



## Placing People at the Center of UN Peace Operations

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United Nations peace operations are predominantly state-centric, in that a significant portion of their efforts are focused on supporting host government and state institutions, or threats to them. The [International Day of United Nations Peacekeepers](#) is an opportune time to consider how placing people at the center of the way peace operations are planned, and their performance assessed, will make them more accountable, locally grounded, and effective.

Peacekeepers in the UN mission in the DRC stand near a helipad. (MONUSCO/Sylvain Liechti)

A shift to people-centered peace operations implies moving away from a narrow focus on state-building, institutional capacity, and the extension of state authority. It implies complementing efforts to strengthen the state with initiatives that engage people, communities, and societies and that support them in their ownership of sustaining peace. This approach invests in social capital, social cohesion, and resilient local and national social institutions, which will in theory help local communities and society at large strengthen their own capacities to prevent conflict and sustain peace.

The need for more people-centered peace operations has been a key recommendation of several reviews, including a recent report for [Together First](#), contributed via the [Effectiveness of Peace Operations Network \(EPON\)](#). Research over the last two decades, including that of EPON, has found that the ineffectiveness of many peace interventions is due to the fact that they are too [state-centric](#), [top-down](#), and [template driven](#). Peace operations have generally [failed](#) to sufficiently take local context and local agency into account, and they have not ceded enough space for local ownership and [self-organization](#) to emerge.

There are a number of implications that a people-centered approach has on peacekeeping. The first relates to the state/non-state binary stabilization [doctrine](#) that underpins the mandates of three of the four big UN peacekeeping operations and primarily focuses on the extension of state authority. This doctrine is counterproductive, because the more successfully peace operations stabilize, the less incentive ruling elites have for [seeking a political settlement](#). Stabilization theory [presupposes](#) a legitimate state faced with an illegitimate insurgency, but there are many situations where state authority is captured by a set of elites who sideline genuine grievances and control political processes and economic participation. Balancing the focus of peace operations more evenly between the state and the people will strengthen effectiveness and help these missions to avoid becoming victims of elite capture.

The second relates to the impact of conflict, which erodes trust between the state and the people. Peace operations need to help to restore social cohesion, and by extension, [resilient state-society relations](#). The ultimate aim of any peace process should be to help foster dispute settlement capacities within societies. Making peace operations more people-centered does not need new mandates or policies, nor does it necessarily need to have financial implications. Mostly, it needs a [shift in mindset and leadership](#), accompanied by guidance and implementation plans that can help operations become [more adaptive and participatory](#).

A third implication is that centering operations on people will shift how the effectiveness of a peace operation is assessed. Effectiveness will be measured by the impact the operation has on the everyday lives of the [people it is meant to protect](#) and support. It will also require more of peace operations. For example, they will need to establish close relationships with local and national actors and improve efforts aimed at including women, youth, and marginalized groups. National and local ownership will need to be enabled and supported, and the impact of innovative measures by field-level staff towards [community-oriented](#) confidence-

building, intercommunal dialogue, and [protection of civilians](#) need to be highlighted and encouraged. More broadly, peace operations will need to situate their work within the historical and contemporary political and social context, through meaningfully engaging with local and national counterparts in a variety of inclusive and consultative forums, and involving them in analysis, assessments, evaluations, and other mission processes.

Fortunately, the idea of a shift towards people-centered peace operations already holds broad political support. The [Action 4 Peacekeeping](#) initiative of UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, the 2015 report from the High-Level Independent Panel of Peace Operations, the 2016 Security Council and General Assembly resolutions on sustaining peace, and the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda, all place people in the center. Unfortunately, to date, translating this political commitment into action has been slow.

There are a few ways that the people-centered concept can be more attainable in practice. The first is to anchor the focus on people at the highest levels. This includes ensuring that people-centered principles and practices are reflected in mandates and are integrated into the work of the Special Representatives of the Secretary-General, the peacekeeping force, police, Political Affairs, and other sections. Working with the people should not be reduced to communication (public information) or community relations (civil affairs).

The second is to proactively involve local actors in the work of peace operations by meaningfully engaging representatives of society and local communities in conflict analysis, planning, and assessment processes. This could be done by establishing national and local advisory groups of leading citizens from a variety of fields that provide input to and feedback on assessments, analysis, planning, implementation, programming, and evaluations.

Another is to involve community and civil society representatives in the Comprehensive Performance Assessment System ([CPAS](#)) and other mission performance assessment processes. Missions can also commission independent institutions, such as local universities, to use focus groups, surveys, and other methods to provide inputs on key issues and generate feedback on mission performance.

And, finally, the involvement of host states in making peace operations more people-centered is critical. It should not be the people or the state, but both. This principle and related practices should be part of the dialogue between the UN and host countries and should be reflected in memoranda of understanding, joint framework agreements, and compacts between the host country and the UN.

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