowed until the mandate changes and that won’t be for some time. They are on protection. The way that community-type of approaches would be relevant is: what sort of strategies are UNMISS and UNPOL using to engage with communities, and how community oriented are they in their work.”*

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*“The problem to address is to provide [local civil society groups] with a ‘seat at the table’, for example in the DRC, international groups dominate the discussion and local groups find it difficult to get their voices heard.”*

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UN and officials and more conflict between the UN and rebels.<sup>6</sup> Here, interviewees observed that declining legitimacy of the authorities had a negative impact on the work of UNPOL and Civil Affairs locally.

In the perception of the people we interviewed, UN peacekeeping missions do not engage extensively with local NGOs; for example local NGOs have only limited representation at the UN-NGO coordination meetings. Civil society organisations based outside the main cities have even less interaction with the UN and the international community.

## CONCLUSIONS

There is large variation in the NGO willingness to engage with UN peacekeeping missions, ranging from open-minded to extremely cautious attitudes. In part, this varies from mission to mission, but it also varies from NGO to NGO. For example, MONUSCO (DRC) has more experience with meeting with NGOs compared to MINUSCA (CAR) where NGOs and the UN still have to agree on a framework for civil-military relations. However, it is also clear that some NGOs are simply more willing and better prepared to work with the UN than others. Having clear internal guidelines and procedures on civil-military engagement facilitates cooperation.

The principle of distinction remains a core element of civil-military engagement for all NGOs, and is seen as crucial to protect civilians against attacks from armed actors. Robust peacekeeping makes peacekeepers into another armed actor, whereas arguably peacekeepers are not part of the armed conflict and originally only mandated to use force in self-defence. Although NGOs give great importance to the distinction between blue and black UN, and the latter and themselves, they recognize that the local population (including armed actors) is less aware of the distinction. Local factions also often do not distinguish between armed fighters and unarmed civilians. Failing to recognize the distinctions between the various components of the UN peacekeeping mission and the international humanitarian community creates false expectations about the security peacekeepers can actually provide when they escort humanitarian work. It also risks making NGOs a target in the conflict. In addition, there are concerns about the ability and willingness of UN peacekeepers to protect civilians. Although in some missions civil-military engagement has improved, NGOs often feel that communication remains one-sided where they are not provided with relevant information, e.g., on the caveats made by specific peacekeeping contingents, while information by NGOs can be used for military purposes.

Arguably, the UN should emphasize the role of its civilian components and only rely on robust peacekeeping as a last resort to fulfil protection of civilian mandates. A large part of the UN security and stability mandate is civilian; for example, dealing with unrest are policing and crowd-control operations rather than counter-insurgencies. The civilian aspects and leadership of peacekeeping should be given even more priority; especially in engaging with civil society.

Further, the UN should look for specific capabilities of peacekeepers to match deployment to the needs of the local context. Community projects should not have as their primary objective to make the presence of peacekeepers more acceptable. In their current format, QIPs are seen as often wasteful and undercutting NGO initiatives. Instead community engagement projects should be well prepared and long-term with a clear understanding of the local situation. Existing ties between international NGOs with civil society and local NGOs could identify potentially valuable partners. They provide a natural and suitable access to and knowledge about local communities, but they can also make it more likely that projects last beyond the presence of a PKO and/or NGOs.

6. Dorussen, Han, and Ismene Gizelis (2013). 'Into the Lion's Den: Local Responses to UN Peacekeeping', *Journal of Peace Research*, 50(6), 693 - 708.



## LIST OF INTERVIEWEES

Briony Balsom, Oxfam GB  
Victoria Brereton, Saferworld  
Caitlin Hannahan, World Vision  
Aurore Mathieu, Oxfam Novib  
Tatiana Miralles, Kvinna till Kvinna  
Rachel Mitima, Kvinna till Kvinna  
Rodolphe Moinaux, Mercy Corps  
Henri Myrntinen, International Alert  
Alio Namata, CARE International  
Ruairi Nolan, Peace Direct  
Victor Odero, International Rescue Committee  
Sarah Pickwick, World Vision  
Jeremiah Young, World Vision

## FURTHER THANKS GO TO

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Farzana Ahmed, Peace Direct  
Maria Appelblom, former Chief Standing Police Capacity, UNGSC Brindisi  
Veronique Aubert, Save the Children  
Jeffrey Buenger, UNGSC Brindisi  
Fred Carver, United Nations Association  
Natalia Chan, Christian Aid  
Cecilia Dunster, former Superintendent UNPOL with UNMISS  
Siobhan Latham, Foreign and Commonwealth Office  
Kate Latimir, British Red Cross  
Babu Rahman, Foreign and Commonwealth Office  
Jane Rhodes, UNGSC Brindisi

## ACRONYMS

CAR, Central African Republic  
DRC, Democratic Republic of the Congo  
MINUSCA, UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the CAR  
MONUSCO, UN Organization Stabilization Mission in the DRC  
OCHA, UN Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs  
PKO, Peacekeeping Operation  
QIPs, Quick Impact Projects  
UN, United Nations  
UNDP, UN Development Programme  
UNDSS, UN Department of Safety and Security  
UNGSC, UN Global Service Centre  
UNHCR, UN Refugee Agency  
UN DPKO, UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations  
UNPOL, UN Police  
UNMISS, UN Mission in South Sudan  
SGBV, Sexual and Gender Based Violence