

UN peacekeeping as a learning organisation

From Brahimi to the HIPPO (2000-2015)

Ian D. Quick



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Executive summary

The report of the UN's Panel on Peace Operations in August 2000 heralded a period of drastic change. Over the next fifteen years the organisation launched new 'multi-dimensional' missions in a dozen different countries, and handed them an array of unfamiliar new responsibilities related to the protection of civilians and 'early peacebuilding'. These new expectations led to a five-fold increase in the average size and budget of individual operations. They also presented a steep learning curve for managers, who were challenged to do three things simultaneously:

Learn new tasks in real time. Extensive trial-and-error in the early going gave way progressively to detailed policy guidance. The evolution over time of mandatory policies, lessons learned and best practices suggest several practical lessons about how the guidance task can best be approached. The longer-term perspective also indicates several competing interests that must be kept in proper balance: task-level versus strategic-level effectiveness; and backward-looking 'best practices' versus open-ended questions where the answers are simply not known.

Develop viable country strategies. The major determinant of peace operations' success, insofar as they can control it, has been the ability to understand and adapt to the context on the ground. Policy-makers have accordingly given high priority to better analysis and planning, with rapid iterations of guidance on both mission start-up and country-level decision processes. Over time this reflects two major trends. The first is away from linear planning, towards a more dynamic concept of strategic management. The second is opening up an inward-looking, production-type model to encompass much greater stakeholder engagement.

Build a learning infrastructure. This has been a long-term enterprise focused on Headquarters policy capacity, peer-peer knowledge-sharing and basic-training efforts (in roughly that order). The major lesson in this regard has been the difficulty of matching up external models with the UN's highly specific management environment. The initiatives that have succeeded are those that paid close attention to stakeholder relationships, and that drew effectively on external partners to compensate for structural gaps.

Each of these challenges is complex, and the managerial responses have been spread out over a long period and across many different interlocutors. Yet it is possible to suggest some over-arching lessons about 'best-fit' approaches. The key points here are:

- (i) Where to focus. All three areas must be held in balance. Organisational-level doctrine is important, but it cannot substitute for context-specific adaptation. And both will require investment in learning processes and resources.
- (ii) How to execute. Learning initiatives succeed when they attract the buy-in of financial and political stakeholders, and are compatible with UN peacekeeping's peculiar operating systems. These are design parameters that must be taken into account from the outset.
- (iii) What to prioritise. Multilateral peace operations are perhaps uniquely vulnerable to forgetting their own history. This puts a premium on practical approaches to identify recurring challenges; capture relevant experience; and quickly disseminate the findings.

Introduction

In 1988 the UN deployed a small peace operation in Angola to verify the withdrawal of Cuban troops. Over time it was reconfigured to support successive ceasefires and peace agreements between the national government and the National Union for Total Independence of Angola. Its mandate comprised good offices in support of negotiations; supervising the disengagement of military forces; monitoring the neutrality of Angolan police; supporting humanitarian service delivery; and observation of elections. To achieve these tasks the operation's authorised strength peaked (briefly!) at 3,250 troops, and its annual budget at USD 175m, just before it was drawn down in 1999 in response to renewed hostilities.

In that same year, the first military observers of a new UN operation for the Democratic Republic of the Congo arrived in-country. They were initially charged with monitoring of the Lusaka Ceasefire Agreement, agreed between four major armed factions and the recognised government. Over time this evolved through support to the establishment of national political institutions, the protection of civilians 'at imminent risk of violence', and the 'restoration of state authority' in the eastern region of the DRC. The operation's authorised strength grew to 27,000 personnel, split over a hundred deployment locations and with a fleet of sixty aircraft. Annual budgets grew apace to over USD 1.5bn per year, with total spending up to 2015 at about \$19bn. The mission weathered renewed outbursts of serious fighting in 2003-04, 2008-09 and 2012 and indeed in the last case was stiffened with an 'intervention brigade' tasked with offensive operations against armed groups.

These two peace operations faced similar political challenges and physical terrain, at least in the early going. Yet the policy response was almost unrecognisably different. These differences reflect in miniature the major trends for UN peacekeeping in the twenty-first century. In total, the organisation has deployed seventeen distinct peace operations since the Angolan mission was wound down in 1999. No fewer than thirteen of these were given complex statebuilding mandates; and a like number were tasked to protect civilians at risk of violence.¹ This has brought with it a substantial increase in the overall peacekeeping footprint. From 2000 to 2015 the average annual budget of current operations increased from USD 100m to USD 500m; average author-

¹ That is, excluding reconfigured operations in Timor-Leste, the DRC, the Central African Republic and Haiti.

ised personnel roughly tripled; and average duration stretched from well under fifteen years to nearly twenty-five.²

This paper asks how the UN built a bridge from operations like that in Angola, to ones like that in the DRC. It aims to synthesize the organisational learning challenges, and managerial responses, that have accompanied peacekeeping's very rapid evolution over the last fifteen years.

In this regard, a convenient place to start is the Brahimi Report of August 2000 (formally, the UN Panel on Peace Operations).³ This was a landmark review that came at a critical moment for the organisation. Rwanda and Bosnia had demonstrated that catastrophes could occur notwithstanding the presence of 'blue helmet' peacekeepers. The fledgling operation in Sierra Leone had just been rescued by British military intervention, while the first tentative steps in the Democratic Republic of the Congo had also been greeted by serious fighting.

It is thus no exaggeration to say that the spectre of failure lurks throughout the document. The report's authors warned in stark terms that peace operations were increasingly deployed into crisis situations without exit strategies to leave them. Doing better implied a change agenda focused 'not only on politics and strategy, but also and perhaps even more so on operational and organizational areas of need'.⁴ The recommendations that followed were a fair summary of the major learning challenges for UN peacekeeping as it encountered rapidly shifting expectations. In essence, the organisation was being asked to:

Learn new tasks. The historically symbolic role of UN military personnel had given way to the active use of force to defend 'themselves, other mission components and the mission's mandate'.⁵ Alongside this, operations were now expected to act as 'early peacebuilders', with a particular focus on reinforcing host government institutions. In both cases it was critical to discover what worked, and 'value added' by peace operations as distinct from other institutions.

Create viable country strategies. The new mandates also meant a steep learning curve for individual operations. It rapidly became clear that what effective protection and peacebuilding looked like was irreducibly context-specific, and that the main condition of success would be effective adaptation to local condition.

² For data see Peace Operations Review, '10 trends in peace operations', 2015, at peaceoperationsreview.org; Quick ID, 'Peacekeeping agendas dataset', *Rethink Fragility*, 2013.

³ United Nations, 'Report of the Panel on United Nations Peace Operations', August 2000, UN Doc A/55/305-S/2000/809

⁴ *Ibid*, p viii.

⁵ *Ibid*, p9.

Build a learning infrastructure. As UN peace operations grew in scale and complexity, it was clear that the improvised operating culture that had sustained earlier peace operations would no longer suffice. There was an acute need for systems and processes to capture the rapidly accumulating experience; to systematically reflect on its lessons; and to make the conclusions widely available.

The following sections unpack the UN's efforts to meet these challenges over the fifteen years between the Brahimi Report and the next comprehensive review of peace operations, the High-Level Panel of 2015. In each case we ask and aim to answer three questions:

- What were the practical needs?
- What were the managerial responses, and how did they evolve over time?
- What are some useful takeaways, or 'lessons learned about learning'?

1. New tasks

1.1 The learning challenge

In 1993, a future Assistant Secretary-General for Strategic Planning, John Ruggie, had warned of a ‘doctrinal void’ around the re-purposing of a ‘traditional peacekeeping mechanism’ in Cambodia and the Balkans.⁶ His comment proved prescient as the end of the decade approached. For the most striking difference between the peace operations in Angola and the Democratic Republic of the Congo was their *scope of work*. The latter attempted much more; stayed much longer; and employed vastly greater resources.

Underlying this were two major changes in the expected role of UN peace operations. These confronted the organisation with tasks that were essentially new, and moreover had to be worked out in real time.

The first group of tasks concerned **exit strategies**. In 1999 the Security Council mandated the establishment of interim administrations in both Kosovo and Timor Leste, and charged them to help develop sustainable local institutions for security, police, justice, and public administration. This announced a pivot to ‘state building’ as a cornerstone of UN strategy, in essence the belief that ‘achieving security and development in societies emerging from civil war partly depends upon the existence of capable, autonomous and legitimate institutions’.⁷ Once it occurred, the shift was dramatic. Between 2000 and 2015 the Security Council has instructed eleven subsequent peace operations to help strengthen security, rule of law and democratic institutions.

In the early going, these operations had to improvise. Both interim administrations were marked by serious gaps in expertise and unclear transitional strategy, with the head of mission for Timor-Leste famously penning a memo entitled ‘How not to run a country’.⁸ Ad hoc approaches to the security sector came in for particularly harsh criticism after the Timorese police service imploded in 2003-04.⁹ Other contem-

⁶ Ruggie JG, ‘Wandering in the void: Charting the UN’s new strategic role’, *Foreign Affairs*, Nov/Dec 1993.

⁷ Paris R and Sisk T, ‘The dilemmas of statebuilding: Confronting the contradictions of post-war peace operations’, Routledge, 2008, p2.

⁸ Viera de Mello S, ‘How not to run a country: Lessons for the UN from Kosovo and East Timor’, internal memorandum (undated). Cited in, for example, Harris V and Goldsmith A, ‘Security, development and nation-building in Timor-Leste: A cross-sectoral assessment’, Routledge, 2012.

⁹ United Nations, ‘Report of the joint assessment mission carried out by the government of Timor-Leste, UNMISSET, UNDP and development partner countries for the

porary studies of work with security and rule of law institutions likewise found a lack of clear objectives, and behind this no ‘theory of change’ for how such work would contribute to the eventual drawdown of the peace operation.¹⁰

Concurrent with all this was the equally rapid growth of **protection mandates**. Here the pivotal moment was also in 1999, when the Security Council mandated the UN Assistance Mission in Sierra Leone to ‘afford protection to civilians under imminent threat of physical violence’.¹¹ Versions of this language now apply to some 95% of personnel deployed in UN peace operations. Over the years they have confronted widely varying conditions, with the relatively simple case of Sierra Leone (71,000km², pop 6m) set alongside those of the DRC (2,345,000 km², pop. 65m) and the Central African Republic (630,000 km², pop. 5m).

It is fair to say that policy in this area evolved on an ad hoc basis. The main driver was ‘the impact of a series of critical challenges to the various missions on the ground’,¹² including flare-ups of large-scale violence in Sierra Leone (2000-01), DRC (2003-04), and Cote d’Ivoire (2005-06). As late as 2009, a comprehensive independent study found ‘no evidence’ of an agreed concept of operations to guide planning. In practice this made for inconsistent understandings of ‘who is to be protected, from what kinds of actors and threats, and by what means’.¹³ The task was complicated by sourcing of military personnel from dozens of different contributors, each with their own doctrine and operating culture.

Timor-Leste Police Service’, UNMISSET, 2003; Rees E, ‘Under pressure: FALINTIL – Forças de Defesa de Timor Leste. Three decades of defense force development in Timor-Leste (1974-2004), Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces, 2004; International Crisis Group, ‘Resolving Timor-Leste’s crisis’, 2006; Smith J et al, ‘Enhancing United Nations capacity for post-conflict policing and rule of law’, Henry L. Stimson Centre, 2007.

¹⁰ Dahrendof N et al, ‘A review of peace operations: A case for change’, King’s College London, March 2003; United Nations, ‘Lessons learned from United Nations peacekeeping experiences in Sierra Leone’, Peacekeeping Best Practices Unit, September 2003; United Nations, ‘Report of the Secretary-General: The rule of law and transitional justice in conflict and post-conflict societies’, August 2004, UN Doc S/2004/616.

¹¹ SC Res 1270, 22 October 1999, UN Doc S/RES/1270, para. 14. For a concise overview see Holt V, Taylor G and Kelly M, ‘Protecting civilians in the context of UN peacekeeping operations’, Independent study jointly commissioned by the Department of Peacekeeping Operations and the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, November 2009, Pt II.1.

¹² Benner T, Mergenthaler S and Rotmann P, ‘The new world of UN peace operations: Learning to build peace?, Oxford University Press, 2011, p19.

¹³ Holt V et al, ‘Protecting civilians’, above, ch 3.

1.2 Managerial responses

Under acute operational pressure, early learning initiatives aimed simply to inventory the work that was already being attempted at field level. Early handbooks on civilian police doctrine (2000) and Multi-Dimensional Peacekeeping Operations (2003) listed out common elements of the new mandates.¹⁴ These documents were rudimentary at best – the latter notes apologetically that it was ‘intended to provide general background’ for incoming staff, with a single paragraph each for issues like the protection of civilians and the disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) of combatants.

Over time, there followed lessons-learned studies that mapped practices in a more systematic way across different operations in the field. These studies were prepared for increasingly well-defined thematic areas: security sector reform, judicial reform, corrections, protection of civilians and DDR, among others.¹⁵ At a practical level they were commissioned and managed by still-embryonic Headquarters policy teams configured along similar thematic lines, with the research itself typically conducted by external consultants. (We return to the mechanics of this in Part 3, below.)

As confidence grew the Secretariat expanded its ambitions, seeking to go beyond descriptive accounts to endorse specific good practices. A set of 2008 Principles and Guidelines, nicknamed the Capstone Doctrine, aimed to delimit ‘core business’ and the proper division of labour between peace operations and other actors.¹⁶ Concurrently, newly staffed policy teams at Headquarters developed guidance notes, and often formal policies, for the same thematic areas. This included rewritten guidance for longstanding occupational categories such as civil affairs whose role had changed dramatically with the new multi-dimensional mandates.¹⁷

¹⁴ United Nations, ‘Handbook on United Nations Multidimensional Peacekeeping Operations’, Department of Peacekeeping Operations, December 2003; United Nations, ‘United Nations Civilian Police Principles and Guidelines’, Department of Peacekeeping Operations, 2000.

¹⁵ United Nations, ‘Supporting national prison systems: Lessons learned and best practices for peacekeeping operations’, Department of Peacekeeping Operations, December 2005; Carlson SN, ‘Legal and judicial rule of law work in multidimensional peace operations: Lessons-learned study’, Department of Peacekeeping Operations, 2006; Rees E, ‘Security sector reform (SSR) and peace operations: “Improvisation and confusion” from the field: External study’, Department of Peacekeeping Operations, 2006; Holt et al, above; United Nations, ‘Second generation disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) practices in peace operations’, UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations, January 2010.

¹⁶ United Nations, ‘United Nations peacekeeping operations: Principles and guidelines’, Department of Peacekeeping Operations / Department of Field Support, January 2008.

¹⁷ United Nations, ‘Primer for justice components in multidimensional peace operations: Strengthening the rule of law’, Department of Peacekeeping Operations, De-

These early initiatives proceeded at different rates, and looked slightly different, according to the human resources available at Headquarters in the different thematic areas. In most cases the guidance products themselves are now in their second or third generations, building on feedback from practitioners in field operations and outside experts.¹⁸ If we examine these documents over time, or ask those involved, there are several clear trends:

- Mandatory policies that set out purposes and principles for commonly recurring mandate tasks, in effect interpreting the quite general language used by the Security Council. These typically also set out minimum expectations for processes and outputs at the level of individual missions.
- Supplementary guidelines on more-specific areas of work, e.g. capacity-building for host-country police; procedures for prison incident management; and tactical approaches to the protection of civilians.¹⁹
- Less formal reference tools that set out tools, methodologies and practical examples for recurring areas of work. Much of the newest guidance bundled into user-friendly handbooks, with the intent that they are used more *à la carte*.
- Greater focus on partnerships. Newer guidance is notable for its emphasis on integration with other pillars of the peace operation; how to productively engage with the host government and civil society; and how to engage with other international agencies.

ember 2006; United Nations, 'Policy directive: Prison support in UN peacekeeping operations', Department of Peacekeeping Operations, December 2007; United Nations, 'Policy directive: Civil affairs', Department of Peacekeeping Operations / Department of Field Support, April 2008; United Nations, 'DPKO/DFS lessons learned note on the protection of civilians in UN peacekeeping operations', Department of Peacekeeping Operations / Department of Field Support, 2010.

¹⁸ United Nations, 'Civil affairs handbook', Department of Peacekeeping Operations / Department of Field Support, February 2012; United Nations, 'Handbook for judicial affairs officers in United Nations peacekeeping operations', Department of Peacekeeping Operations, June 2013; United Nations, 'DPKO/DFS policy: The protection of civilians in United Nations peacekeeping', Department of Peacekeeping Operations / Department of Field Support, April 2015.

¹⁹ United Nations, 'Guidelines: Police capacity-building and development', Department of Peacekeeping Operations / Department of Field Support, March 2017; United Nations, 'Lessons Learned Report on the Joint Protection Team Mechanism in MONUSCO', Department of Peacekeeping Operations / Department of Field Support / Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2013; United Nations, 'Prison Incident Management Handbook', Department of Peacekeeping Operations / Department of Field Support, 2013; United Nations, 'The United Nations rule of law indicators: Implementation guide and project tools', Department of Peacekeeping Operations / Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2011.

- Recognition of the need for good contextual analysis. To take one striking example, the 2013 handbook for judicial affairs officers includes dozens of pages on national legal systems compared to almost zero coverage in its 2006 predecessor.

Alongside such ‘thematic’ work, it has also been essential to pay attention to cross-cutting issues. The most obvious candidate here was the renewal of the organisation’s field support processes. As the New Horizons policy statement of 2009 noted drily, ‘administrative practices and financial management systems designed for a stable civil service secretariat now manage massive, complex field operations in some of the most difficult and remote environments in the world’.²⁰ Major initiatives that followed included the Global Field Support Strategy (2010-15); the 2011 review of Civilian Capacity in the Aftermath of Conflict; and several initiatives for enterprise resource planning. These focused on re-engineering core systems and processes. Parallel workstreams aimed to professionalise core support functions and define standardised approaches, much as for the ‘substantive’ tasks noted above.

A third set of learning initiatives examined peace operations’ overall effectiveness, as (according to doctrine) ‘one part of a much broader international effort to help countries emerging from conflict’.²¹ These included a Working Group on Transition Issues; the Panel on System-Wide Coherence; a string of reports on Peacebuilding in the Aftermath of Conflict issued by the Secretary-General’s office; and the High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations of 2015.²² Their recommendations touched on system-level issues such as integration of effort; financing gaps; and the roles of the Security Council as policy-maker and the Secretariat as its advisor.

1.3 Takeaways

There is no doubt that UN peacekeeping has been handed a difficult set of challenges from 1999-2000 onwards. Protection and institution-

²⁰ United Nations, ‘A new partnership agenda: Charting a new horizon for UN peacekeeping’, Department of Peacekeeping Operations / Department of Field Support, July 2009, p4.

²¹ United Nations, ‘United Nations peacekeeping operations: Principles and guidelines’, above, pp22-3.

²² United Nations, ‘Report of the UNDG/ECHA Working Group on Transition Issues’, UN Development Group (UNDG), 2004; United Nations, ‘Delivering as One, Report of the Secretary-General’s High-Level Panel on System-wide Coherence’, UN Doc A/61/583, 2006. On the Peacebuilding in the Aftermath of Conflict series see: Statement by the President of the Security Council, 20 May 2008, UN Doc PRST/2008/16; United Nations, ‘Report of the Secretary-General on peacebuilding in the immediate aftermath of conflict’, June 2009, UN Doc A/63/881-S/2009/304. See also Security Council Report, ‘Update report No. 1: Peacebuilding’, April 2010; Security Council Report, ‘Update report No. 4: Peacebuilding: Institution building’, January 2011.

building mandates were new to the organisation, and had to be ‘learned on the job’ in rapidly evolving environments. Under such circumstances, the sequence of initiatives noted above was a rational response (even if their speed and quality was often criticised).

At the same time, this was effectively a process of a trial-and-error. The organisation adjusted its approach incrementally as early products met criticism, or resistance. Among other possible lessons, the experience suggests the need to manage two basic tensions:

(i) Tactical usefulness vs. strategic relevance

Most learning efforts have been pitched at specific mandated tasks like judicial reform, the protection of civilians, or corrections. This is inevitable given the need for a practical division of labour, and to effectively ‘backstop’ staff in these specific occupational roles in the field. Indeed, practitioners have often commented that these thematic categories are already much too abstract. Early guidance was roundly criticised for being unhelpfully broad and vague, given the complexity and sheer scope of the activities it encompassed.

The response from policy-writers has been to focus on specific practical challenges, and to collate real-world examples of how they were approached. This has been reinforced through an emphasis in recent years on peer-peer interactions, to provide support on day-to-day tasks as they arrive (discussed further in Part 3 below). This is consistent with wider thinking on professional education, which tends to favour learning that can be immediately applied and adapted.

Yet such an approach, by itself, is clearly inadequate. The report of the 2015 High-Level Panel on Peace Operations (HIPPO) was fiercely critical of operations designed according to ‘supply-driven templates’, i.e. matching the organisational division of labour at Headquarters rather than needs on the ground.²³ In doing so the HIPPO panellists reflected views held widely within the Secretariat. They also echoed a long line of assessments by bilateral and multilateral agencies active in fragile states – as one influential joint study put it, that interventions tend to be ‘strategy-resistant, as if they need no justification because their worth is self-evident’.²⁴

²³ United Nations, ‘The challenge of sustaining peace: Report of the advisory group of experts for the 2015 review of the United Nations peacebuilding architecture’, June 2015.

²⁴ Smith D et al, ‘Towards a strategic framework for peacebuilding: Getting their act together’, Overview report of the Joint Utstein Study of Peacebuilding, Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2004. See also United Nations, ‘Inventory: United Nations Capacities in Peacebuilding’, Executive Office of the Secretary-General, September 2006, p1; Patrick S and Brown K, ‘Greater than the sum of its parts? Assessing “whole of government” approaches to fragile states’, International Peace

The implication is simple: A holistic perspective is also needed. Organisational learning must continually assess the contribution of individual lines of effort to ‘a secure environment that is self-sustaining’ as the Brahimi Report put it. In practice there is no obvious source for this perspective, with the Secretary-General describing the overall transition from conflict to peace as a ‘gaping hole in the United Nations institutional machinery’.²⁵ One-off, ad hoc measures have thus played a crucial role. These have included external advisory groups of eminent personalities (the 2011 Review of Civilian Capacities; 2015’s High-Level Panel); and occasional papers prepared through the executive office of the Department of Peacekeeping and the Secretary-General (New Horizons, Peacebuilding in the Aftermath of Conflict).

(ii) Proven practices vs. unfamiliar challenges

In 2002, the UN formed a task force aimed to map institutional competencies around criminal law and penal systems. This group included an alphabet soup of UN offices, agencies, funds and programs, and it worked for several years to document good practices and lessons learned. At the end of the process, the chairperson looked back and summarised bluntly that ‘no UN agency had developed experience or expertise in how to build adequate capacity’. In reality the need was to *develop* viable approaches to international assistance in these sensitive, and not to locate ones that already existed.²⁶

This is a fair reflection of the wider experience with multi-dimensional peace operations. An initial focus on mapping ‘best practices’ was wholly appropriate: given the highly decentralised nature of UN operations, innovation could only happen in the field. Yet it is also clear that there are basic uncertainties, and gaps in knowledge, about key tasks. The 2011 Review of Civilian Capacities noted bluntly that in many cases ‘the needed capacities are just not available’ within the UN system.²⁷ The current head of peacekeeping operations has conceded that ‘our expertise is not very deep in critical peacebuilding areas’, and his predecessor that ‘we are still a long way from being able to provide credible responses on these technical issues’.²⁸

Academy, 2007, p130; de Coning C, ‘The United Nations and the comprehensive approach’, Danish Institute for International Studies, DIIS Report 2008:14.

²⁵ United Nations, ‘Report of the Secretary-General: In larger freedom: towards development, security and human rights for all’, March 2005, UN Doc A/59/2005.

²⁶ O’Neill, ‘UN peacekeeping operations and rule of law programs’, in Hurwitz A and Huang R (eds) *Civil war and the rule of law*, Lynne Rienner, 2008. Quoted in Benner et al, ‘The new world of UN peace operations’, above, p128.

²⁷ United Nations, ‘Civilian capacity in the aftermath of conflict: Independent report of the senior advisory group’, March 2011.

²⁸ Le Roy A, ‘Keynote address: Managing “complexity”’, in Clement C and Smith AC (eds) *Managing complexity: Political and managerial challenges in United Nations peace operations*, International Peace Institute, 2009; Guéhenno JM, ‘The fog of

As this has become more apparent, policy products have become notably less prescriptive. Recent policies and guidance put as much emphasis on country-level diagnostic work, including careful stakeholder engagement, as they do on specific ways of working. This is consistent with the broader international development literature – now extremely critical of ‘institutional monocropping’ that prescribes solutions ill-fitted to context; and increasingly emphatic on the need for ‘problem-driven’ and ‘politically smart’ approaches.²⁹

In parallel, the UN’s policy staff now make much heavier use of think tanks and academic institutions that are better equipped to deal with original research (a point that we return to in Part 3 below). The questions that are asked have also become much more open-ended, with research programs like the ‘Future of Peace Operations’ and ‘Future Concepts and Models for Peace Operations’ now common.³⁰

peace: A memoir of international peacekeeping in the 21st century’, Brookings Institution Press, 2015, p266.

²⁹ Andrews A, Pritchett L and Woolcock A, ‘Escaping capability traps through problem-driven iterative adaptation’, Center for Global Development, Working Paper No. 299, 2012; Booth D and Unsworth S, ‘Politically smart, locally led development’, Overseas Development Institute, 2014; Autesserre, S, ‘Peaceland: Conflict resolution and the everyday politics of international intervention’, Cambridge University Press, 2014.

³⁰ These are programmes of the Henry L. Stimson Center and the International Forum for the Challenges of Peace Operations, respectively.

2. Country strategies

2.1 The learning challenge

In 2010, Lakhdar Brahimi looked back on a long career as the UN's most celebrated trouble-shooter to recall that that the organisation 'is often taking very serious decisions about how to respond to crises it does not know enough about.'³¹ His point was that multi-dimensional peacekeeping implied a steep learning curve for both the design and the successful execution of individual operations.

Returning to the example of the DRC, early mandates tasked 16,000 uniformed personnel to protect civilians across a territory of 2.35 million square kilometres. (Later mandates dropped this to 'only' 400,000 square kilometres of difficult terrain.) As one former head of mission has put it, successful execution thus depended wholly upon good strategy to 'match, or at least reconcile, means and mandates'.³² This in turn required a deep understanding of security and political dynamics on the ground, with successive crises in Ituri, Bukavu, and Goma providing pointed reminders of the high stakes of getting it wrong.

A similar story can be told for peace operations in Sierra Leone, Cote d'Ivoire, Darfur, and a half-dozen other cases. As a 2010 lessons learned note summarised, they face a set of policy dilemmas that can be dimly seen in the abstract, but brought into focus only 'in light of the particular circumstances of each mission, given the context-specific challenges that missions face'.³³ These include managing relationships with parties to the conflict; effective information-gathering; and the proactive allocation and reallocation of resources to meet multiple potential threats.

The design problem was no more straightforward for the new 'early peacebuilding' mandates. There is increasingly emphatic recognition at the inter-governmental level that such interventions 'must reflect the unique conditions and needs of the country rather than be driven by what international actors can or want to supply'.³⁴ Early evaluations of

³¹ Brahimi L, 'Contribution to the General Assembly debate on peacekeeping', August 2010. Cited in Benner et al, 'The new world of UN peace operations', above, p213.

³² Doss A, 'Great expectations: UN peacekeeping, civilian protection, and the use of force', Geneva Centre for Security Policy, Research Series No. 4, 2011.

³³ United Nations, 'DPKO / DFS lessons learned note on the protection of civilians in UN peacekeeping operations: Dilemmas, practices and emerging lessons', Department of Peacekeeping Operations / Department of Field Support, January 2010.

³⁴ United Nations, 'Peacebuilding in the immediate aftermath of conflict', above, para 16.

UN peace operations' support to the rule of law, police and military reform found major shortcomings in this regard. They detailed interventions that took scant account of local political priorities, and were often premised on very superficial understandings of local institutions.³⁵ The G7+, a group of countries designated as 'fragile' by their partners, have likewise excoriated international interventions as 'often inapplicable, unsustainable and incompatible with our in-country national agendas'.³⁶

The managerial challenge is thus clear: To develop context-appropriate strategies that can attract the buy-in of key stakeholders. Of course, this is made more difficult by the fact that peace operations tend to deploy at precisely the moment when national institutions are most fragmented and politicised. As a recent review of the Peacebuilding Commission's work has noted, this means trying to ascertain the 'unique conditions and needs of the country' in a context where 'the capacity and will to exercise full national ownership may be constrained because ... a stable political order is yet to be established'.³⁷

A second complicating factor is the need to find common ground with a confusing array of international actors. UN peace operations may now be early peacebuilders, but are 'neither designed nor equipped to engage in longer-term institution and capacity-building efforts'.³⁸ Their big-picture effectiveness thus depends upon *joint* learning, and the corresponding strategic design, with actors that have complementary capabilities. The latter include (among others!) the developmental and human rights components of the UN system, bilateral diplomatic and aid actors, the international financial institutions, and other multilateral organisations.

2.2 Managerial responses

There has been extensive policy attention to how peace operations should analyse the country context and develop viable strategies. This includes no fewer than four revisions of official guidance from 2006-15, each approved by the Secretary-General and also (more recently)

³⁵ See Part 2.2 above.

³⁶ G7+, 'Statement of the G7+ Heads of State', 20 September 2010. See also International Dialogue on Peacebuilding and Statebuilding, 'Dili declaration: A new vision for peacebuilding and statebuilding', 10 April 2010.

³⁷ United Nations, 'Peacebuilding in the immediate aftermath of conflict', above, para 11.

³⁸ United Nations, 'Peacekeeping operations: Principles and guidelines', above, Part 2.3.

the UN Development Group.³⁹ Taking the long view, the approach that has emerged can be summarised under three areas of work.

(i) Designing new operations

Faced with the new multi-dimensional mandates, it quickly became the norm to establish a dedicated inter-departmental task force for an anticipated peace operation.⁴⁰ These task forces are chaired by a lead department, either the Department of Peacekeeping Operations or the Department of Political Affairs. They were initially conceptualised as a 'project management team' for the start-up process, with responsibility to analyse the context, formulate a common position for the UN system, and report back to the Security Council with recommendations for a mandate. Over time they have evolved to include representatives of 'all relevant United Nations entities', including the specialised development and humanitarian agencies.⁴¹

The assessment and design process historically centred on in-country joint analyses, originally dubbed Technical Assessment Missions and recently rebranded as Strategic Assessments. This process has always been controversial and much-criticised, a fate that was probably unavoidable given the competing value judgments and priorities that hover in the background of any peace operations. Still, successive course corrections suggest some useful orientations:

Priorities and options. The tendency to simply add together competing agendas into an over-general 'Christmas tree mandate' has attracted harsh language both internally, and in external reviews such as the HIPPO report. In response, more recent policy strongly encourages an integrated assessment in which the lead department is explicit about the conflict analysis, the priorities flowing from this, and any dissenting points of view within the UN system. Linked with this, recent initiatives have encouraged clearer decision points for senior leadership in the Secretariat to provide input on basic parameters rather than being presented with a 'fully cooked' approach.

Wider and deeper consultation. There is a self-evident need to engage with multiple levels of government in the host country, where these are

³⁹ The UN Development Group comprises the UN's specialised agencies, funds and programmes. For policy guidance see: United Nations, 'Integrated Missions Planning Process (IMPP): Guidelines endorsed by the Secretary-General', June 2006; United Nations, 'IMPP Guidelines: Role of the Headquarters', May 2009; United Nations, 'IMPP Guidelines: Role of the Field', January 2010; United Nations / EOSG, 'IMPP Guidelines: Role of the Field', January 2012; United Nations, 'Integrated assessment and planning handbook', IAP Working Group, December 2013.

⁴⁰ Integrated Mission Task Force, later Integrated Task Force.

⁴¹ United Nations, 'Report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of the report of the Panel on United Nations peace operations', October 2000, UN Doc A/55/502, paras 49-66; United Nations, 'Integrated assessment and planning handbook', above.

in place. There are also important stakeholders at the inter-governmental level, where failures to engage early with troop-contributing countries and interested regional powers have been flagged as raising unnecessary tensions. A more recent, but clearly evident, trend is to emphasise the need for ‘inclusive’ processes that engage with a broader array of political, civil society and community interlocutors.⁴²

Professionalisation. There have been tentative steps to build a more thorough analytic process rather than placing too much weight on a brief ‘technical assessment mission’. This includes better utilisation of expertise from other parts of the UN system and outside sources, and recognition of the need to intersect with key national processes rather than working on an UN-dictated timeline. (These include, for example, fragility assessments under the New Deal for Conflict-Affected and Fragile States; compacts with the Peacebuilding Commission; and lending agreements with the international financial institutions.)

(ii) Country-level decision-making

Once a peace operation is deployed, the locus of responsibility for general management shifts to country level. Doctrinally, heads of mission are responsible for revising the strategic framework guiding the United Nations system’s activities, and to recommend needed adjustments to mission tasks and mandates.⁴³ Practically, they are the principal interlocutor of the host nation, the diplomatic community and external partner agencies. In most operations, moreover, they are also the only point at which the full range of mandate tasks comes together.

With regard to process: The inter-departmental task force at Headquarters level has a counterpart at country level, most recently re-branded as a Senior Leadership Forum. This body comprises the management team of the peace operation, and heads of UN agencies with local representation. It is responsible to provide ‘strategic direction, planning oversight, information-sharing, analysis, coordination and monitoring in support of the UN’s peace consolidation efforts’.⁴⁴ Since 2006, it is also expected to endorse an ‘integrated strategic framework’ (ISF) for the UN system as a whole. This is intended to include a common analysis of the conflict; definition of peacebuilding priorities;

⁴² United Nations, ‘Peacebuilding in the immediate aftermath of conflict’, above, para 11; United Nations, ‘7143rd meeting of the Security Council’, 19 March 2014, UN Doc S/PV.7143; United Nations, ‘Review of the United Nations peacebuilding architecture’, July 2010, UN Doc A/64/868- S/2010/393; United Nations, ‘The challenge of sustaining peace: Report of the advisory group of experts for the 2015 review of the United Nations peacebuilding architecture’, June 2015.

⁴³ United Nations, ‘Peacekeeping operations: Principles and guidelines’, above, pt 5.2.

⁴⁴ United Nations, ‘Integrated assessment and planning handbook’, above, p56

mechanisms for follow-up; and approach to monitoring & reporting.⁴⁵ Within the peace operation, meanwhile, policy dictates an overarching mission concept to tie together the different pillars.

It must be stressed that the implementation record for all of this is very mixed. The planning process set out in official policy has been frequently criticised as ‘asking a lot, but adding little’, and the development of Integrated Strategic Frameworks and mission concepts has been progressive at best. Nonetheless, the adjustments made in successive generations of policy guidance suggest some clear lessons of experience.

Function over form. Early dogfights about how to organise, and who reported to whom, obscured the fact that there were broader weaknesses in strategy. The influential Report on Integrated Missions in 2004 noted in this regard that it was essential to clarify overarching objectives in order to know which UN activities really needed to be ‘integrated’. This would both increase effectiveness and avoid sensitivities about humanitarian and human rights work being subordinated to political-security considerations.⁴⁶

Later versions of planning guidance have accordingly put much greater emphasis on the need for regular joint analysis, consultation and stock-taking at the level of senior leadership. They have also been considerably less prescriptive on the content and timeline of ISFs and mission concepts. As one review put it, there is greater recognition that these are ‘mechanisms or processes that facilitate an integrated approach, not ends in themselves’.⁴⁷

Benchmarking and evaluation. Following early initiatives in Sierra Leone and Liberia, the use of benchmarks to assess the country situation and mandate implementation is now endorsed as a general practice. This has led to a handbook on tools and processes, alongside specialist guidance on indicators for areas like the rule of law and protection of civilians.⁴⁸ In practice uptake remains limited, with evaluation still

⁴⁵ United Nations, ‘Note from the Secretary-General: Guidance on Integrated Missions’, January 2006. This was subsequently updated and revised in 2008, 2011 and 2013.

⁴⁶ Eide EB, Kaspersen AT, Kent R and von Hippel K. ‘Report on Integrated Missions: Practical Perspectives and Recommendations’, Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, 2005, pp20-1.

⁴⁷ de Coning C, ‘The United Nations and the comprehensive approach’, Danish Institute for International Studies, DIIS Report 2008:14, p21.

⁴⁸ United Nations, ‘Peacekeeping operations: Principles and guidelines’, above; United Nations, ‘Integrated assessment and planning handbook’, above. On indicators see United Nations, ‘The United Nations rule of law indicators’, above; United Nations, ‘DPKO/DFS policy: The protection of civilians in United Nations peacekeeping’, Department of Peacekeeping Operations / Department of Field Support, April 2015.

widely regarded as a significant weakness and few specialist resources available for this task at either Headquarters or in the field.⁴⁹

(iii) Periodic strategic review

The principal tool for review and recalibration of deployed peace operations has been the same ‘technical / strategic assessment’) process. Such exercises are sometimes launched on the Secretariat’s own initiative; sometimes at the request of the Security Council prior to renewal of mandates; and occasionally at the request of host governments. The intent is to supplement the standard narrative and financial reports for on-going peace operations with a more holistic look at progress. The resulting analysis then feeds into mission-level decision-making, as well as adaptation of the mandate and budget at the inter-governmental level.

In general, the same complaints and policy adaptations are evident for this use of a ‘strategic assessment’ as for its utilisation at the design phase of new missions, as discussed above. The main additional issue has been the need to respect the delegation of authority to the head of mission in the field, an issue that has frequently been contentious.⁵⁰

2.3 Takeaways

The development of robust approaches to analysis and planning has been difficult, and led to no small amount of heated debate. The advantage for the outside observer is that adjustments over time give a fairly clear indication of where things have gone wrong. Some of these hard-learned lessons are as follows.

Management, not planning. The first few generations of planning guidance envisaged a linear, ‘shoot and forget’ model.⁵¹ According to this philosophy the Secretary-General would issue a directive with strategic objectives; headquarters planners would refine this into a strategy document; and then draft a mission plan to hand over to the incoming head-of-mission.⁵² It rapidly became clear, however, that this was supremely ill-fitted to the operating environment. At the start-up phase, missions had to grapple with complex histories and geographies before

⁴⁹ For a balanced overview see Lipner A and Livingstone A, ‘Impact evaluation and assessment of UN peace operations: What is the state-of-the-art?’, International Forum for the Challenges of Peace Operations, June 2015.

⁵⁰ United Nations, ‘Evaluation of Technical Assessment Missions’, Division of Policy, Evaluation and Training, 2012.

⁵¹ de Coning C, ‘Planning for success’, in Clement C and Smith AC, ‘Meeting note’, in *Managing complexity: Political and managerial challenges in United Nations peace operations*, International Peace Institute, 2009.

⁵² United Nations, ‘Integrated missions planning process’, draft, January 2004; United Nations, ‘Integrated Missions Planning Process (IMPP): Guidelines endorsed by the Secretary-General’, June 2006.

they could define workable approaches to institution-building and protection. Once established, they routinely needed to adjust tasks and resources in the wake of national political and electoral processes, new ceasefires or peace agreements, and major crises.

The result is that the formal process was rarely followed. Recognising this, planning frameworks have been progressively re-conceptualised as ‘a regular reference for an on-going field-based process of joint analysis and review’.⁵³ This process relies on active steering by mission leadership, with the result that management skills have received somewhat greater emphasis in senior appointments and training. The 2015 HIPPO report went still further in calling for a two-stage mandating process, by which a stabilising core presence would deploy and begin to map out mission objectives over the medium term once conditions on the ground became clearer.

Involve political stakeholders. The lion’s share of strategic management properly sits at the field level. It is usually counter-productive to open different channels around a head of mission; or for generalists in New York to countermand managers who are closer to the issues. Yet it is also clear that success in UN peacekeeping depends upon forging common intent with Security Council members, troop contributors, the General Assembly, and other international agencies.

The consequence is a two-level system for strategic management that is ‘painful, but probably essential’, as a 2012 assessment put it.⁵⁴ In this system Headquarters-level teams work to avoid decision-making in the field becoming disconnected from essential political support. This role is particularly important where decisions are needed at the inter-governmental level, as is the case for changes in the mandate (via the Security Council), financial resources (via the General Assembly), or military resources (via troop contributors).

Recognise external dependencies. Early planning models were heavily criticised for a closed, production-type approach that simply did not match up well with an environment comprising many different partners. This led to enormous tensions around the issue of humanitarian space, with fears that peace operations were attempting to dictate how such assistance would be delivered. There were also many notable failures of communication with development agencies, with peacekeeping plans developed in splendid isolation from key processes such as Post-Conflict Needs Assessments (conducted by the international financial institutions) and Fragility Assessments (under the New Deal for Fragile and Conflict-Affected States).

⁵³ United Nations, ‘Integrated assessment and planning handbook’, above, p72.

⁵⁴ United Nations, ‘Evaluation of Technical Assessment Missions’, above.

Later iterations have progressively clarified the scope of ‘integration’ to exclude the humanitarian work of the United Nations, which remains within its conventional channels, and to make more modest demands upon development agencies. This has led to much greater flexibility around the form and timeline of products at country level, in consequence of the greater number of variables that have to be taken into account. Crucially, they have also put more emphasis on soft skills and good process leadership. As one former SRSG has put it, there is no alternative to a patient and participatory approach in a system where key partners report to their own executive boards and funding partners, and where the authority of the Secretary-General is more moral than practical.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Doss A, ‘Squaring the circle – can coherence work?’, UNAMSIL, 2003.

3. Learning infrastructure

3.1 The learning challenge

We have already seen that the rapid growth of multi-dimensional peace operations throughout the first decade of the 2000s presented a steep learning curve. Managers in Sierra Leone and the DRC had to develop viable concepts of operations for the protection of civilians as they went; interim administrations took over day-to-day governance in Timor-Leste and Kosovo with almost no in-house expertise on their politics or history.

There was little alternative to this in the short run, but it was clearly necessary to capture the UN's growing institutional experience and make better use of it. Early needs assessments drove home the point:

- A 2004 survey of field staff found that 50% felt they had to recreate guidance (or 'reinvent the wheel') 'all the time' or 'very often'. Meanwhile 46% said they had received no guidance materials or briefings whatsoever upon starting their current job.⁵⁶
- The first-ever training needs assessment for UN peacekeeping found that just 19% of civilian staff had received pre-deployment training of any kind. Less than half of military personnel who had received pre-deployment training, and less than a third of civilians, felt that such training was useful for their day-to-day jobs.
- Evaluations of early 'multi-dimensional' operations, notably in Timor-Leste and Kosovo, emphasised that personnel deploying into missions had to 'find their own way' without any UN-provided training or guidance.⁵⁷

In response, the incoming Under-Secretary General for the Department of Peacekeeping Operations set out to transform it, in his phrase, into a 'learning organisation'.⁵⁸ The internal 'Peace Operations 2010' reform agenda articulated this to mean a 'strong culture of continuous institutional development and knowledge transfer', with the specific ambition

⁵⁶ United Nations, 'Peacekeeping best practices: Report of the Secretary-General', December 2007, UN Doc A/62/593.

⁵⁷ See e.g. United Nations, 'Lessons learned from United Nations peacekeeping experiences in Sierra Leone', Peacekeeping Best Practices Unit, September 2003, p79; Harland D, 'UN peacekeeping operations in post-conflict Timor-Leste: Accomplishments and lessons learned', Peacekeeping Best Practices Unit, 2005.

⁵⁸ Guéhenno JM, 'The fog of peace', above, p295.

that 'collective experience be captured and put to use each time a new mission is launched or when a mission is expected to engage in new tasks'.⁵⁹

Realising this ambition required confronting some hard realities. First and foremost was the heavily decentralised nature of UN peace operations. The starting point for learning initiatives had to be an acknowledgment that accumulated knowledge and practices were overwhelmingly to be found in the field. This meant that the primary 'value add' of Headquarters involvement, at least at the early stages, would be to help capture and transfer that experience. Steps beyond this to generate common approaches and policies had to be cautious ones, given the many differences between individual peace operations and the environments that they worked in. Stated otherwise, the organisation had to keep in balance 'thematic' expertise on common peacekeeping tasks (discussed in Part 1 of this paper) with the acknowledged primacy of country-specific strategy (discussed in Part 2).

The second and closely related point was the very limited human resources capacity at UN Headquarters. In 2000 the Brahimi report found a Headquarters presence that accounted for a scant two percent of the total cost of UN peacekeeping. This inevitably meant that priority was given to operational needs, with staff not 'able to do more than keep existing missions afloat'. To take two notable examples in the early 2000s, the ratio of personnel in Criminal Law and Judicial Support Unit to their counterparts in the field was about 1:200; and the comparable ratio for the Police Division's Policy and Planning Unit was 1:2000.⁶⁰ Given that both units had responsibilities for planning and recruitment, they were fully occupied by the rapid-fire deployment and draw-down of peace operations during the early 2000s. Other potential contributors, notably the small Policy Analysis and Best Practices Unit, had fared no better for resources, and were likewise fully occupied with day-to-day demands.⁶¹

A third obstacle to a genuine 'learning organisation' was perhaps the most intractable. As one comprehensive review has put it, any such initiative was 'fragile because of extreme turnover – on average, civilian staff stay for less than four years while military and police personnel are generally on six- to twelve-month deployments'.⁶² This posed enormous practical difficulties for training and on-the-job develop-

⁵⁹ United Nations, 'Overview of the financing of the United Nations peacekeeping operations: Report of the Secretary-General', February 2006, UN Doc A/60/696.

⁶⁰ Rotmann P, 'First steps towards a police doctrine for UN peace operations (2001-2006)', IPES/DCAF, October 2009; Benner T et al, 'The new world of UN peace operations', above, ch 4.

⁶¹ United Nations, 'Peacekeeping best practices: Report of the Secretary-General', December 2007, UN Doc A/62/593.

⁶² Benner et al, 'The New world of UN peace operations', above, p35.

ment; and limited the incentives for staff to themselves contribute to the institutional knowledge base.

3.2 Managerial responses

Over time, the ambition to become a ‘learning organisation’ has been supported by three complementary lines of effort:

(i) Headquarters policy capacity

From the rather low starting point of 2000, there are now a number of policy teams that help identify and disseminate good practices, develop organisation-wide policy guidance, and provide technical backstopping to colleagues in the field. Among the more important are:

- The Office of Rule of Law and Security Institutions, established in 2007. This includes specialist staffing for judicial support; security sector reform; corrections; and disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration.
- Teams within the Peacekeeping Best Practices Service for thematic areas such as Civil Affairs, the protection of civilians, and gender.
- Some reinvigoration of the policy functions of the Police Division (within OROLSI) and the Military Planning Service (within the Office of the Military advisor).
- A small team on overall planning for peace operations, although this is widely acknowledged as a continuing weakness.

The gradual evolution of the work of these units has been summarised in Part 1, above. It is important to note that in most cases they are embedded in forums to help gather inter-departmental and external perspectives, such as the Rule of Law Coordination and Resource Group; and the Integrated Assessment and Planning Working Group.

(ii) Peer-peer knowledge sharing

There has been a considerable drive to capture and disseminate knowledge and practices closer to their points of origin in the field. One notable early initiative was the ‘knowledge toolbox’ comprising models for end-of-assignment-reports; after-action-reviews; handover notes; and surveys of practice.⁶³ This was accompanied by the deployment of a dedicated Best Practices Officer into larger missions and part-time focal points into smaller ones, as service providers to help capture experiences and to gather relevant lessons learned from other operations. Over time this has led to a modest library available to staff via an online

⁶³ Explained in United Nations, ‘Peacekeeping best practices: Report of the Secretary-General’, December 2007, UN Doc A/62/593.

Resource Hub. An additional enabling tool are the online ‘communities of practice’, organised by thematic area and with a staff member acting as (part-time) facilitator. These forums aim to provide advice on a real-time basis via a direct question-and-answer format.

The level of utilisation of these knowledge-sharing processes has varied significantly between different thematic areas and peace operations, depending on occupational cultures and the skills of facilitators. (Areas like political and civil affairs, in which drafting and reporting already play central roles, have been the most fruitful; areas like civilian policing much less so.) The products of the ‘knowledge toolbox’ have also been skewed heavily towards senior staff, where in-mission Best Practices staff has tended to prioritise their support.

Later UN policy has tried to broaden uptake by exhorting managers to create a ‘conducive environment’ for staff to spend time and energy on knowledge-sharing, and directing them to incorporate this criterion into staff performance assessments. It has also instructed staff to begin ‘any new significant activity’ with an examination of existing practice; and to mandatorily conduct after-action reviews for certain activities and events.⁶⁴

(iii) ‘On-boarding’ training

It is widely recognised that peacekeeping training remains under-developed. The main steps have been the formation of the Headquarters-level Integrated Training Service; and global needs assessments in 2008-09 and 2012-13 to examine how this office should orient its work.⁶⁵ Both have focused, due to very limited resources, on the points at which personnel enter into service in individual peace operations. Measures in this regard have included:

- Delivery of pre-deployment training for civilian personnel; and of induction training for both civilian and uniformed personnel. This has focused on ‘cross-cutting’ short-course programmes delivered in common for all staff.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ United Nations, ‘Policy: Knowledge sharing and organizational learning’, Department of Peacekeeping Operations / Department of Field Support, October 2015.

⁶⁵ United Nations, ‘Report on the strategic peacekeeping training needs assessment’, DPKO / DFS, October 2008; United Nations, ‘Global peacekeeping training needs assessment: final report 2012-2013’, Department of Peacekeeping Operations / Department of Field Support, 2012.

⁶⁶ United Nations, ‘Report of the Secretary-General: Report on the progress of training in peacekeeping’, January 2009: UN Doc A/63/680; United Nations, ‘Report of the Secretary-General: Report on the progress of training in peacekeeping’, December 2010, UN Doc A/65/644. See also United Nations, ‘Core Pre-Deployment Training Materials’, Department of Peacekeeping Operations / Department of Field Support, 2009; United Nations, ‘United Nations peacekeeping operations: An introduction’, 2013, via UN Knowledge Campus (portals.unssc.org).

- Materials and advice for pre-deployment training by member states who provide military contingents and formed police units. (The General Assembly has urged ‘coherence and a common view of responsibilities’, but stopped short of endorsing the idea of mandatory common standards.⁶⁷) There has also been some institutional collaboration with the International Association of Peacekeeping Training Centres.
- Development of a limited range of specialised training courses on topics including child protection; tactical-level protection of civilians; and military command-and control.
- Several dedicated courses for incoming senior managers, comprising the Senior Leadership Programme and the SMART programme for mission support functions. An additional course for potential leadership appointments (the SML programme) is delivered through a number of different providers.

Training beyond this – notably professional education and leadership development – remains the responsibility of individual managers. However the budgets for this purpose are small, and the results to date limited.⁶⁸

3.3 Takeaways

The UN Secretariat operates in a perhaps uniquely complex management environment. The consequence is that building up its learning infrastructure was a gradual, and carefully negotiated, process. Two particular lessons bear emphasis.

The first is the need for good **stakeholder engagement**. The expanded ambitions that the Security Council began to define for peace operations from 1999 onwards did not enjoy universal support, and tensions between the Council and the member states of the General Assembly frequently played out through the budgetary process.

This was particularly evident for sensitive areas such as judicial and security sector reform, which touched directly upon core sovereign responsibilities.⁶⁹ It took three annual budget cycles to get two policy

⁶⁷ United Nations, ‘Report of the Special Committee on peacekeeping operations’, September 2012, UN Doc A/66/19; United Nations, ‘Core pre-deployment training materials’, Division of Policy, Evaluation and Training, 2009.

⁶⁸ See inter alia United Nations, ‘Strengthening and coordinating United Nations rule of law activities: Report of the Secretary-General’, August 2008, UN Doc A/63/226; Jones B, Pascual C, and Stedman SJ, ‘Power and Responsibility: Building International Order in an Era of Transnational Threats’, Brookings Institution Press, 2009; United Nations, ‘Civilian capacity in the aftermath of conflict: Independent report of the senior advisory group’, February 2011, UN Doc A/65/747; Benner et al, ch 8.

⁶⁹ Benner et al, ‘The new world of UN peace operations’, above, ch 5.

staff in place for rule of law institutions; and three more before the policy products discussed in Part 1 began to flow in earnest. Throughout this process the Secretariat's top leadership played a very active role in consulting with member states and pressing the agenda forward. A first major step included a Report of the Secretary-General in 2004 on the Rule of Law and Transitional Justice which defined the scope of peace operations' work and what key policy products would eventually look like. This was followed by the negotiation of a paragraph endorsing strengthened Secretariat capacity in this area in the outcome document of the 2005 World Summit (involving some 170 member states).⁷⁰

Conversely, there are many examples of policy initiatives that failed, or were heavily delayed, due to inadequate consultation. Part 2 of this paper has already provided a cautionary tale in this regard. Early iterations of policy guidance for strategic planning were developed in-house with scant consultation. They almost immediately ran into resistance from UN agencies, funds and programmes, and on occasion from host-country governments. Member states meanwhile remained unconvinced, and declined to support additional budgeted posts for professional planners at Headquarters. The net result is that rollout remained limited, with a little correspondence between formal policy requirements and practice in the field.

A second lesson is that the UN's learning infrastructure has gradually evolved into a **network effort**. The efforts of the two principal departments (Peacekeeping and Field Support) have been heavily supplemented by:

- Input into the training programmes of member states providing military, police and civilian personnel, and support to third-party training institutes via the IAPTC network (noted above).
- Utilisation of outside think tanks as external repositories of UN peacekeeping experience. These institutions have provided frequent original research and occasional drafting support; facilitated exchanges between peacekeeping staff and subject-matter experts on high-priority topics; and hosted many senior officials for reflection and writing after their tenure with the UN had come to an end.⁷¹

⁷⁰ United Nations, 'Report of the Secretary-General: The rule of law and transitional justice in conflict and post-conflict societies', August 2004, UN Doc S/2004/616; United Nations, '2005 World Summit Outcome', September 2005, UN Doc A/60/L.1

⁷¹ A partial list includes the Henry L. Stimson Center; International Peace Institute; the Centre on International Cooperation; the Geneva Center for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces; the African Center for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes (ACCORD), the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs; and more recently the International Forum for the Challenges of Peace Operations.

- Reliance on financial contributions from individual member states to underwrite policy development in specific areas. This has allowed the Secretariat to tap outside expertise on a contract basis.

Use of joint working groups and planning teams to tap institutional memory and expertise of other agencies within the UN system, and to a lesser extent the international financial institutions.

Conclusion

UN peacekeeping's overarching learning challenge from 2000-15 can be summarised very simply: getting better at multidimensional operations. The huge jump in size and complexity from the operation in Angola to that in the Congo now reflects the 'new normal', with similar approaches tried in Sierra Leone, Kosovo, Timor-Leste, Liberia, Cote d'Ivoire, Haiti, and a half-dozen other crises. In the early years, managers found themselves scrambling to meet new and unfamiliar demands, with the Brahimi Report's warning that previous peace operations had 'repeatedly failed' lurking in the background.

What practical advice can we glean from this hard-won experience, for other organisations engaged in peacekeeping and peacebuilding? What lessons are there for the UN itself, with expectations for its operations now expanding to encompass the aggressive use of force and suppressing violent extremism?

A first point, and a fundamental one, concerns **where to focus**. This paper has organised a great number of different initiatives under three broad lines of effort, with the aim of underlining the fact that these must be kept in balance. To quickly recapitulate:

- System-level learning was essential for tasks that were, apart from anything else, *new to the organisation*. An early focus on 'best practices' had to give way to the recognition that what worked for peace operations was often very unclear, or very controversial.
- Mission-level learning does *not* happen automatically. The HIPPO report's strongest recommendation was that 'politics must have primacy'. This underlined the need for a flexible management model that responded effectively to the context, rather than relying on Headquarters-led formal planning.
- Dedicated resources for learning are indispensable. Peace operations are by their nature crisis-driven. It is easy for operational pressures to crowd out attention to learning, and this has happened over long periods at both country-level and system-level.

Within each of these lines of effort, there is also important learning on **how to execute**. In formulating policy goals such as the 'learning organisation', or integrated mission planning, the UN drew overtly on models from other sectors and presumed global 'best practices'. Yet

these ran almost immediately into some rather unyielding realities of the UN's environment, namely:

- Complex stakeholder relationships. Peace operations depend for their success upon the alignment of host-country interlocutors, interested foreign governments, and inter-governmental institutions. Approaches that could not attract widespread support in this environment were unviable, whatever their paper merits.
- A unique operating model. 'What worked' could only be determined with reference to the UN's highly particular systems for assessed funding; for sourcing civilian and military personnel; and for coordinating with its specialised agencies.

In these two senses, the takeaways noted in previous sections reflect progressive adjustments to 'how things work around here'. These adjustments usually occurred after fierce criticism of early initiatives from practitioners in the field, from key political stakeholders, and from external experts. Taken as a whole, they sketch the path that the UN muddled along towards 'best-fit' approaches for its particular circumstances.

All this sounds daunting – and it is. There is no avoiding the fact that UN peacekeeping is at the upper end of difficulty for organisational learning, as for many other management challenges. This leads us to a third and final observation, about **sequencing and prioritisation**. On this point opinions must vary, yet there are two facts worth bearing in mind.

The first is that the natural centre of gravity for innovation is in the field. Mission staff outnumber their Headquarters counterparts by about 100:1; and moreover are under everyday pressure to solve practical problems. As a result, practice has consistently run a long way ahead of doctrine.⁷² The second fact is that this same apparatus is perhaps uniquely vulnerable to forgetting innovations. Peace operations are 'temporary and ad hoc by nature, contracts are often short term, training opportunities are limited, and, consequently, staff turnover is high'.⁷³

The policy consequence follows: The perfect may be the enemy of the good. The conceptual barriers are very high for doctrinal clarity on issues like early peacebuilding and international protection of civilians.

⁷² Mateja P, 'Between doctrine and practice: The UN peacekeeping dilemma', *Global Governance*, 21:351-70, 2015.

⁷³ Clement C and Smith AC, 'Meeting note', in *Managing complexity: Political and managerial challenges in United Nations peace operations*, International Peace Institute, 2009.

As one early enthusiast of current approaches to peacekeeping exit strategy admitted in a *mea culpa* some years later:⁷⁴

Too often ... problems are misdiagnosed as coordination failures because they manifest themselves, superficially, as disorderliness or ineffectiveness in the field, whereas in fact they reflect deeper frustrations, tensions and uncertainties in the enterprise.

Efforts to manage these tensions and uncertainties are at the edge of innovation in international development circles, and within inter-governmental processes like the International Dialogue on Peacebuilding and Statebuilding. It is not easy to keep abreast of such trends, let alone train widely dispersed staff to do likewise. Yet there are plenty of practical steps that do not require this. UN Peacekeeping has made considerable headway over the last fifteen years in clarifying its recurring tasks, how they have been approached in the past, and where peace operations' comparative advantages actually lie. This has permitted, in turn, the articulation of minimum standards and the dissemination of practical tools across a number of key areas. These are innovations can be replicated with considerable benefit of hindsight, and with rapid impact for practitioners in the field.

⁷⁴ Paris R and Sisk T, 'The dilemmas of statebuilding: Confronting the contradictions of post-war peace operations', Routledge, 2008, p54.



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