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UN–AU Collaboration and Ambitions for People-Centric Operations

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THE PROTECTION OF CIVILIANS (PoC) is considered a key indicator of mission success in UN peacekeeping contexts and is also a major area of focus for AU peace support operations. However, despite their ongoing partnership in several mission contexts, the AU and UN are operating with distinct strategic and operational approaches to PoC, including varying degrees of emphasis on people-centred approaches to PoC. This paper examines some of the challenges that need to be addressed by the UN and AU to ensure that PoC adopts a more people-centred approach and that it is streamlined in future hybrid and parallel operation settings.

This paper suggests that the AU and the UN consider the following policy recommendations to strengthen PoC efforts through people-centred approaches.

Policy recommendations



At the strategic level

- Institutional (UN and AU) headquarters need to establish a working definition of the “people-centred protection of civilians”
- Adopt similar and streamlined guidelines for people-centred PoC across international and regional organisations.

At the practical (tactical) level

- Ensure that each institution’s field missions use an agreed-upon concept of people-centred PoC in their planning processes so that people-centring is an integral component of the mission’s approach to PoC and not an operational addition.
- Ensure mission-specific approaches for people-centred PoC for operations engaged in settings characterised by asymmetric warfare or compromised host-community consent, including in the case of partnership peacekeeping and peace enforcement operations.

Introduction

OVER THE PAST few decades, protection of civilians (PoC) has been prioritised as a central goal of UN peace operations, many of which now include robust PoC mandates. PoC is considered a key indicator of mission success, and the concept has grown in relevance at various levels and across activities in the United Nations.¹ PoC has also grown in importance within the AU. Over the last two decades, the AU Peace and Security Council (AU PSC) has increasingly mandated and deployed peace support operations (PSOs) to prevent and respond to human security threats and mass atrocities on the African continent.² Overlapping conflict drivers (such as climate change, economic underdevelopment, and extremism) have led to an increasingly difficult context for protection on the continent which further underscores the need for a more people-centred approach to improve protection outcomes in operations settings.

By nature of design, UN peace operations and AUPSOs are state-centric. These operations typically provide support for host governments and primarily work to strengthen state capacity against security threats. Therefore, people-centring peace operations require a reorientation of operations to prioritise bottom-up, mission-specific, and civilian-focused posture that engages with local expertise and strengthens community capacity to sustain long-term peace. In this way, ‘people-centred approaches’ can include communities in the peace process in ways that the traditional state-centric posture of operations could not. While PoC is a crucial component of UN operations’ efficacy and legitimacy, reports have shown that in recent years, civilians have not seen a significant increase in protection in line with the level of attention paid to PoC within Security Council mandating processes.³ This gap between normative commitments to PoC and protection outcomes, along with the challenges of deployment in contexts with no peace to keep and extremist elements in operations theatres all create issues for protection tasks to be effectively carried out. People-centred approaches can provide more directly positive outcomes for civilians who are served by peace operations carried out by both the AU and the UN. Taking a people-centred approach

to PoC conceptualisation and implementation can also help address the challenges of contemporary peacekeeping (UN) and peace support/enforcement (AU) by shaping responses to the protection issues of most pressing concern to affected civilians. In a world where these operations are increasingly deployed alongside one another, it will also be crucial to enhance inter-operability between UN–AU efforts to people-centre operations.

The long-term, transformative power of a people-centring approach lies in its ability to 1) make a meaningful impact on the planning and mandating of future deployments, and 2) establish distinct responsibilities for UN and AU troops’ co-engagement in instances of multi-organisation deployment or in partnership peacekeeping contexts. This Research Brief will assess the UN and AU frameworks for the protection of civilians and people-centred approaches, analyse how institutional collaboration across mission headquarters can help produce innovative policies, and discuss the practical needs in translating those policies into practice. The Research Brief will also assess some of the people-centred dimensions of the PoC strategies of two peacekeeping operations on the African continent: the United Nations–African Union Mission in Darfur (UNAMID), and the African Union Mission to Somalia (AMISOM).⁴ As multi-actor operations (including partnership deployments) become the standard approach for peacekeeping, learning from such examples of collaboration is ever more important.⁵

Converging on PoC: Similarities and Divergences in UN and AU Approaches to PoC

AT THE HIGHEST strategic level, the AU and UN are seemingly aligned on the issue of PoC. As laid out in the *Joint United Nations–African Union Framework for Enhanced Partnership in Peace and Security*, “maximum convergence...will always be the goal” for both the AU and UN. This is evidenced in the functionally compatible approaches to PoC adopted by both organisations. This Research Brief argues that a unified definition of “people-centred peacekeeping” should also be agreed upon by the UN and the AU. This would enable both organisations to engage with these matters in a unified manner across their respective operational peacekeeping efforts. Whether distinctions matter and how they matter must be assessed at the operational level.

Since the codification of PoC in 1999, the UN has developed the concept of PoC through guidelines and frameworks.⁶ The AU’s *Draft Guidelines for the Protection of Civilians in African Union Peace Support Operations* were adopted in 2009.⁷ Where the UN’s framework primarily focuses on measures to protect civilians from the threats they are already facing, the AU has taken steps to formalise safeguards against peacekeeper-inflicted harm.⁸ This remains an underdeveloped component of the UN’s PoC approach and is an increasingly glaring point of weakness, since harm caused by UN peacekeepers are both a direct human rights violation against vulnerable populations and a threat to the legitimacy of UNPKOs that already face weakening host–state consent. The UN has developed a human rights due diligence policy (UN HRDDP), a UN-wide policy that applies to security forces that receive UN support but are not part of the UN. This policy was instated to ensure that the actions of all forces with the support of the UN acted consistently with the UN’s purposes and principles—specifically in reference to upholding IHL and IHRL. However, the existence of this policy without an equivalent policy to hold UN personnel

and peacekeepers accountable to these standards is an issue that has major implications for AU–UN partnerships and PoC.⁹

The difference in frameworks concerning harm caused by peacekeepers aside, the AU has largely adopted an approach that resembles the UN’s approaches to PoC. This is arguably due to practical considerations by both the UN and the AU. However, greater similarity between approaches can facilitate streamlined efforts in contexts where both organisations are deployed, or where AU troops are re-hatted as UN peacekeepers.¹⁰ The two processes used to develop guidelines for PoC were also happening in parallel in 2009–2010 with considerable engagement between the UN and AU, leading to a sort of ‘incidental adaptation’ on the part of the AU.¹¹ The convergence lends itself to better protection for civilians and avoids undue confusion for peacekeepers who would otherwise be made to memorise and differentiate between different organisational approaches.¹² However, as discussed later in this paper, this streamlined approach to PoC stunted the implementation of the African Union Mission in Somalia’s (AMISOM) tasks.

A point of divergence between the UN and the AU’s approaches to PoC is the number of tiers within each framework, with the UN’s PoC concept divided into three tiers (protection through political process, protection from physical violence, and a protective environment), and the AU’s concept containing an additional fourth element: rights-based protection. However, the distinction is largely nominal, since the UN considers the entire PoC concept—all three tiers—to have ‘rights-based’ formulation at its centre, which is to say that a ‘rights-based’ approach is mainstreamed in the UN’s definition of PoC. Essentially, the difference in tiers presents as a larger distinction in theory than in practice.

People-centred PoC, while still officially undefined, is used throughout this paper to refer to bottom-up approaches to protection that centre the perspectives, lives, and experiences of civilians. People-centred PoC is a newer conceptualisation of the question of protection that has the potential to amplify civilian voices and grassroots expertise in the implementation of effective protection efforts. In this Research Brief, I highlight the distinct and inconsistent strategic and operational approaches to PoC of the AU and UN and argue that infusing a people-centric perspective into mission planning and implementation would make peace operations more accountable to the people they serve. In a global context where these affected populations are sometimes opposed to the very presence of peacekeeping forces in their country, this is an approach that holds within it both the promise to improve the key indicator of mission success—effective PoC—and result in responsive and innovative approaches that would improve host community consent.¹⁵

The concept of people-centred peacekeeping is gaining traction at the UN as an operational aspiration. It has also been articulated at the AU as a part of Agenda 2063, the AU's strategic framework for inclusive and sustainable development.¹⁴ However, there is still a need for further refinement regarding what this means within the work of AU PSOs. If defined as a genuine restructuring of the design and ownership over UN peacekeeping missions, however, people-centred approaches to peacekeeping have not been fully implemented.¹⁵ The AU indicates an interest in infusing people-centred approaches in the foundational work of the organisation, as shown in the following quote from the 2006 AU-released report entitled *Study on an African Union Government: Towards a United States of Africa*:

“(shared values) should particularly be used at the national, regional and continental levels to devise and implement developmental policies and programs that are people-centred [emphasis added] and well rooted in African traditions.”¹⁶

“ People-centred approaches should be seen as a strategic shift, rather than a technical solution.”

More recently, Agenda 2063 also articulates this aspiration as a progression towards a “a people-driven Union”.¹⁷ While people-centred approaches have the potential to result in high-level re-framing in the work of PKOs, UN peacekeeping operations, and AU peace enforcement missions, the approach has fallen short of any restructuring. To date, it has tended to solely translate into ad hoc mechanisms for engagement with local populations. The results of these community-oriented mechanisms are positive and contribute to direct engagement with effected civilians. However, because they are implemented in an ad-hoc, mission-by-mission manner, it is difficult to assess them on a strategic level.¹⁸

Thus, this Research Brief argues that people-centred approaches should be seen as a strategic shift, rather than a technical solution. This shift will require changes in terms of mission planning and operations. This would entail consultative processes within mandating processes, the creation of distinct responsibilities for UN and AU presences within robust peacekeeping settings, relying on local expertise for civilian engagement activities, and ensuring more thorough accountability mechanisms for both institutions.

People-Centred Approaches in Differing Contexts

PEOPLE-CENTRED approaches to peacekeeping face major hurdles in the context of both the UN and AU. The UN has developed tools to make calls for people-centred peacekeeping implementable, for instance within the framework of the United Nations Organisation Stabilisation Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO). There, it has supported local protection councils, community alert networks, and community liaison assistants (CLA).¹⁹ Such stakeholders serve affected civilians in a tangible way in contexts where trust in the mission is intact, security conditions are stable, movement of UNPKOs is not restricted, and importantly—where these processes can coexist and act complementarily.²⁰ However, these ideal conditions are rarely met due to a variety of practical conditions, including light human

resourcing and a lack of adequate funding. Often it is these very conditions that lead to a loss of trust in peacekeeping missions and in their ability to protect civilians from threats.

Over the past few years, PoC has become a more well-established perspective within the AU, challenging the organisation’s traditionally state-centric approach. The role and importance of PoC has been codified at many levels of the organisation, most recently in the AU Doctrine on Peace Support Operations.²¹ The firm emphasis on PoC in this doctrine provides an opportunity for more people-centred approaches to take hold and be articulated in line with the priorities of the AU in future engagements.²²

African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM)

AMISOM OFFERS LESSONS concerning the challenges to effective PoC within non-traditional peace operations settings. AMISOM was not given an explicit PoC mandate upon deployment in March 2007, however, the expectation was that the mission would comply with International Humanitarian Law—which notably has no proactive protection measure. This approach to PoC was opaque and unclear in the early years of AMISOM’s deployment. Questions were continuously raised regarding what the ideal strategy would be for a mission that was recognised by the AU as having been “expected to protect civilians in [its] areas of operations, without being explicitly mandated or resourced to do so.”²³ The AU eventually adopted the Draft Guidelines for the Protection of Civilians in African Union Peace Support Operations in March 2010, three years after AMISOM was deployed. That same year, the AU PSC declared that the AU would fully adhere to International Humanitarian Law in

AMISOM’s operations. It was only in 2013, after the mission wide PoC strategy was instated, that the mission began to develop its PoC approach.

The challenges faced by AMISOM in establishing and carrying out PoC have been well-documented.²⁴ The mission has faced accusations of harming civilians through firing mistakenly at civilians believed to be enemy combatants and failing to protect civilians from direct attacks by Al-Shabaab. Over the years, AMISOM established several high-profile fact-finding and board of inquiry missions investigating allegations of civilian harm, including the Qoryooley incident in December 2016, the Ceel-buur incident in May 2016, and the Golweyn incident in October 2022. In a few cases, those responsible were court martialled for committing civilian harm.²⁵ Overall, AMISOM could not adequately carry out PoC tasks, even after the mandate to do so was instated in 2013,

because the operations were not set up to make this possible while also pursuing militarised operations to degrade Al-Shabaab's capabilities.

AMISOM also faced challenges arising from a lack of clarity in terms of its PoC responsibilities. Part of AMISOM's lack of strategic vision for PoC implementation was due to the AU's reluctance to implement a proactive PoC mandate, a reluctance that in turn was due to a lack of experience on the part of the AU.²⁶ The African Union Mission in Sudan was the only previous AU operation to have included a PoC mandate, and at this point the AU was not yet prepared to replicate it. Furthermore, the AU PoC guidelines produced in 2010 were very much in line with the UN's guidelines for peacekeeping operations.²⁷ This posed an issue for implementation, since AMISOM's tasks and robustness were largely outside of the edicts of traditional UN peacekeeping.²⁸ This illustrates the limitations of streamlining doctrinal establishment of protection approaches, because different operational frameworks are likely to benefit from more tailored guidelines.

In line with civilian protection principles and in response to the growing lack of consent from the civilian population, the UN Security Council resolution 2036 (2012) required AMISOM to establish an indirect fire policy.²⁹ This resulted in the establishment of no-fire zones surrounding certain public areas such as hospitals. In line with principles in International Humanitarian Law of proportionality and precautionary methods, this impacted the use of particular weapons and successfully reduced harm to civilians. However, by then, there were also reports of attacks against civilians and the reputation of the mission had fallen substantially in public estimation.³⁰ AMISOM was mired with a negative reputation due to the extent of civilian harm it had caused, despite efforts to reduce harm and hold those who committed crimes to account. In this context, the activities undertaken by the mission in support of direct needs expressed by the community were crucial to build back community support. For example, activities undertaken by the Civil Affairs section illustrate how militarised and robust mandate operations can be responsive to the needs of civilians and engage directly in response to those needs. For instance,

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this has been done through Quick Impact Projects (QIP), defined by the AU as: “rapidly implementable, small-scale activities of benefit to local populations [which provide] an immediate impact and critical contribution aimed at promoting and facilitating the AU mission's stabilisation and peacebuilding efforts. The projects furthermore serve to build confidence in the mission, its mandate, and in the peace process, thereby improving the environment for effective mandate implementation.”³¹

The AMISOM Civil Affairs Section led the oversight for the implementation of QIPs and several other coordinated efforts undertaken in collaboration with humanitarian actors. The activities were small-scale in nature and reportedly had an immediate impact on communities. The projects ranged from livelihood support to the construction of schools and community centres. The work was implemented in remote parts of Somalia, where there was no UN presence nor governmental authority once AMISOM troops recovered areas from Al-Shabaab. In these contexts, QIP served the civilian population through water-related activities and basic infrastructure provision.³²

Despite not having a mandate to engage in humanitarian activities, the mandate to craft an effective approach to PoC and provide appropriate security conditions for the provision of humanitarian aid gave the mission space to play a crucial role in humanitarian assistance.³³

United Nations–African Union Mission in Darfur (UNAMID)

THE UNITED NATIONS–AFRICAN Union Mission in Darfur (UNAMID) was established on July 31, 2007, and marked the first time that the UN and AU were jointly mandated by the Security Council to oversee a hybrid peacekeeping operation. UNAMID also took over after a pre-existing AU-led mission (the African Union Mission in Sudan) and operated alongside another UN mission (UNMIS) in-country, making the operating space truly hybrid in nature. UNAMID was deployed as people-centred approaches were gaining traction in the wake of the crisis in South Sudan. The importance of focusing on the population that the mission was deployed to serve was stressed in 2013, when hundreds of thousands of civilians sought shelter from violent conflict at UN bases.³⁴ Various efforts carried out by the mission were people-centred in nature and demonstrated innovative approaches in a partnership setting. Notably, this illustrated where people-centred approaches can be efficiently implemented, namely within community stabilisation and in relation to engagement with armed groups.

In 2013, the Sudanese National Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration Commission (NDDRC) endorsed a national strategy to establish a community-based approach to disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration. However, youth were not explicitly included in this process, despite returning to combat at high levels due to an unstable environment and a dearth of economic opportunities.³⁵

In this context, UNAMID undertook a responsive approach to community stabilisation and established community-based labour-intensive projects (CLIPS). This was a community stabilisation and violence reduction programme that sought to directly address an issue in the long-term implications for stability through a ripple effect—providing youth with economic options, slowing down the rate of return to combat, and allowing the youth population to rebuild their communities. The programme was developed alongside national partners and civil society organ-

isations with intimate knowledge about what structures would be most effective. CLIPS offered specific vocational skills training and employment for youth and emphasised their role as long-term stakeholders in peace and stability.

UNAMID's efforts were in line with recommendations made in the 2015 Report on the High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations regarding community dynamics in conflict zones; in particular that peacekeeping operations should “should maintain the closest possible interaction with the communities and support national initiatives regarding rural and local development. Missions should lend their assistance to the resolution of local conflicts, and support community efforts to move toward reconciliation.”³⁶

In Nertiti, Central Darfur State, local communities identified root causes of child recruitment into armed groups as including poverty, a lack of economic opportunity, and vocational training. In response, UNAMID's Child Protection Unit carried out sensitisation campaigns on child protection. The campaign was carried out in collaboration with affected community members under the leadership of the Transitional Council of the Sudan Liberation Movement and the Sudan Justice Equality Movement.³⁷

UNAMID faced myriad challenges in the implementation of its PoC mandate, including lack of access to certain areas of Darfur; limited resources in terms of armoured vehicles and helicopters; and high levels of insecurity, including targeted violence against peacekeepers.³⁸ Against this backdrop, it is notable that the PoC efforts undertaken by the mission were rooted in a responsive people-centred posture, were borne from engagement with local communities in conflict analysis and project planning, and had tangible positive impacts. However, in an operational context as fraught for PoC as that of UNAMID, where peacekeepers were being targeted themselves, it was difficult to replicate approaches taken by the UN in

other contexts, such as the location protection councils supported by MONUSCO in the DRC. However, in Sudan, community stabilisation and long-term development projects were possible. This showcases

the diverse range of people-centred approaches that can be deployed within partnership peacekeeping contexts.

Toward interoperability: **Lessons and recommendations**

THE PROTECTION EFFORTS of UNAMID and AMISOM illustrate that effective people-centred protection requires access to a remote area of countries where missions are deployed, an understanding of what the most pressing needs of the population are, and timely efforts in line with those needs. People-centred approaches are certainly about *listening* to the population, but they also require the *means and resources* to access the population. In turn, this requires a range of assets and enablers. To this end, in instances of robust peacekeeping, the AU and the UN can rely on their comparative advantages to access remote areas of the country and provide responsive protection to civilians in line with their priorities.

For the UN and AU to effectively implement people-centred peacekeeping well, both organisations must define and prioritise people-centring at the inception of missions. Their respective definitions should be complementary, mirroring their respective organisational definitions of PoC. It is key to ensure that both the UN secretariat and the AU PSC consider this aspect when planning for missions and developing mandates.

In future hybrid operations, a streamlined approach to people-centred PoC will be necessary in the planning of the mission itself. This means that both the UN and AU must clarify what the goals of the PoC mandate are and how they will be achieved. In countries where there are parallel AU/UN operations, as was the case in AMISOM (and now in ATMIS), both organisations should be jointly responsible for implementing complementary people-centred efforts. This will require greater integration, collaboration, and mission headquarter-level cooperation on the field. AMISOM illustrated how the UN and AU can

collaborate to take advantage of their respective comparative organisational strengths: the AU had the spatial advantage and greater mobility in remote areas, while the UN had an advantage by way of resources.

PoC has been identified as one of the most crucial indicators of mission achievement within UN missions and is increasingly being seen as such also in the context of AU missions. The mandating and planning of peace operations, whether in the form of UN PKOs, AU PSOs, and hybrid or parallel operations, should continue to reflect this. PoC can gain a greater impact if missions are increasingly designed in a people-centred way rather than using a state-centric approach. As the example of UNAMID and AMISOM illustrate the need to tailor both PoC and people-centred approaches to the contexts where the missions operate. Both mission settings were hostile and resulted in site-specific measures to ensure protection for civilians.

As shown by Gelot and Khadka in the present brief series, these cases also illustrate the fact that whether a mission is mandated to protect civilians or not, civilian populations expect a degree of protection that, if not met, leads to distrust of the mission and loss of legitimacy in the eyes of the populations missions are there to serve.³⁹

Further knowledge is needed about where the conceptualisations of PoC can be strengthened by people-centred approaches, which aspects of a people-centred methodology can be standardised across mission planning, and how militarised operations with robust missions can carry out this work in a safe and constructive manner. There is a gap in terms of

understanding *how* certain protection efforts contribute to an end goal, where people are at the centre of PoC approaches and precisely how best the AU and UN can work together to complement efforts in this regard.

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Author biography

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Ilhan holds two Masters degrees from the University of Oxford where she studied as a Rhodes Scholar and a bachelor's in political science and English literature from The Ohio State University.

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