

Sustaining Peace through Community Engagement in Peacekeeping Operations¹

1. The Importance of community engagement

The primacy of political solutions for international peace and security questions has been continually reiterated: from the 2015 HIPPO report to the 2018 Declaration of Shared Commitments under the Action for Peacekeeping initiative, both national and sub-national political solutions are at the core of any UN strategy to bring peace to countries affected by conflict.

Moreover, there is widespread recognition that the sustainability of such political solutions is dependent on their inclusivity as this is required to generate a shared societal agreement about what peace means and what it entails. In the words of Security Council Resolution 2282 (2016): “sustaining peace’ [...] should be broadly understood as a goal and a process to build a common vision of a society, ensuring that the needs of all segments of the population are taken into account”.

This cannot be simply achieved through top-down approaches, such as through formalizing elite bargains and brokering power-sharing agreements, as these have been proven to be short-lived in the absence of broader buy-in. Therefore, community engagement – understood not as the mere first step of outreach, but as an actual process of inclusion in decision-making - lies very much at the heart of the concept of sustaining peace. Therefore, it is not surprising that the HIPPO also determined it to be such an important theme in its review of the effectiveness of UN peace operations, insisting on more people-centred and field-focused UN peace operations.

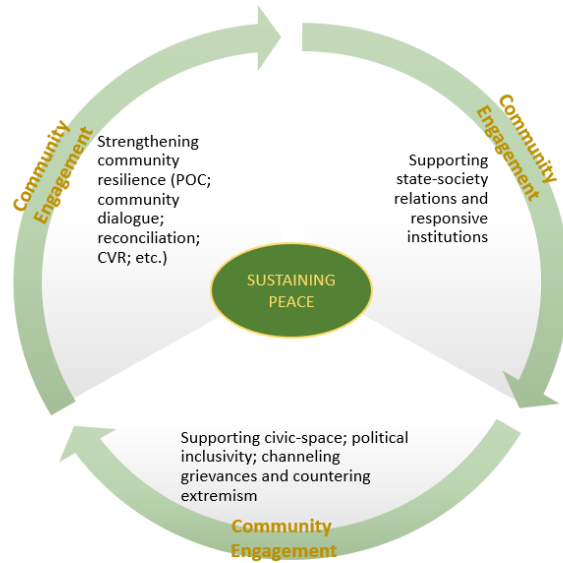
Indeed, peacekeeping missions conduct community engagement activities as a means of achieving their mandates and promoting sustainable peace. This paper will review some of the ways in which peacekeepers have been contributing to sustaining peace by engaging with local stakeholders to support inclusivity, resilience, accountability and local ownership.

2. Peacekeeping and community engagement

Community engagement in peacekeeping is not an end in and of itself. It is a means of achieving and promoting increased inclusiveness and resilience in communities that have lived through repeated cycles of violence with limited participation in societal agreement. A 2018 DPKO Practice Note on Community Engagement noted how peacekeeping missions engaged communities to implement a broad range of mandated tasks including improving situational awareness, protection of civilians strategies, supporting inclusive political processes, monitoring the violation of human rights, strengthening the legitimacy of state institutions and fostering the effective implementation of disarmament, demobilization and reintegration activities. Some of these initiatives are undertaken to improve the responsiveness of the UN peacekeeping mission while others are directly related to the strategic objectives of the mission. However,

¹ This paper has been developed by DPO/DPET with contributions from other DPO offices and is focused on peacekeeping practices on community engagement and the way these contribute to sustaining peace.

when undertaken as part of a deliberate strategic vision and through integrated interventions, community engagement activities have contributed to sustaining peace through three broad ranges of interventions: a) supporting community-based mechanisms to address threats to civilians that increase community resilience; b) promoting inclusive processes that can best address the roots of societal grievances, including by supporting the reintegration of former combatants and countering narratives that capitalize on disenfranchisement to breed extremism and radicalization; c) supporting opportunities and avenues for dialogue between state authorities and local populations to promote institutional responsiveness and accountability.



Before reviewing the various ways peacekeeping missions contribute to sustaining peace through community engagement, it is useful to review some of the approaches used to conduct this kind of work.

3. Approaches to community engagement

Community Liaison Assistants (CLAs): CLAs are Civil Affairs-managed national staff deployed alongside uniformed components which are vital to bridging cultural divides and gaps in trust by improving communication between local communities and the Force. They provide a unique insight into how to improve mission efforts through enhanced situational awareness and are best suited to facilitate cohesion and reconciliation initiatives. In MONUSCO, for instance, CLAs conduct a number of activities such as developing relationships with community focal points, facilitating inter-communal dialogue and improving the mission’s ability to communicate information about its mandate and ongoing efforts.

Community Alert Networks (CANs): provide a continuous flow of updates in real time via telephone or in person regarding the situation on the ground by allowing civilians to report suspicious activity and imminent and ongoing conflicts to the mission directly. The information is directed to focal points selected by community members or identified by CLAs. It is important to note that “Do No Harm” safeguards have been put in place to ensure CANs do not negatively impact the focal point or the community. The invaluable information provided by CANs is passed to the military component who can then either respond to ongoing conflicts in a timely and strategic manner or conduct preventive action which can effectively protect civilians without the use of force.

Quick Impact Projects (QIPs) are small-scale, low-cost initiatives that are designed to address pressing community needs in order to build confidence in the mission’s mandate and the peace process as a whole. While only a tool to serve a more comprehensive political strategy by peacekeeping missions to sustain peace, QIPs also allow local NGOs and community-based organizations to contribute to the process by conceiving and implementing initiatives that contribute to community empowerment and resilience.

Community Violence Reduction (CVR)² consists of programmes implemented by Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) sections in peacekeeping, with the aim of preventing recruitment into armed groups and reducing violence at the community level in ongoing armed conflicts or in post-conflict environments. CVR is implemented in support of and as a complement to, DDR processes, through a flexible, bottom-up and cost-effective approach to find solutions to causes of armed violence from within, and explicitly targets youth at risk of recruitment by armed groups in addition to ex-combatants. CVR generates peace dividends and addresses immediate community needs including mobilizing and empowering women to ensure their meaningful participation in the design, planning and implementation of activities.

Community-oriented policing helps enhance public trust in the police and other law enforcement agencies. Missions, in partnership with host Governments, work to establish and strengthen protective environments in order to prevent the emergence of threats and build capacity to re-establish the rule of law. For instance, in 2019, UN Police conducted a series of trainings on community policing for their South Sudanese counterparts in the greater Lakes region with the aim of improving relations between the police and the civilian population. Similarly, MINUSMA began supporting the Malian security forces in community-oriented policing with a view to rebuild confidence, address security concerns and prevent crime, while UNAMID engaged with the Sudanese police to develop and build its capacity on community-oriented policing for the security of internally displaced persons at the national, regional and state levels.

Risk education and victim assistance: Establishing networks of mine action partners at the local level helps to strengthen the resilience and capacities of communities in mitigating the impact of explosive threats. As an example, mine action community liaison teams are deployed in central and northern Mali to deliver risk education messages, conduct surveys to confirm explosive contamination, and identify focal points to refer victims of explosive incidents.

Community-Level Justice: Mission Rule of Law sections conduct activities both access to and delivery of justice at the community level in order to bring justice to remote and insecure areas. Such activities include: the establishment of rural courts; public information campaigns to enhance understanding of and demand for justice at the local level, and the facilitations of citizens' access to legal service, including alternative dispute resolution mechanisms.

4. Contributing to sustaining peace at the grass-roots level

a) Strengthening community resilience and local ownership

Structured and consistent community engagement has been part of effective peacekeeping strategies to address threats to civilian populations whether they originate from armed groups or as a result of intercommunal violence. UN peacekeeping missions have implemented several different tools to this end, but one common feature has been to promote the establishment of local community committees at the village level, which not only play an early warning role but, most importantly, one of threat analysis and of initiating mitigating measures that may include dialogue with potential perpetrators or between communities in the aftermath of incidents.

² UN-DPO, Community Violence Reduction: Creating Space for Peace (2017) <https://peacekeeping.un.org/sites/default/files/ddr-and-cvr-creating-space-for-peace.pdf>

The introduction in 2009 of Community Liaison Assistants (CLAs) in some of the largest and more challenging peacekeeping settings has brought missions closer to communities and enabled them to play an important role in supporting communities to strengthen or develop local mechanisms that allow them to better appreciate and address their security needs.

A good example of how missions engage local communities through CLAs in order to set up community-based early warning mechanisms is when in September 2019, in the Central African Republic, community alert networks informed MINUSCA about rising inter-ethnic tensions in the aftermath of violent local clashes between the “Le Front Populaire pour la Renaissance de Centrafrique ” (FPRC) and “Mouvement des Libérateurs Centrafricains pour la Justice” (MLCJ). As a consequence, MINUSCA was able to prevent tensions from escalating through increased and targeted joint patrols by police and military components along with CLAs.

In Liberia, UNMIL supported the establishment and operationalization of fifteen County and District Security Councils across Liberia as early warning response mechanisms and forum to manage local security concerns. The sub-national level councils provide situational security information to the National Security Council. Efforts to address local conflicts are even more emblematic of how peacekeeping can contribute both to supporting processes that create the conditions for sustainable peace and to developing local capacities that can support peace efforts more effectively. These efforts cannot be limited to the communities but must also include local and national authorities and civil society actors in order to further strengthen the virtuous cycles of responsiveness and accountability within the host country.

For instance, in 2018, UNMISS organized an intercommunal dialogue in Renk County to foster cohesion and communication between locals and returning IDPs and refugees. Fifty participants including women, youth, elders and traditional and county authorities attended and agreed that national identity should take precedence over ethnic and tribal identity. The different groups agreed to participate in each other’s cultural events and to allow intermarriage. These locally led forums have generated interest and enthusiasm and have facilitated land dispute resolution as well as reconciliation. At the same time, they also reinforce the role of traditional authorities in communal conflict management which, in turn, strengthens the community’s capacity to resolve such conflicts in the future should the need arise once the mission has drawn down.

b) Promoting inclusive processes and space for dialogue

Strengthening local capacities for conflict resolution and reconciliation is an important step towards sustainable peace, but local political solutions are limited and vulnerable to national dynamics and, in the absence of a viable and comprehensive political settlement, relapse into conflict is always a risk. Supporting the engagement of local stakeholders, and especially those that are typically marginalized or even excluded, in political peace process represents a fundamental step towards broader inclusivity, durable peace, joint leadership and stronger legitimacy of the proposed solutions.

In this regard, peacekeeping missions play an important overall role in advocating for the inclusion of a broad spectrum of voices such as women and youth and other segments of society that have been traditionally excluded from national processes, be they peace discussions, national dialogue and reconciliation or electoral and security sector reform processes. More specifically, peacekeeping missions – along with other local and international partners – can be credited for advancing the agenda of women and youth inclusion in political processes and the crucial role played by women in peacebuilding. For

example, UNMISS facilitated women's forums on peace and reconciliation across South Sudan in support of the establishment of women's platforms that could advance their role in promoting peace and reconciliation at the grassroots level. One such example was a two-day forum facilitated by UNMISS in February 2018 on negotiation and peacebuilding for 89 women from the Bentiu Protection of Civilians (POC) site and Rubkona and Bentiu towns.

In 2019 in the Central African Republic, MINUSCA supported local peace process activities, such as intercommunity dialogue and sensitization sessions for community leaders, which engaged over 7,000 individuals, including 2,870 women. Women's organizations were specifically targeted to increase their ability to engage in conflict mitigation, local mediation and dialogue initiatives. Efforts by peacekeeping missions to build trust among local authorities and women and youth representatives undoubtedly contributed to give more legitimacy and prominence to their engagement in peace processes, as in the case of Grimari, where women were critical in consolidating the local peace process. Moreover, working in partnership with the African Union, MINUSCA also supported four national women's Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) to conduct workshops in eight locations in the country to gauge women's perceptions and expectations after the Khartoum agreement.

Similarly, UNAMID has been supporting inclusive and participatory peace negotiations of marginalized communities such as women, youth and IDPs from conflict-affected areas through forums, development of position papers and direct participation in negotiations.

In December 2015, the Security Council adopted the landmark resolution 2250 (2015) on youth, peace and security recognizing youth as positive agents of peace in peacebuilding processes. The findings of the 2015 resolution contrasted the previous emphasis on their nuisance potential when disenfranchised and on responses almost exclusively oriented towards generating job opportunities, while ignoring the demand for increased empowerment and participation in societal life.

A good example of peacekeeping contributions to advancing the Youth, Peace and Security agenda comes from Mali where, in 2018 and 2019, MINUSMA and the governmental reconciliation teams (*Equipes régionales d'appui à la réconciliation* - ERARs) conducted 60 community dialogues for 2,400 people in Kidal, Timbuktu, Taoudénit, Gao, Ménaka, and Mopti. The dialogues aimed to strengthen community engagement and protection mechanisms as well as enhance the resilience of vulnerable communities through reconciliation, mediation and support to conflict resolution, and the promotion of socio-economic and cultural empowerment of youth to prevent youth recruitment by armed element groups.

Moreover, in March 2019, in an effort to promote social cohesion in Malakal, UNMISS organized a conflict management and reconciliation workshop for youth from different ethnic groups from the Malakal POC site and Malakal town, after which the youth agreed to carry out regular exchange visits as a way of promoting peaceful coexistence. In another example, MONUSCO conducted 57 sensitization campaigns and 31 capacity building sessions between July and December 2018 aimed at CSOs, particularly youth and women organizations. These efforts focused on sharing good practices to allow for peaceful elections, tolerance and non-violent communication as well as advance inclusive democratic governance. The initiatives were mainly conducted in the more populated urban areas of Kinshasa, Goma and Lubumbashi.

Admittedly, most peacekeeping work on youth remains focused on mitigating the risks of youth engagement in violent activities by promoting material incentives and employment opportunities, but also by improving the overall living conditions of communities, thus contributing to increased levels of confidence in the peace process. For instance, MINUSCA, UNDP and IOM have worked together in the

Central African Republic on community violence reduction programmes designed to complement the formal DDR programme and “provide an occupation to vulnerable and at high-risk youth that are not participating in the DDR programme” by providing temporary employment and other income-generation opportunities while simultaneously sensitizing youth on social cohesion, reconciliation and human rights.

From 2015 to 2019, the DDR-CVR Section in MINUSTAH and MINUJUSTH implemented 44 initiatives (activities and projects) reaching 12,211 youths as direct beneficiaries. In addition, the Section implemented 30 public outreach activities in communities. In Haiti, MINUSTAH and then MINUJUSTH implemented five community violence reduction (CVR) projects involving 1,520 youth to promote community-based decision-making processes through capacity building initiatives and participatory approaches. These projects resulted in the increased participation of youth in focus groups and community dialogue as well as in conflict management and citizen engagement actions, including school crossing guards and youth clubs for peace.

Often misunderstood as a method for peacekeeping missions to simply inform communities about the scope of its mandate or as a means of gathering information to improve its situational awareness, peacekeeping community engagement is also a means of promoting the active participation of unheard voices at the grassroots level to national political processes.

In this regard, in November 2019, UNMISS undertook a remarkable initiative in South Sudan working with local intellectuals, civil society and international actors such as UNDP and Finn Church Aid. The initiative aimed to support the implementation of the peace agreement and help raise awareness on the aspirations of grassroots stakeholders to achieve peace across South Sudan through the organization of a three-day grassroots forum called “Our Peace Forum”. The forum’s goal was to strengthen the link between subnational and national actors in the peace process and formulate national-level policy recommendations on key issues affecting peace at the local level. The forum was attended by 73 participants including 33 women representatives of various political parties, traditional and religious leaders, women and youth groups, human rights activists, civil society members and IDPs.

The forum ended with the adoption of a communique which called for the signatories of the R-ARCSS to remain committed to the peace process and ensure promotion of unity and inclusivity and urged the parties to resolve the outstanding issues in a timely manner, including those related to security arrangements and state boundaries. It also called on the government to promote human rights and accountability, widen civic space and conduct comprehensive disarmament across the country. In return, political leaders present at the forum urged the delegates to mobilize communities in their respective states to promote social cohesion among conflicted communities.

c) Supporting accountability and responsiveness of state actors

Strengthening capacities and resilience as well as promoting inclusivity are all ultimately intended to create a stronger bond between the state and its citizens in order to reinforce the social contract and enhance the responsiveness and accountability of state institutions, and local authorities. Peacekeeping missions have a particular opportunity to bring communities closer to their authorities and institutions in conflict affected settings where trust between the two has been eroded and the legitimacy of the latter is often disputed. By working simultaneously with the government and local authorities, as well as civil society and local communities peacekeeping missions have often bridged the gap between the institutions and the population in ways that contribute to sustaining peace.

For instance, in Mali in 2018, MINUSMA provided support to more than 150 CSOs working on State reform and democratic processes, as well as for the implementation of the Peace Agreement. In collaboration with the *Forum des Organisations de la Société Civile* (FOOSC), civil society capacity building workshops were organized in Mopti, Gao, Segou, Ménaka, Kidal, Timbuktu and Taoudénit to strengthen their capacity in conflict resolution and monitoring public policies. On the implementation of the Peace Agreement, regular exchanges between locally elected officials and civil society were organized to monitor the decentralization process, with a focus on the participation of young people and women in the implementation of the Peace Agreement and on the challenges to be met for their active commitment. In this regard, seven observatories to monitor the Peace Agreement were created in Mopti, Segou, Gao, Kidal, Timbuktu, Taoudénit and Ménaka. Each observatory is comprised of at least 21 organizations. A diverse, representative and well-organized civil society can contribute to the monitoring of peace agreements through a credibility stemming from their status as non-partisan stakeholders, and a claim to be directly involved in sustaining peace.

In the Central African Republic in 2019, MINUSCA supported local authorities by enhancing their capacities in the management of their administration, in their role in the protection of civilians and in their contribution to the peace process. Through said support, 329 chiefs, including 90 women chiefs of villages were trained in management and conflict resolution.

A particularly sensitive area of state-society relations in conflict-affected settings is usually the security sector. In the context of heightened ethnic tensions in Ituri (DRC) between the Hema and the Lendu community and the perceptions that the national security forces were not acting impartially during the conflict, MONUSCO initiated dialogue sessions with the conflicting communities in Djugu and facilitated a training for traditional leaders on conflict management from 2018 to 2019, followed by community consultation meetings for the Lendu, Hema and Alur groups. These initial activities resulted in establishing a “roadmap for peace,” including a trust-building meeting between Lendu leaders and the Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (FARDC) to express their concerns and expectations and organize peaceful coexistence campaigns across Djugu. The roadmap also led to a trust-building workshop for Lendu community leaders, provincial security service providers (FARDC and PNC) and local authorities to discuss issues of ill-treatment, lack of distinction between assailants and civilians, and alleged exactions by the FARDC.

Furthermore, a mission was jointly carried out by FARDC, the Congolese National Police (PNC), Lendu community leaders and government authorities to conduct similar confidence-building meetings and peace sensitization campaigns in Lendu villages. The combined efforts of the local government, national forces, traditional and community leaders and MONUSCO strengthened confidence amongst all actors, leaving concrete positive impacts, such as: improved cooperation between civilians and the security forces; a lull in recorded incidents against civilians; the return of some Lendu IDPs to their villages, as well as the beginning of interaction between Hema and Lendu in some villages. The press statement encouraged FARDC to continue to operate with impartiality and recommended transparency from authorities in relation to land management, as well as for the provincial authorities to establish a “Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

Furthermore, MONUSCO’s prosecutor support programme and partners support the Congolese authorities to conduct community level investigations as well as support victim and witness support/assistance, particularly for cases of conflict related sexual violence in remote and insecure areas where atrocities have been committed and courts do not function or exist. This has resulted in the conviction of over 1,090

perpetrators since 2011, including senior-level officers for crimes against humanity and war crimes. Important cases concluded in 2019 included the conviction of “Kokodikoko”, leader of Raïa Mutomboki armed group, for crimes against humanity including by murder, rape, torture, sexual slavery committed in South Kivu in 2018 and the conviction of 55 individuals of crimes against humanity by murder, looting, mutilation, torture, and rape, in Djugu. While UNAMID through the State Liaison Functions trained over 3500 criminal justice professionals, civil society and community leaders of which 23 percent are women, who contribute to community-driven oversight and coordination mechanisms on criminal justice and trial monitoring. Rural courts supported by UNAMID are increasingly more effectively in resolving and managing intercommunal disputes and other conflict drivers with over 2000 cases being resolved yearly.

UNSOS’s Mine Action Service contributes towards the extension of state authority by deploying CLOs to assess villages and identify explosive hazards, community needs and impacted public facilities and educates communities on the dangers of explosive ordnance. Such initiatives a crucial in ensuring emergency response to conflict affected communities and rebuilding state linked infrastructure through quick impact projects.

In September 2019, UNMISS facilitated a day-long roundtable discussion between local youth and recently deployed members of security forces (SSPDF) in Bor Town to ease growing tensions between the two after allegations of brutality and extortion acts by elements of the SSPDF. The roundtable was chaired by the state Ministry of Local Government and Law Enforcement who played a key role in mobilizing participants and generating increased appreciation of the need to develop collaborative relations to improve the overall security situation in Bor.

The examples above illustrate the important contribution UN peacekeeping operations make through community engagement to sustain peace in the countries they are deployed in. Over the years, peacekeeping has introduced additional tools to improve their community engagement approaches and there has also been a growing sense of awareness among different components and senior leaders in missions that community engagement, should not be just the by-product of outreach activities and “winning hearts and minds” activities, but a critical and necessary element of mandate implementation.

In this regard, additional efforts are required to bring community engagement closer to analytical, planning and decision-making processes in peacekeeping contexts. Furthermore, deliberate efforts by mission leadership are also required in order to develop coherent whole-of-mission strategies to engage local stakeholders to ensure a stronger alignment between the imperatives of the mandate and the specific political circumstances of the host country with the needs, concerns and priorities of the local population.