How can peacekeepers strengthen their engagement with local communities? Opportunities and challenges in the field

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Introduction

Strengthening and deepening engagement with local communities in UN peace operations has emerged as a key priority in recent reviews of the UN system. In its 2015 report, the High Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations (HIPPO) argued that the UN should develop better strategies for community engagement at all stages of the mission cycle, in order to improve mandate implementation and to ensure that the mission is always responsive to local demands.[1] Similarly, the 2015 review of the peacebuilding architecture conducted by the Advisory Group of Experts (AGE) called for 'inclusive national ownership', criticizing the tendency to favour engagement with capital cities and elites. It argued that peacebuilding needs to include broad sectors of society, including community groups, women, youth, labour organizations, political parties, the private sector, civil society and marginalized or under-represented groups.[2] Both reports stress the importance of broader engagement to enhance the role played by women and youth in challenging domains such as addressing radicalization and violent extremism. Across the board, there is renewed commitment to supporting constructive state–society relations through inclusive, nationally and locally owned, broad-based, consultative processes.

This consensus has come to the fore amidst growing criticism that the UN has remained too state-centric, that it applies pre-defined peacebuilding templates to highly diverse contexts, and that it increasingly opts for military solutions rather than political ones. Existing practices often alienate and marginalize the local people whom missions are mandated to serve, and risk 'perpetuating exclusion'.[3] This renewed resolve to 'put people first' is indeed a welcome signal on the part of

the UN – but, as a policy commitment, it actually represents nothing new. What the review processes have revealed is that the UN is still not doing enough to ensure that local people play an active role in determining the roadmap to peace. This Policy Brief examines the opportunities, challenges and trade-offs that peacekeepers have to face when deciding when, with whom and how to engage effectively at the field level. It argues that by integrating bottom–up and people-centric approaches as a core strategy in peace operations, UN practices can be made more sensitive and responsive to the local people. Achieving this will be more realistic if communities are systematically involved in decision-making and if existing practices are incorporated into a set of coherent bottom–up and top–down operational guidelines.

What is community engagement?

Engaging communities and using people-centred approaches have been central to the ethos of the development and humanitarian fields for decades. As a reaction to top–down externally led interventions came 'participatory approaches' in the 1970s and later 'people-centred' development in the 1980s, aimed at empowering communities as agents in the design of projects and programmes. Both the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) and the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) have issued practitioner guidelines on 'community-based approaches'.[4]

While 'community engagement' has not yet been clearly defined for the sphere of UN peace operations, the UN Department of Peacekeeping is developing a set of guidelines for mission staff to use in the field. Echoing the HIPPO report, the

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1   José Ramos-Horta et al., '*Report of the High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations on Uniting Our Strengths for Peace: Politics, Partnership and People* (New York, 17 June 2015), http://www.unic.or.jp/files/peace_operations.pdf.

2   United Nations, The Challenge of Sustaining Peace: Report of the Advisory Group of Experts for the 2015 Review of the United Nations Peacebuilding Architecture, 29 June 2015, http://www.refworld.org/docid/5724aae44.html.

3   Ibid., p. 21.

4   See for example UNHCR, 'A Community-Based Approach in UNHCR Operations' (The UN Refugee Agency, January 2008), http://www.unhcr.org/47f0a0232.pdf. and OCHA, (2015) 'OCHA Message: What is Community Engagement?', United Nations. Available at: https://docs.unocha.org/sites/dms/Documents/OchaOnMessage_CommunityEngagement_Nov2015.pdf [Accessed 10 August 2016], p.1.

5   This draft practice note is a constantly evolving document and has not yet been published. Therefore, these 'engagement goals' should be interpreted flexibly.

draft guidelines[5] argue that it is crucial to mission success that communities play an active role in decision-making, implementation, assessment and monitoring; and go on to map out the potential role of communities at each of these junctures. Three core engagement goals are specified. The first is communication, to ensure that communities receive the information necessary for self-organization. The second is consultation, to enable the sharing of perspectives, grievances, needs and priorities, which can then become key data for decision-making and evaluation. The third is empowerment, to facilitate the direct involvement of local peoples in decision-making. These are principles already practised in most peacekeeping missions, usually applied as parallel, complementary processes.[6]

Community Engagement in UN Peace Operations: Tools, Policies and Best Practices

Over the years, the UN has developed a range of tools, policies and best practices to ensure that peacekeeping missions are better equipped to engage with local people. However, these approaches are still not systematic, and they lack a consistent methodology.

Gathering Local Data and Information Management

Civil Affairs teams gather vast and rich data on local conflict dynamics and protection threats on a daily basis. However, that information is not always routinely or effectively funnelled into mission-wide analyses. Local Civil Affairs teams in UN Mission in the Republic of South Sudan (UNMISS) have overcome this by using the Joint Mission Analysis Cell (JMAC)'s weekly predictive risk-assessment matrix, which synthesizes risks to civilians in a geographic table, as a modality for organizing their information into concise briefs.[7] This contributes to the overall mission-wide awareness of protection threats.[8]

Another related challenge noted by practitioners is that views from the field do not always travel upstream, and may fail to reach the senior leadership. Therefore, the Policy & Best Practices Service of UN DPKO has urged greater community participation in formal planning and assessment processes, and systematizing town-hall visits by senior leadership to ensure that community perspectives are taken into consideration.[9]

Perception Surveys

Capturing local perceptions is becoming an important best practice for peacekeeping missions, improving their understanding of how their interventions impact people on the ground. Since 2005, UN peacekeeping operations have commissioned perception surveys in the DRC, Haiti, Lebanon, Liberia, Sierra Leone and Somalia. Among other things, capturing perceptions of local people provides useful insights into local drivers of violence, which is important to the design of protection strategies.[10]

In the DRC, perception surveys revealed that people preferred softer peacebuilding initiatives such as local conflict resolution and reconciliation over infrastructure development.[11]

Information Communication Technology (ICT) and Media

Media and ICT are increasingly used for facilitating bottom–up community engagement, ensuring that key messages reach remote populations. In Mali, radio was an important communication tool used to raise awareness about the mandate of the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) and the purpose of its operations.[12] Still, challenges remain when communities lack access to media outlets. ICT is also increasingly being used to facilitate reporting back to the mission. For instance, text messaging has been piloted in the DRC for early warning to the mission about protection threats, and in Kenya to track electoral violence.[13]

Deep versus Broad Inclusion

Both the HIPPO and the AGE reports advocate broader engagement particularly aimed at including women, youth and marginalized groups.[14] The link between marginalization and conflict is now well documented empirically[15]; and exclusion is recognized as a primary reason why people take up arms. Inclusive processes substantially increase the chances of achieving sustainable peace – especially when stakeholders are able to make quality contributions that influence decision-making and implementation. The assumption that broader inclusion compromises efficiency has also been refuted.[16] There are, however, several practical and contextual barriers to realizing inclusivity in practice.

In some contexts, interacting with women can be challenging for mission staff. Male peacekeepers are sometimes prohibited from contact with local women altogether. To remedy this issue, there has been an over-focus on increasing the number of women in peacekeeping, under the assumption that this will enhance access to local women[17] and improve community relations.[18] However, research has shown that determinants as race, language familiarity and respect for local culture are

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6   Policy & Best Practices Service Department of Peacekeeping / Department of Field Support 'Draft Practice Note: Community Engagement', United Nations, March 2016, pp. 9–10.

7   Sarah Brockmeier and Phillip Rotman. 'Civil Affairs and Local Conflict Management in Peace Operations: Practical Challenges and Tools for the Field'. Global Public Policy Institute. p. 32, Available at: www. gppi.net/ civilaffairstoolkit [Accessed 9 August 2016].

8   Ibid., p. 32.

9   Policy & Best Practices Service Department of Peacekeeping / Department of Field Support 'Draft Practice Note: Community Engagement', United Nations, March 2016, pp. 19–20.

10 Alison Giffens, 'Community Perceptions as a Priority in Protection and Peacekeeping'. Stimson Center Issue Brief 2, 2013. Civilians in Conflict. Available at: http://www.stimson.org/images/uploads/CIC-IssueBriefNo2.pdf [Accessed 8 August 2016].

11 Hugo de Vries, 'Going around in Circles: The Challenges of Peacekeeping and Stabilization in the Democratic Republic of the Congo', CRU Report (Netherlands Institute of International Relations Clingendael, August 2015), http://www.clingendael.nl/sites/default/files/going_around_in_circles.pdf. p.25

12 Interview with the author 24 June 2016. Oslo.

13 SciDev.Net (n.d.) Tech for peace: Facts and figures. SciDev.Net. Available at: http://www.scidev.net/index.cfm?originalUrl=global/conflict/feature/tech-for-peace-facts-and-figures.html [Accessed 10 August 2016].

14 José Ramos-Horta et al., 'Report of the High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations on Uniting Our Strengths for Peace: Politics, Partnership and People' (New York, 17 June 2015) http://www.unic.or.jp/files/peace_operations.pdf. pp.77–80; United Nations, 'The Challenge of Sustaining Peace: Report of the Advisory Group of Experts for the 2015 Review of the United Nations Peacebuilding Architecture', 29 June 2015, http://www.refworld.org/docid/5724aae44.html. pp.21–24.

15 See for example F. Stewart, Horizontal Inequalities and Conflict: Understanding Group Violence in Multiethnic Societies (Springer, 2016) and Lars-Erik Cederman, Andreas Wimmer, and Brian Min, 'Why Do Ethnic Groups Rebel? New Data and Analysis', World Politics 62, no. 1 (January 2010): 87–119, doi:10.1017/S0043887109990219.

16 Thania Paffenholz, 'Inclusivity in Peace Processes', Briefing paper for the UN High-level review panel (United Nations University Centre for Policy Research (UN CPR), February 2015), http://i.unu.edu/media/cpr.unu.edu/attachment/1005/Inclusivity-in-peace-processes.pdf.

17 Claire Duncanson, 'Forces for Good? Narratives of Military Masculinity in Peacekeeping Operations', International Feminist Journal of Politics 11, no. 1 (1 March 2009): 63–80, doi:10.1080/14616740802567808.

18 Henry F Carey, '"Women and Peace and Security": The Politics of Implementing Gender Sensitivity Norms in Peacekeeping', International Peacekeeping 8, no. 2 (22 January 2001): 49–68, doi:10.1080/13533310108413895.

considered highly important to fostering relations with local communities, regardless of gender.[19]

Opting for broad versus deep engagement may entail various trade-offs. Small-scale processes may be easier to steer and may deliver quicker results; larger consultations offer means for broader representation and participation, but are time-consuming and resource-intensive. However, it is arguably the follow-up after consultations that deserves more attention. With the Bangui Forum, 4 to 11 May 2015, the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA) facilitated widespread local consultations in advance, to ensure the involvement of community representatives, bringing together over 600 leaders from diverse sections of CAR's society to define a collective vision for the future.[20] The process demanded considerable resources from the UN but was commended by local people, many of whom said this was the first time they had ever been consulted since the mission's arrival. However, the consultations failed to generate a specific roadmap for action, partially because of the absence of the donor community: that highlights the importance of including all strategic players and implementation planning.[21]

Using local intermediaries who can connect the mission with communities is now becoming an institutionalized practice in UN peace operations. In 2010, Community Liaison Assistants (CLAs) were introduced by MONUSCO's Civil Affairs to bridge the gap between local communities and the mission. As of 2015, there were over 200 CLAs at some 70 military bases throughout the Eastern DRC.[22] These local staff, trained and hired by the UN promote greater engagement by offering translation services, establishing connections, informing local people about the mission's mandate, and are a vital resource for gathering information on local conflict dynamics. This best practice facilitates confidence-building between peacekeepers and local communities and has been replicated in other missions.

Whether to engage armed non-state actors is becoming particularly challenging in conflicts that fall under the purview of the 'global war on terror'. In theory, the UN has the potential to act as a neutral and impartial arbiter with the legitimacy to engage all parties to a conflict. However, in the post 9/11 context, labels used for categorizing armed non-state actors as 'terrorists' and 'Islamic violent extremists' have emplaced limitations as to whom missions may engage with. Being seen as soft on 'terrorists' is likely to produce a backlash from the host state and conflict-affected populations who have been subjected to abuse by these groups. While missions engage in quiet advocacy to encourage armed non-state actors to adhere to international humanitarian law or to stop the recruitment of children, such engagement remains limited and controversial.[23]

Finally, reconciling engagement with the host state is challenging and can be politically sensitive. When missions take on issues within the domain of 'politics', they are often accused of meddling with sovereign affairs of the state.[24] For example, the United Nations–African Union Mission in Darfur (UNAMID), is restricted in its capacity for local engagement because of access restrictions imposed by the government, preventing the mission from reaching communities affected by the military operations. Negotiating the parameters of consent is a delicate exercise. Pushing these limits too far could result in the mission being forced to withdraw – which could jeopardize the wellbeing of those communities to which the mission does have access.

How to Engage Local Communities Effectively?

Engagement strategies require both bottom–up and top–down initiatives. At the micro-level, engaging local people can be done through the daily practices of peacekeepers. As Séverine Autesserre has noted, this could involve promoting interaction with local staff by sharing office spaces and resources to integrate local colleagues and increase 'socialization'.[25] However, community engagement must also be strategic – with sufficient buy-in from the top-level leadership. Well-intentioned field staff regularly face bureaucratic and programmatic challenges from above. Incentivizing senior leaders to shift their thinking towards communities is essential for an effective community engagement strategy. This could be achieved through incorporating benchmarks in the mission strategy and linking community engagement to the mission mandate, to hold decision-makers accountable. Such commitments must also be backed by financial and human resources, reflected in the mission budget.

UN missions already engage communities through more formal modalities and formats, like workshops, meetings with local partners, and town hall meetings. A systematic attempt to integrate a bottom–up strategy that involved local people in decision-making was implemented in the DRC under the purview of the International Security and Stabilization Support Strategy (ISSSS), a donor-led stabilization initiative that seeks to unite MONUSCO, UN agencies, local NGOs and donors behind a common strategy for stability. The stabilization strategy from 2009-2012 involved infrastructure projects and extending state authority through training and deployment of state officials and the army.[26] However, this strategy was criticised for being elite-focused, top-down, technical and divorced from local dynamics of conflict and did not lead to a reduction in violence.[27] These failures precipitated a drastic revision of the ISSSS led by the Stabilization Support Unit (SSU) in MONUSCO. One core pillar in the revised strategy is 'democratic dialogue': this involves bringing together representatives from all sec-

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19 Lindy Heinecken, 'Are Women "Really" Making a Unique Contribution to Peacekeeping?', *Journal of International Peacekeeping* 19, no. 3–4 (24 November 2015): 227–48, doi:10.1163/18754112-01904002.

20 United Nations, 'Report of the Secretary-General on the Situation in the Central African Republic', S/2015/576, (29 July 2015).

21 Nathalia Dukhan, 'The Central African Republic Crisis', 2016, http://www.gsdrc.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/CAR_Jan2016.pdf.

22 MONUSCO Civil Affairs, 'CLA Best Practice Review 2014', 1 August 2014., August 2014.

23 Sebastian von Einsiedel (2015) Non-Military Protection of Civilians in UN Peace Operations: Experiences and Lessons. Occasional Paper. Available at:http://i.unu.edu/media/cpr.unu.edu/attachment/1182/OC_03-Non-Military-PoC-in-UN-Peace-Ops.pdf [Accessed 10 August 2016]., p.7

24 Cedric de Coning, John Karlsrud, and Paul Troost, 'Towards More People-Centric Peace Operations: From "Extension of State Authority" to "Strengthening Inclusive State-Society Relations"', *Stability: International Journal of Security & Development* 4, no. 1 (29 October 2015), doi:10.5334/sta.gl.

25 Séverine Autesserre, A Message from Peaceland: Change the Way UN Peace Operations Interact with Local Actors. Global Peace Operations Review, 2015. Available at: http://peaceoperationsreview.org/interviews/a-message-from-peaceland-change-the-way-un-peace-operations-interact-with-local-actors/ (Accessed 9 August 2016).

26 Randi Solhjell and Madel G. Rosland, 'New Strategies for Old Conflicts', Policy Brief, Thematic Paper Series (Oslo: NORDEM, 2016).

27 Hugo de Vries. 'Going around in Circles: The Challenges of Peacekeeping and Stabilization in the Democratic Republic of the Congo'. CRU Report. Netherlands Institute of International Relations Clingendael (2015).

tions of the community, including armed groups, in an effort to identify root causes and solutions to conflict.[28] The downside of such a methodological approach is that it is time-consuming and resource-demanding – so replicability to other missions that are already underfunded could be challenging.

Operating in a Securitized Environment

As peace operations are increasingly deployed to areas where there is no peace to keep, security constraints will hinder systematic community engagement, as seen with processes of 'bunkerization' and 'remote management programming'. In Mali, MINUSMA's Stabilization and Recovery Section (S&R) designed regional stabilization strategies through a bottom–up consultative process, but engagement with local actors was limited because of security threats. The mission had to rely on the All Source Information Fusion Unit (ASIFU), the first intelligence unit deployed in a UN mission, to conduct their conflict analysis which served as a basis for developing programme priorities. It is also important to consider the risks borne by communities who engage with mission staff. In Mali, a key cause of civilian targeting by armed groups is retaliation and reprisals for suspected collusion with 'foreign' forces.[29] It is vital that the mission conducts comprehensive risk assessment to ensure that individuals or communities are not jeopardized by the mission's actions.

Conclusions

Community engagement strategies have the potential to make peace operations more responsive to local dynamics. Yet, as this Policy Brief has highlighted, various dilemmas arise when it comes to devising and implementing community engagement strategies. The UN already has a range of tools and practices at its disposal – but, for community engagement to be more systematic, these need to be harnessed into a coherent strategy, with operational guidelines that are relevant for bottom–up and top–down processes. Consideration must also be given to the growing challenge of operating in a securitized environment which creates further distance between peacekeepers and local people. Choosing whom to engage with also requires regular stakeholder mapping, taking into consideration the gender dynamics inherent in the cultural context and identifying the risks associated with excluding certain groups.

28 Solhjell and Rosland. 2016.
29 ACLED. 2015. 'ACLED-Country-Report Mali 2015'. Country Report. ACLED.

Not all contexts will be conducive to the implementation of a system-wide community engagement strategy, due to resource and security constraints. Moving forward, the UN will have to develop specific guidelines and toolkits for peacekeepers – but it must also promote senior leadership buy-in so that mission structures and budgets can be reformed to ensure that the commitment to engage communities moves from rhetoric to reality.

Recommendations

- Develop a clear concept of what 'community engagement' means in the context of UN peace operations.
- Develop specific guidelines on whether and how to engage violent extremist groups/ terrorists.
- Develop accessible information-sharing mechanisms to funnel local field data into mission-wide analyses of conflict dynamics as well as to mission leadership, to ensure that such information reaches top-level decision-making levels – for example, using the Joint Mission Analysis Cell/Centre as a platform.
- Community representatives should participate in planning and assessment processes and senior leadership should periodically make visits to platforms such as town-hall meetings to ensure that bottom–up perspectives are heard.
- Perception surveys should become more systematic and undertaken at frequent intervals in all mission settings.
- More research is needed on how ICT and social media can be used to connect mission to local people and vice versa, as well as on how to tailor these strategies to rural as well as urban settings.
- Mission staff should spend more time educating men and boys on the importance of including women in peacebuilding activities. They should also conduct needs assessments of women and youth in the early stages of mission deployment, and staff should be informed of the specific gender dynamics in their operating environment and on how to overcome these.
- Recruit staff based on knowledge of local language, tradition and culture, rather than thematic expertise.
- Conflict analysis should be undertaken with key, local representatives; program design can be jointly defined by communities and the mission, while local organizations can be mobilized as implementing partners to ensure an active role in decision-making.

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