



## Local Perceptions of Robust Protection of Civilians in Peace Operations

### Panel discussion in Stockholm



On 26 September 2024, the Challenges Forum organised a hybrid panel discussion on local perceptions and the Protection of Civilians (PoC) in peace operations with a focus on South Sudan. The event, which took place at the Swedish Defence University, launched a research brief titled *Local Perceptions of Robust Protection of Civilians in UNMISS and AMISOM* by Linnéa Gelot, Senior Lecturer at the Swedish Defence University, and Prabin B. Khadka, Lecturer at the University of Essex. It forms part of a series sponsored by the Challenges Forum, the Folke Bernadotte Academy (FBA) and the Swedish Defence University.



The panel consisted of **Lt Gen Mohan Subramanian**, Force Commander, UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS), **Regina Fitzpatrick**, Protection of Civilian Team Leader, DPET, UN Department of Peace Operations (DPO) and **Leben Moro**, Director, Scientific and Cultural External Relations, University of Juba. The discussion was moderated by **Susanna Ahlfors**, Event and Communication Specialist, Challenges

Forum International Secretariat (CFIS) with opening and concluding remarks by **Benoît Pylyser**, Director, CFIS.

The research findings show that the level of force used by mission has an impact on how local communities perceive peacekeepers' performance, and people's preferences varies between countries and contexts.

### Key takeaways from the discussion

- This year marks the **25th anniversary of POC** as included in a UN Security Council mandate. Significant normative progress has been made with to date 16 peacekeeping missions mandated to protect civilians. Five of which are currently active (MINUSCA in CAR, MONUSCO in the DRC, UNIFIL in Lebanon, UNISFA in Abyei, and UNMISS in South Sudan).
- Today UN peace operations remain an **irreplaceable and effective tool** to protect civilians.

- With the adoption of the Pact for the Future requesting the UN Secretary-General to undertake a review on the future of all forms of UN peace operations, **our global partnership will remain committed to ensuring that POC remains central to peace operations.**

#### ***Community Engagement & Local Perception Studies***

- The research brief indicates that South Sudanese want **UNMISS to be more proactive with physical protection.** UN peacekeepers are looked upon favourably by local communities when taking on a proactive role.
- Community feedback is key in **strategic and operational decision-making** in missions. It supports **prevention and early warning** and helps tailoring people centred responses.
- Existing **POC tools and practices need to be adapted** to keep peace operations fit for purpose. **Greater focus on community engagement and local expectations** is part of this adaptation.
- Addressing community concerns requires **tailored strategies.** A one-size-fits-all mission strategy is ineffective across different issues such as physical protection, sexual violence, or natural calamities.
- Communities may have conflicting interests and peacekeepers must remain **impartial** considering a range of voices and expectations.
- **Local perception surveys** are a useful instrument for missions but are expensive and lengthy. **Digital solutions** should be explored in making perception surveys less expensive and time to execute. Incorporating the latest technological advances, including AI, can offer substantial returns in improving their effectiveness.

#### ***Leadership and integrated training***

- Good **mission leadership** is key to ensure relations with host countries and with political and military decision makers in T/PCC capitals.
- TCCs/PCCs should **avoid “national caveats”** restricting how national troops engage in mission activities, to be able to protect civilians.
- Customised **pre-deployment and in-mission training** is important to improve both skills and mindsets on community engagement and improve integration and collaboration between T/PCC's.
- A larger emphasis should be placed on **the role of police** within peacekeeping missions. They can play a critical role in community engagement, being part of a more comprehensive approach to safeguarding vulnerable populations.

#### ***Strategic Considerations***

- POC remains a **central imperative for the UN** and it should feature centrally in reflections on the future of peace operations and future mission models.
- Missions must continue to be afforded the necessary **capabilities and resources** to fulfil their POC mandates.
- PoC should be seen as part of **political solutions** in host countries, not as an operational physical protection task only.
- Enhanced **partnerships with regional actors** are key and further discussions are needed on the implementation of the UN Security Council resolution 2719 and the **normative implications** for the regionalisation of PoC.