

Humanitarian panel on UN peacekeeping missions

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This panel was part of a conference of Stichting Nationaal Vrijheidskwartier and Wageningen University & Research 'Myths and Realities of (Dutch) Peacekeeping'

Summary report

About the panel

Many humanitarian programs interact with UN peace missions, or with the broader UN framework within which peace missions also take place. This raises questions about cooperation and compatibility of objectives, and dilemmas and opportunities that arise. What are the experiences of dealing with conflicting or aligning humanitarian and military dimensions? How do humanitarian actors view the future of peace missions, and the roles of the UN and themselves within that future? This panel explored how NGOs reflect on previous or ongoing peacekeeping missions.

A study by Oxfam on UN Peacekeeping missions in CAR, DRC, Mali and South Sudan found that the missions have played a significant role in reducing insecurity and, to an extent, have brought stability. Still, dysfunction challenges their legitimacy and effectiveness. Communities in areas where peacekeeping missions are active sometimes consider the missions to be poorly contextualised, to lack sensitivity to conflict dynamics, and to exclude communities from involvement and consultations. In addition, some withdrawals were sudden and lacked a proper exit strategy, leaving mission areas in a vacuum where instability and insecurity increased among vulnerable groups. But not all peace missions are the same: each mission has its own focus, methods, and mandates, which also evolve over time.

Introduction by panellists:

Kees van den Broek, Advocacy Advisor at CARE Netherlands explains that CARE works on the Women, Peace and Security agenda with communities. Protection of women should be part of humanitarian action, CARE works on the community level to strengthen the voice of women and to change social norms. This entails structural development efforts to get women more involved in, for instance, decision making processes and peace negotiations. CARE bases their engagement with peacekeeping missions on what they hear from communities on how they perceive these missions. The perspective on peacekeeping missions within communities is thus critical. Many would say to keep away from missions, for example in the east of Congo, there was dissatisfaction with the military operation. However, there can be a counterargument that the departure of the mission meant that M23 could come in.

Wendy MacClinchy, Director of the United Nations program at the Center for Civilians in Conflict (CIVIC) stated on peacekeeping missions that it has been the best tool that the multilateral system has in response to conflict, despite the cons, because it save lives. CIVIC is a humanitarian organisation focused direct community engagement with armed actors for the protection of civilians in armed conflicts. They work upstream with policy, at the local and

national level through the community level and all the way onwards to the UN Security Council. CIVIC gathers data and does research so that it has an evidence base to engage with decision makers. The Security Council provided mandates and CIVIC contributes with technical advice when applying these mandates. It is important to talk about the issues brought forward in the panel today, as now is a unique and unfortunate time. Current disturbing trends are the increased number of attacks on civilians with 72% and the attacks on global governance and the multilateral system.

Steven Lanting, Advocacy Lead at Save the Children Netherlands explains that children are the most vulnerable group to negative impacts of conflict and insecurity that peacekeeping missions seek to prevent. They are more grievously injured by explosive and weapons, more often victims of sexual violence, and are often unable to access sufficient, child-specific psychosocial care. Children are rarely consulted or considered when policies and interventions are developed, preventing tailor-made approaches that would protect them. Save the Children focuses on child protection in areas where peacekeeping missions operate. This entails protecting children directly, supporting parents, and tackling dangers in the environment around children. In addition, Save the Children advocates for accountability for violations against children, pursuing policy change and judicial action from the community to the state and international level. Save the Children works in and amongst communities that are in close contact with peacekeeping missions. Depending on the context, NGO's can find themselves working alongside, amidst, in parallel, and, at times, in opposition to these missions. Experiences working with peacekeeping missions are both positive and negative.

Coordination between peace keeping operations and NGOs

Coordination with peacekeeping missions is always necessary and very important, for obtaining humanitarian access, to complement approaches, and for sharing assets. Activities of peacekeeping missions sometimes overlap with those of civil society organisations. This overlap can lead to a lack of coordination between missions and NGOs, caused by misunderstandings and limited awareness of which actors and initiatives are present in the context, as well as competing or diverging objectives. In addition, some communities have negative perceptions or experiences of missions due to misunderstandings of mandates or real cases of violations or breaches of trust. These perceptions factor into how NGOs are perceived as well – either as alternatives for missions in addressing community needs, or as enablers and collaborators with missions. Consequently, some NGOs avoid association with missions to maintain their impartiality and independence in some contexts. Whether NGOs work alongside, amidst or in opposition to peacekeeping missions depends on the context, local perceptions of the missions, mission mandates, and whether missions have themselves committed violations or abuses.

CIVIC works with several ingredients to protect civilians in coordination with peacekeeping missions. These are: clear and prioritised mandates, sustained political support, community engagement, rapid mobilisations, aligning resources and leveraging the United Nations' strengths. Civilian harm mitigation is executed through cooperation with state security actors,

for example through training among states and the exchanging of good practices. Early warning systems of when attacks will occur are of importance to keep civilians safe. Community based protection is built on how missions are embedded in the local culture/communities. A key moment is when missions draw down, as this can create power vacuums.

CARE works through community based organisations and together with them focuses on what the presence of military actors means and how to coordinate. For instance, the mission may intend to build infrastructure, but communities may have their own plans too. Important to focus on what is there already and build on that. An example is the office in North Kivu in Congo that engages with the leadership in the region and also with the gender officers/experts, to see how they look at it and what is needed. Sometimes country offices get approached by communities that do not want CARE to engage with the missions openly as this could endanger them. CARE also brings discussion on protection of civilians and protection of women to Geneva and New York, taking it from the community level upwards.

Coordination with peacekeeping mission by Save the Children is done in close collaboration with actors in the community, including consultations with children. This helps to ensure the responsiveness of mission interventions to community, and especially children's, needs. Save the Children focuses on measures to prevent, and respond to, violations against children, and to restore a sense of normality in their lives. Examples of this might be to provide education or child-friendly spaces for children to play. In South Sudan and DR Congo Save the Children coordinates with the peacekeeping missions on child protection. With UNMISS, the mission in South Sudan, Save the Children coordinated about the referral and reintegration of children that were engaged with the parties of the conflict, helping to reintroduce children into communities. Where peacekeeping missions had access to children recruited into armed groups, they lacked capacity and resources to effectively demobilize children and provide psychosocial support and rehabilitation. In this case, Save the Children provided complementary programming to address this gap.

Collaborating with peacekeeping missions poses dilemmas for NGOs: sometimes, collaboration with missions can enable access to hard-to-reach areas under through security guarantees or negotiations with non-state actors done by the missions. At other times, collaboration with missions undermines communities' and non-state armed groups' perceptions of NGOs as neutral or independent actors. This can impede the access for NGOs, as armed groups prevent access at roadblocks or refuse to provide security guarantees to humanitarian actors.

Collaboration is also not without risk. Recently, an NGO that gathers data for safety purposes found their staff being arrested because they shared data. This was considered by the government as secret data, which is a worrying development. Another risk example is DR Congo, where the UN mission has been present for many years. There has been little protection for people by the peacekeeping mission. Whether that happens depends on the mandate of the mission, which differs; some are more reactive and not so visible. This leads to the people having become frustrated, meaning humanitarian organisations have to be careful in their negotiations so as not to lose trust of the people.

Negotiating access for humanitarian actors

Humanitarian actors need access to be able to save lives. In order to gain access, humanitarian organisations – and peacekeeping missions – negotiate with armed actors in the specific contexts they seek to provide their services. Logistically, the peacekeeping missions have resources that humanitarian organisations do not have. These assets, such as vehicles and supplies, are of significant importance on the ground and can make the difference when access is obtained. Negotiations are done with all parties to a conflict: armed groups, the government. Sometimes this is done in coordination amongst humanitarian organisations that are active in the region, or alongside peacekeeping missions. But contexts differ, meaning that sometimes organisations negotiate alone. Negotiations most often take place behind closed doors, to prevent perceptions of taking sides, in order to maintain humanitarian principles of neutrality and impartiality. Humanitarian organisations do not want to take sides in the conflict, only addressing the perpetrators of violations where these occur. Any action humanitarian actors take can be perceived as being partial, which may endanger their staff and operations, as well as other humanitarian actors in the area.

At other times, the peacekeeping missions themselves are gatekeepers of access, allowing or preventing access to sites under their control, like civilian camps or protected areas. How do peacekeeping missions support and complement the activities to address needs on site? Do missions enable or prevent needs-based activities? The reality is that both are true. Missions have access to important resources and expertise that encourages interventions that address community needs. On the other hand, mission staff have also been found to violate the rights and protections of communities, as direct perpetrators of sexual violence or by not preventing recruitment of children under their watch into armed groups.

A good practice in terms of negotiations is to work with armed actors at different levels since they often operate in hierarchies. On the senior military level, the political will should be embedded, but command and control is located more on the local level. This should be done through community-based protection groups so that they are included in the process. Another good practice is establishing weapons free zones. Also, sharing of data and joint data analysis across humanitarian organisations is lauded: the more inclusive data, the better.

A challenge in the negotiation on access is that it is that they are often done with decision-makers and not with the people in the community, but their consent and involvement helps to sustain initiatives to prevent instability and violence. Another challenge is that humanitarian organisations risk being caught in a bargain where they are instrumentalized.

Conversation with the audience

A question was raised about how the organisations deal with the tension of engaging in advocacy on the one hand and having their operations on the ground on the other. The panellists responded by emphasising the complementarity between experience in aid delivery and advocacy, as real evidence from the field strengthens policy advocacy and gives it legitimacy and urgency. There is a need to balance public and private advocacy; confidential engagement gives the space and opportunity to act constructively in spaces where public advocacy does not work. At other times, public campaigning is the only means to galvanize action by decision-makers. Every context is different, this is a constant reassessment of advocacy and intervention

strategies. In Gaza, for example, the experiences of Palestinian colleagues were crucial for mobilizing public support for action in the Netherlands. But this is a constant weighing of how much organisations speak out, as there may be repercussions for their access. For example, Israel now requires NGOs to re-register to continue to provide humanitarian aid, which may be affected by public advocacy on behalf of Palestinians. Organisations also advocate for civil-military-cooperation being centralised in missions, which is key for protection of civilians.

Another question was about how to depoliticise aid. This is done through adhering to the humanitarian principles; humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence. Sometimes humanitarian aid is targeted, both politically and as direct targets of violence. This poses a real threat to humanitarian actors and the continued ability to operate.

Another question was about data sharing and whether existing tech tools can play a role. Panellists were mixed on this: some considered this dangerous, considering the lack of privacy and political agendas of big tech companies. Others saw a necessity, as developments in tech move quickly. For example, there is a huge surge in Artificial Intelligence linked with armed drones, this has increased by 2000% over a short period.

A participant asked how panellists stay positive and motivated to do this work, considering the gravity of what they are confronted with? They mentioned their respect for the people they work with; people standing up and fighting for their rights, this is what keeps the motivation high. Risks are there but needs are bigger.