

Peacekeeping missions meet humanitarian action: Lessons from the past for increased future alignment

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Introduction

This session built on a panel discussion held the previous year during a symposium of Wageningen University on the future of peacekeeping, which explored the (mis)alignment between peacekeeping and humanitarian action, as well as lessons from experience. With both fields facing growing pressure from budget cuts, effective coordination has become more urgent than ever. NGO and government representatives now gathered in The Hague to discuss the interaction of peacekeeping missions and humanitarian action. A key focus was on the emerging modalities in the peacekeeping sector, consisting of a new vernacular, guidance policies, and modes of working, like the [Board of Peace](#) that oversees the Gaza peace plan.

Central questions guiding this session were: What does the current landscape of peacekeeping look like? How does coordination function in practice? What are the new modalities of peacekeeping operations, and how can those build on the lessons learnt over the past decades?

The current landscape and the new reality for peacekeeping

Peacekeeping finds itself at an existential crossroad. Trends in armed conflict have taken an alarming direction: civilian harm has increased by 10 per cent, grave violations against children have risen by 25 per cent, and drone usage in warfare has surged by [4,000 per cent in 2024](#) since 2020. These developments point towards a growing disregard for international agreements and a prevailing sense of impunity, creating space for further political violations. Increasing impunity regarding attacks against humanitarian actors is a particular concern. The [Advisory Council on International Affairs](#) (AIV) soon.

Experience has shown that locally led approaches, community-based engagement, civil society inclusion, and civilian harm tracking are effective tools within peacekeeping missions. Yet, the future of these capacities remains uncertain due to the changing geopolitical climate. Additionally, when missions withdraw, they leave gaps in the support for communities, as could be witnessed after the partial retreat of the United Nations Organisation Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO).

The era of multilateral peacekeeping is over. A clear path forward within the humanitarian community has yet to emerge. The new reality is that actors across the HDP-nexus are likely forced to collaborate and coordinate more. Future missions will be smaller in footprint, more tailored, and more adaptable, with a narrower focus on political stabilisation, security, and protection. Rather than large-scale operations, future peacekeeping operations may take the shape of a special envoy supported by a peace and development expert.

Operational activities beyond this narrower scope would shift into the broader UN system, redistributing responsibility across UN architecture. Protection would be defined by minimum standards, and in the absence of a clear mandate, different UN agencies would need to

collaborate more closely. This dynamic is already evident in contexts outside the formal UN peace agenda, such as Ukraine and Myanmar.

There are ongoing peacekeeping operations that require attention. The Netherlands funds numerous projects and remains strongly engaged in the evolution of peacekeeping, even as the changing geopolitical landscape introduces new constraints. The Netherlands is specifically strongly involved in the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) and the UN Sudano-Sahelian Office (UNSO).

Challenges in (new) peacekeeping

The quality of peacekeeping missions is only as good as the risk-taking of the Security Council. With geopolitical tensions within the Security Council higher than ever, drafting mandates has become increasingly complicated. Opposing sides struggle to reach an agreement, for example, as in the context of Gaza. Focus and realistic mandates are difficult to achieve in the current political climate.

Applying the UN system to its full capacity remains challenging, particularly as the UN is increasingly called upon to take on tasks that peacekeeping operations can no longer carry out. For the Netherlands, peacekeeping operations remain an indispensable instrument for security, while acknowledging the complexity of the geopolitical environment.

Grave violations in conflict contexts are on the rise and harm against children is increasing. Since children are disproportionately affected by both the immediate and long-term effects of conflict, child protection should be anchored in peacekeeping mandates. When missions withdraw, or when there is strong under-resourcing of a mission, children tend to be more at risk. Programmes that focus on gender, gender-based violence and the protection of children are first to fall out, such as reintegration programmes for child soldiers.

For NGOs, association with peacekeepers can pose specific challenges in crisis contexts. Local communities lose trust in peacekeeping operations when these are politically charged or peacekeeping forces commit violations, followed by impunity. The Netherlands has a zero-tolerance policy for inaction in the case of sexual exploitation and abuse in peacekeeping.

One of the biggest dilemmas around peacekeeping is the lack of political courage, both among member states and in institutions. Humanitarians and civil society actors have to proactively and strategically adapt in their engagement. Some ways forward are stimulating dialogue, reframing advocacy efforts, and championing meaningful reform of the peacekeeping sector.

Good practices & opportunities

The Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus

The Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus may be an overused term, but it remains valid at its core. It also ties the humanitarian sector and the UN system together. When peacekeeping operations withdraw, they leave significant gaps behind, making the nexus an important framework for ensuring continued collaboration between different actors. The nexus also opens windows for important sharing of information, data, and analysis.

Peacekeeping operations are inherently a political tool, and humanitarians must apply that political lens when engaging with them. Some missions have a mandate to support humanitarian aid, while others are perceived to be part of the conflict, creating tensions. The consent of the host state is a key factor and therefore can influence the scope of a peacekeeping operation mandate.

Leadership

Leadership within peacekeeping missions is often overlooked in coordination discussions. Much depends on the leadership and willingness of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General. For example, humanitarian actors may request an airlift to gain access to hard-to-reach areas, and whether this is possible depends largely on the Special Representative of the Secretary-General. Constant dialogue between humanitarian and peacekeeping actors is therefore essential.

Peacekeeping operation leadership holds a triple-head function, chairing multiple bodies from within the mission, which positions them to bring the UN system together and facilitate information sharing. They hold more power than the Humanitarian Country Team, which is particularly relevant in contexts where the Humanitarian and UN Country Teams take on some peacekeeping roles. Peacekeeping operations can also leverage their political and legal capital to ensure access for NGOs.

Priorities

In peacebuilding, a human-centred and locally led approach is key, requiring a positive relationship with local communities. The human-centred approach is the starting point of intervention for the Netherlands: what is set in policy, is determined by what happens on the ground. All speakers stressed the value of locally led approaches and meaningful engagement with communities within peacekeeping missions. Building trust with local populations is essential not just for humanitarian effectiveness, but for the political legitimacy of peacekeeping operations. Practical tools, such as newly developed translation technology to support cooperation with local inhabitants, are part of this approach.

Protection of Civilians (PoC) remains the core of the mandate for the Netherlands. Minimum protection standards should be defined even in the absence of a clear overarching mandate, with different UN agencies collaborating to fill gaps.