

Community Engagement for Protection

Recommendations on the implementation of the HIPPO Report

While engaging with communities has been a priority for peace operations since 2010, there is a significant gap between rhetoric and implementation. A greater effort needs to be made to ensure engagement with civilians is actually happening on the ground. A number of NGOs that work on protection of civilians, including **Civilians in Conflict, FIDH, the Global Centre for R2P, IRC, Nonviolent Peaceforce, Oxfam, PAX, Refugees International and World Vision**, would like to provide the following recommendations on how to operationalise community engagement.

Civilians are the main stakeholders of peace operations, with the most to gain from their successes and the most to lose from their failures. The increasing use of robust tactics in peace operations in recent years has only raised the stakes further for local communities. They should be front and centre in decision-making. Community engagement should be done in a safe and respectful manner while building upon existing community-led initiatives.

We welcome the mention of community engagement in the report of the High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations (HIPPO) and the Secretary-General's Plan of Action. Indeed, local communities are the most knowledgeable about the nature of the threats they face. They are key partners in identifying risks and in formulating effective action for the protection of civilians (POC). This is particularly true for women and girls and other traditionally marginalized groups, who often face unique protection threats. Yet they lack access to venues to articulate their needs or participate in the design, implementation and monitoring of protection strategies. With this in mind, we encourage the UN to implement the necessary changes to ensure that peace operations effectively adopt a people-centred approach.

Specifically, member states should ensure that community engagement is central to all UN peace operations. Concrete ways to do this include the following:

1. Community engagement should be a meaningful and mandatory part of a UN mission's political and protection strategies;
2. Community engagement needs to build further upon existing civil society and community-led efforts to address community security needs;
3. Community Liaison Assistants (CLAs) should be adopted by all peace operations where it is appropriate, and consist of half men and half women;
4. Engagement with communities, in particular with women, youth and minorities, needs to happen in a safe and respectful manner.

1) Community engagement should be mandatory in all UN mission's political and protection strategies: A mission's political vision and protection strategy should be developed in systematic cooperation and consultation with local civil society actors, and shared and reviewed with local communities on a regular basis.

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The Secretary-General's Plan of Action discusses the need to provide support to local populations by fostering public support immediately upon deployment and the essential need for strategic communication and community engagement. The Secretary-General explicitly states that:

“where security conditions permit, peace operations will recruit national staff and community liaison officers, particularly women, from the outset [...] Beginning with careful and considered outreach to communities at local levels and extending to strong mission information management that informs action and feeds into protection responses and reporting to the Council, a shared platform will strengthen response, monitoring and the coherence of multiple reporting.” (S/2015/682, Par. 64)¹

According to the Plan of Action, public opinion surveys must be conducted regularly as a valuable means of continuously assessing progress and evolving community priorities (S/2015/682, Par. 66). This is a welcome commitment from the Secretary-General. However, efforts should be made to go beyond actors based in capitals to seek inputs and experience from those groups and communities based in rural or border areas which might not normally be consulted.

As part of this, the Terms of Reference for mission leadership should include the importance of community engagement and accountability to affected populations. Not only a mission's leadership, but all levels of staff of a UN peace operation, whether a peacekeeping or a political mission, should engage with civil society and other local actors. This requires specific guidance and training – with Civil Affairs taking the lead to coordinate and facilitate this engagement.

2) Building upon existing civil society and community structures for peace and protection: The UN is often missing out on opportunities to engage constructively with locally-led efforts for peace and protection, such as grassroots efforts by churches in South Sudan that cultivate peace on a local level. A local actor mapping is a valuable tool to strengthen rather than duplicate existing efforts. Understanding the specific role of women, youth, minorities and religious leaders as change agents, as well as recognizing their specific needs, vulnerabilities and risks makes activities much more likely to be sustainable.

3) Community Liaison Assistants (CLAs) have been effective at bridging the gap between peacekeepers and local communities. However, the number of women CLAs must substantially increase to a 50 per cent quota. Female CLAs should not be required to live on the base.

***DRC: In spite of great efforts to redress the gender imbalance, 90%
(182 of 202) of current CLAs are men.***

MONUSCO Civil Affairs Section – Ops East, CLA Best Practice Review 2014.

With their safety and protection guaranteed, and with the appropriate services to facilitate their deployment, female CLAs will be able to help in the sharing of knowledge and other information,

¹ *SG Report on the Recommendations of the High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations*. 2 Sep. 2015.

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especially between the women of a local community and the UN peace operations civilian and armed personnel. In more remote areas, such as in parts of the Democratic Republic of Congo, CLAs struggle to engage with Civil Affairs and political parts of the Mission. Along with increasing the deployment of CLAs to more remote bases, considerations must be given to increasing the presence of Civil Affairs Officers in these locations in order to strengthen the work of CLAs and to ensure community consultations inform the mission's work.

The staff that have engaged most with communities are often UN Volunteers (UNVs). Along with Civil Affairs and Political Officers, UNVs have a high turnover rate, particularly in field offices. This impedes them from getting to know the CLAs and communities they work with, and vice versa. Ideally, staff should be posted for longer than 6-month periods and receive cultural training. Ability to speak local languages needs to be a prerequisite for all CLA staff. With a comprehensive community engagement strategy in place, it will also be easier for continuity of engagement by sustaining contacts and knowledge, even when staffing changes.

4) Safe and respectful engagement: When engaging with members of the community, UN mission staff should ensure that they have developed a solid understanding of the context and of cultural sensitivities to gauge whether the presence of and interaction with UN staff would put the communities involved at further risk. Ensuring comprehensive standards and practices for joint context analysis that involves political, peace-building and development parts of the mission and women, youth, community and faith leaders, as well as civil society actors, is key. Women's protection concerns must also be given the same prominence and prioritization as men's.

The recruitment of more women peacekeepers would support community engagement. At the same time, the Secretary-General recognizes the need for gender risk considerations for female staff, which are currently being developed to ensure their security. (S/2015/682, Par. 105)

Whether or not male military representatives can interact with women depends on the culture. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo for instance, local women in North Kivu suggested that it would be inappropriate for a married woman to approach a military man, and that it was only the more educated men in the village who spoke with the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in DRC (MONUSCO).

UN staff should be conflict sensitive in their actions and be trained and evaluated on the application of Do No Harm principles as part of their work to ensure they are actively conflict reductive. This would include taking into account gender considerations and cultural sensitivities, as well as other dynamics, including sectarianism and political rivalries. To this end, the Secretary-General has called for the "senior manager compact for Heads of Mission to better reflect their multiple responsibilities, including directing mission-wide strategies and mainstreaming gender" as well as instituting a "framework to provide community-based mechanisms where people can more readily come forward to raise complaints regarding UN personnel." (S/2015/682, Par. 117; 122)

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If communities share information with UN mission staff, it needs to be clear to them what purpose it will serve. There must be a mechanism for regular feedback and two-way information. UN missions should thus be accountable to communities and have a mechanism for feeding back to the local populations of how their contributions were used and what results they led to. Ideally, this would lead to better strategies and action that will benefit communities and provide better protection.

