Local Politics and Perspectives in UN Peace Operations

Introduction

In 2022-24, there were violent protests against the UN peacekeeping operation in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), MONUSCO, in which several dozen people were killed, including a number of UN peacekeepers. Though the mission has delivered multiple successes during its 26 years in the country, the persistence of violence in the East and a perceived reluctance to protect civilians have led to popular discontent with its presence among some parts of the population. Similar protests against the peacekeeping operations in the Central African Republic and Mali also turned violent – in the case of Mali, anti-UN sentiment was shared by the government, which withdrew its consent to the mission, MINUSMA, in 2023, forcing it to depart completely. This was followed by the withdrawal of government consent for the UN Integrated Transitional Assistance Mission in Sudan (UNITAMS) in 2023 and its withdrawal the following year.

While violent protests are not necessarily representative of the broader population, these episodes nevertheless represent an expansion of such sentiments to larger numbers of people; a serious escalation in the way they are expressed; and a new willingness on the part of host governments to withdraw consent and eject the UN – and in the worst cases, to turn to private military contractors instead, as in Mali. In the most extreme cases, these outcomes increase insecurity for civilians, impunity, and humanitarian crises, risks that can spread rapidly beyond the borders of the host state and have repercussions for entire regions and beyond. **In this regard, these events demonstrate in the starkest terms the importance of engaging with local political dynamics, building local legitimacy and ownership, and taking into account local perceptions in making UN peacekeeping both successful and cost-effective.** As the 2024 *Future of Peacekeeping* report noted, local populations are one of the "critical parties" whose consent and cooperation are essential to peacekeeping.[1]

Indeed, UN peacekeeping missions operate in contested environments where legitimacy, local perceptions, and effective communication with local populations can significantly influence their success or failure. Where the UN engages with local and sub-national politics, conflicts, and peacebuilding efforts, rather than simply the national level, it is more likely to ensure a solid basis for long-lasting peace and to prevent a turn towards authoritarianism and exclusionary politics.[2] Moreover, where local populations feel a sense of ownership of the process of building peace in their country and feel that the UN understands and responds to their concerns, then both the legitimacy and sustainability of UN peacekeeping will increase, encouraging local actors to work with the UN and ensuring that they have the capacity to continue processes of reconciliation and reconstruction over the longer term.[3] In this way, **engaging with local populations can enhance UN efforts, which over the long-term can help to save costs and improve mandate implementation**.

Importantly, local perceptions of the conflict(s), national political dynamics, local peacebuilding efforts, and the UN's presence can vary dramatically within host country

[1] El-Ghassim Wane, Paul D. Williams and Ai Kihara-Hunt, *The Future of Peacekeeping, New Models and Related Capabilities* (United Nations, 2024), 10.
[2] Sarah von Billerbeck, Birte Julia Gippert, Kseniya Oksamytna, and Oisín Tansey. *United Nations Peacekeeping and the Politics of Authoritarianism* (Oxford University Press, 2025).
[3] Sarah von Billerbeck, *Whose Peace? Local Ownership and United Nations Peacekeeping* (Oxford University Press, 2016).

populations – among ethno-linguistic or religious groups, across regions, and among youth, women, and displaced peoples, among others. Yet an accurate understanding of these differing local concerns and perspectives is critical to effective planning, and UN peacekeeping personnel therefore need to find ways to engage with a wide variety of constituencies.

Missions have made large strides in this regard, and both civilian staff and uniformed personnel dedicate significant time and resources to engaging with local populations and local politics. Yet, despite a strong emphasis on local engagement and local ownership in numerous UN policy documents and reports,[4] missions still struggle to effectively empower the local population to contribute to peacebuilding and communicate what UN peacekeeping operations can (and cannot) do. The 2015 High-level Independent Panel on Peace Operations (HIPPO) report stated that "peace operations have some way to go to create strong channels of communication with local populations"[5] and the Future of Peacekeeping report warns that unachievable mandates and unrealistic expectations can fuel popular discontent with missions.[6] **Without feasible mandates, adequate resources, and clear expectations management, discontent with UN missions is likely to persist.**

This paper explores some of the most prominent issues in ensuring adequate consideration of local politics and perspectives in UN peacekeeping:

- First, engagement with **local political dynamics and local peacebuilding efforts** is critical to making UN peacekeeping acceptable and effective. Indeed, while peacekeeping processes tend to focus on the national level, conflict is often situated at the sub-national and local level, driven by local considerations and impacting local communities most severely. Failure to work with local partners and adequately connect the national and local levels will increase risks for the mission and lead to inefficiencies and ineffective use of resources.
- Second, **local legitimacy** yields important operational benefits but relies heavily on the comportment and proximity of UN peacekeepers, impartiality and engagement with a range of constituencies, and the delivery of tangible results for the population.
- Third, effective peacekeeping relies on having high-quality and nuanced **local knowledge and local perceptions data**. However, due to resourcing and access issues, missions may struggle to incorporate local knowledge and information into their planning, may exclude or dismiss certain voices, or may fail to recognize important variations between constituencies and across different contexts.[7] Equally, high-quality longitudinal public opinion data in host countries is limited, making it difficult for missions to engage in outreach and planning accordingly.[8]
- Fourth, effective peacekeeping relies not only on gathering information on local perspectives, but also on communicating information back to local populations and demonstrating concrete results on the ground. Where mandates are unachievable or

[4] See, for example, United Nations, *United Nations Peacekeeping Operations: Principles and Guidelines* (United Nations, 2008) (hereafter "Capstone Doctrine"); United Nations, *High-level Independent Panel on Peace Operations*, A/70/95-S/2015/446 (United Nations, 2015) (hereafter "HIPPO report"); and individual mission mandates.
[5] United Nations, *HIPPO report*.
[6] Wane et al., *The Future of Peacekeeping, New Models and Related Capabilities* (United Nations, 2024).
[7] Sarah von Billerbeck, Katharina P. Coleman, Steffen Eckhard, and Benjamin Zyla, "Local Knowledges in International Peacebuilding: Acquisition, Filtering, and Systematic Bias," *International Studies Review* 26, no. 4 (2024): 1-28.
[8] Albert Trithart, "Local Perceptions of UN Peacekeeping: A Look at the Data," *International Peace Institute* (2023).

where results are not forthcoming, not visible, or not well communicated, there is likely to be a gap between expectations and capabilities that can quickly turn perceptions against the UN. In this regard, it is critical for missions to engage proactively in **managing expectations and strategic communication** with local populations, including through the use of new technologies.

To overcome these challenges, UN peace operations require **sustained resources for engaging with local actors and processes, support and training from New York, and member state backing**. The final section of this paper provides a list of concrete recommendations in this regard.

Engaging with Local Political Dynamics and Local Peace Processes

Over the past decade, the **"primacy of politics"** has become a central tenet of UN peace operations.[9] The idea that peacekeeping should be designed and deployed to support political processes was articulated in the 2015 HIPPO report and subsequently re-emphasized in the UN's Action for Peacekeeping and Action for Peacekeeping Plus (A4P/A4P+) frameworks. The primacy of politics is often conceived of as applying to formal political processes at the national level, but it is just as relevant to local peace processes, which are critical to consolidating peace.

Indeed, there are often strong linkages between national and sub-national violence, and failing to address local violence can undermine the success of national level processes. Even in cases where a national process does not exist, local peace processes can serve as building blocks toward a national agreement.[10] Moreover, in some contexts, many fatalities in contemporary contexts occur as a result of local conflicts.[11] Focusing only on national level processes may therefore not address some of the most egregious and intractable drivers of violence.

A recognition of the **interrelation between local and national processes** and the importance of local dynamics to national ones has meant that UN peacekeeping operations have long been involved in supporting local peace processes, and this practice has increased over time, becoming a common feature of contemporary peacekeeping mandates. Local engagement is often undertaken by the **Civil Affairs components** of missions, though they work closely with other components to implement tasks such as supporting the implementation of political agreements, holding elections, extending and restoring state authority, and protecting civilians. Indeed, this intra-mission coordination is critical in order to ensure that national and local approaches are complementary and contribute to shared objectives.

Similarly, mission work at the local level also requires strong **civil-military coordination**. Like their civilian components, military and UN police formed units have increasingly become involved in addressing local conflict and working to prevent new flare-ups at the local level. However, uniformed contingents operate on short rotation cycles, while civilian staff are often present at the community level for longer periods of time and thus may develop a deeper understanding of local conflict fault lines as well as partnerships with local peacebuilding organizations and peace constituencies. It is therefore essential that these

[9] United Nations, *HIPPO report*, 78.
[10] Allard Duursma and Jenna Russo, "The Primacy of Politics at the Local Level in UN Peace Operations," *International Peace Institute* (2025).
[11] Allard Duursma, "Non-State Conflicts, Peacekeeping, and the Conclusion of Local Agreements," *Peacebuilding* 10, no. 2 (2022).

different units communicate, share knowledge, and coordinate their efforts to ensure that they are mutually reinforcing.

An excellent example of this sort of engagement involves **Community Liaison Assistants** (CLAs) – national staff that deploy with uniformed contingents to serve as a bridge between troops and communities. Ensuring that troops are fully aware of the role of CLAs, and that they are willing and able to receive guidance from national civilian staff is important to troops' ability to engage effectively with communities. At the same time, CLAs require proper resourcing and support in order to be effective and it is important that missions do not displace all responsibility for liaison to these personnel.

UN efforts to address local conflict also require a focus on addressing drivers of conflict, which are often related to **local political economies**. While peacekeeping missions have usually focused on governance issues, PoC, the rule of law, and human rights and have steered away from local economic issues, it is important to recognize that sustainable and secure livelihoods, land use rights, and regional trading systems are often key drivers of continued violence. Demonstrating concrete improvements in this area can bring divided communities together and help to overcome points of disagreement.

In such cases, the use of **Quick Impact Projects (QIPs)** can be effective, in that they can help facilitate access to resources and serve as catalysts for livelihood opportunities, thus addressing drivers of conflict, while also bolstering trust in the mission. QIPs can also usefully contribute to operational effectiveness, for example through the construction of infrastructure that will be used by UN peacekeepers, such as roads, bridges, and air transport facilities. Missions should also form **partnerships** with actors who may be better situated to address the root causes of conflict, including development actors, the UN country team, local leaders, and others who are more embedded within local communities (please see the policy paper on "The Importance of Peacekeeping Partnerships").

In one example of this kind of engagement, in 2017, the peacekeeping operation in the Central African Republic, MINUSCA, facilitated a local peace process to end violent reprisals over cattle raids between anti-Balaka and ex-Séléka factions in Nana-Bakassa and Kouki. The mission used shuttle diplomacy to engage local authorities, spiritual leaders, and parliamentarians to mediate tensions. This resulted in an agreement that addressed key grievances such as freedom of movement and the cessation of armed activity, fostering improved security and economic interaction. The parties remained committed to the agreement in large part because of the way it divided revenues generated from taxing cattle traders between the anti-Balaka and the ex-Séléka.[12]

More broadly, to ensure the sustainability of local efforts, missions must empower local stakeholders and act as facilitators, rather than as owners, of processes to build peace. Indeed, **local ownership** was recognized in the 2008 Capstone Doctrine as "critical to the successful implementation of a peace process,"[13] first because it can help to ensure that peacekeeping efforts are not externally imposed and second because it can facilitate mandate implementation, build local capacity, and thus help ensure sustainability beyond the UN's withdrawal.[14]

Unfortunately, efforts to promote local ownership often remain primarily rhetorical or are limited to a narrow set of elites or dominant groups, thus leaving out smaller or more marginalized communities. In this regard, the UN could helpfully support local outreach and

[12] Duursma and Russo, "The Primacy of Politics at the Local Level in UN Peace Operations."
[13] United Nations, *Capstone Doctrine*, 39.
[14] von Billerbeck, *Whose Peace? Local Ownership and United Nations Peacekeeping.*

listening efforts to ensure that different communities are involved (e.g. through the provision of neutral spaces and transport) and provide guidance and technical expertise for locally-led peace initiatives. At the same time, these activities must be accompanied by efforts to connect the local and national levels of security and political engagement in order to avoid a piecemeal approach to peacekeeping and different mission components working at cross-purposes.

Building Local Legitimacy

UN peacekeeping is widely acknowledged to enjoy considerable international legitimacy due to its multilateral nature. However, these views are not always shared in host countries and there can be significant variation in legitimacy perceptions within local populations. **Local legitimacy entails the acceptance of a UN peace operation by the local population**, and the 2008 Capstone Doctrine identified local legitimacy as a key success factor for UN peacekeeping.[15] Local legitimacy can increase cooperation with the mission and can help to reduce hostility towards it, thereby lowering security risks to peacekeepers and enhancing effectiveness.

Local legitimacy has many sources. Most importantly, it derives from a mission's effectiveness in protecting civilians and maintaining security (please see policy paper on "Protection of Civilians in Peace Operations"), but it is also directly related to numerous other factors:

- **Protection of civilians and maintenance of security**
- The **conduct and behavior** of military, police, and civilian peacekeepers
- **Respect for local customs, institutions, and laws**
- **Responsiveness to the population's changing concerns and needs**
- Perceived ability to **deliver concrete benefits** to the population

Research has shown that local perceptions of a mission's legitimacy are likely to decline over time, and it is thus critical for missions to **actively and continuously engage in efforts to enhance legitimacy and build trust across a range of population groups**. This includes remaining unbiased and interacting impartially with all stakeholders, responding without delay to threats against civilians, enforcing a zero-tolerance policy towards misconduct (e.g. sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA)), and reacting quickly, decisively, and transparently to any reported incidents.

Most importantly, to achieve these goals and maintain legitimacy over time, UN personnel must **interact with a full range of local actors**, including various ethno-linguistic groups, religious groups, women, youth, displaced peoples, remote communities, and other marginalized or disenfranchised communities. Indeed, public sentiment towards the UN is often related to the proximity of the mission and the degree of interaction people have with peacekeepers.[16] Local governance structures and traditional leaders play important roles in enhancing legitimacy for peacekeeping personnel, and it is therefore also important that they interact with these leaders through both formal or informal consultations in order to understand any growing distrust and work to enhance mission relations with the population.

Unfortunately, as noted above, though some mission components (like Civil Affairs) work closely with local populations, the UN Security Council and mission leadership tend to rely heavily on host governments and often relegate minor or remote groups and communities to the background. Missions are of course required to work closely with host governments for a

[15] United Nations, *Capstone Doctrine*, 36-40.
[16] Trithart, "Local Perceptions of UN Peacekeeping: A Look at the Data."

range of important reasons, relating not least to issues surrounding sovereignty and legal agreements that detail the respective obligations of the mission and the government (such as access to facilities and areas and the status of UN personnel in the country). However, too much of a focus on the government risks excessive attention to the national level at the expense of local dimensions of conflict and peace, and can thus cause resentment towards the UN to develop in some sections of the population or among opposition groups. Indeed, it is increasingly acknowledged that formal government consent to missions alone is insufficient and that consent from the population is also important.[17] Similarly, as a 2013 report noted, "inclusivity increases the domestic legitimacy and thereby sustainability of political settlements,"[18] and reaching out to a wide range of constituents is an important part of making the UN's commitment to impartiality a reality.

Finally, missions can generate local legitimacy by **delivering concrete, visible results** in the short-term.[19] As noted above, **QIPs** are an effective tool in this regard, as they can bring immediate improvements to health, education, commercial, and transportation infrastructure, which can also benefit the mission through facilitated troop, personnel, and equipment movements. They can also enable different UN military contingents to contribute to skills development in a range of relevant areas, which can help to build rapport with the local population in their immediate areas of responsibility and showcase the UN's prioritization of the population's well-being. Indian troops, for example, have successfully undertaken relationship-building activities in Lebanon, Somalia, DRC, and South Sudan, Bangladeshi troops and Chinese medical teams have done so in South Sudan, and Pakistani troops have done so in DRC.[20]

At the same time, it is important that efforts are coordinated across the mission as well as with other international and national partners to avoid overlaps, gaps, or inappropriate projects and to ensure that they benefit as large and diverse a number of people as possible while also contributing to security and stability in general. In this regard, it is important that funding is allocated centrally within missions, and it would be helpful for peacekeeping personnel to receive training prior to deployment on how to engage in relationship-building in the communities where they are based, how to identify local needs and feasible projects, and how to align projects with broader mission goals.

Local Knowledge and Gauging Local Perceptions

High-quality knowledge of the host country, the conflict, and key stakeholders as well as data on public opinions of the mission, security conditions, and local governance are key to effective peacekeeping. Local knowledge and perceptions data feed into planning, strategy, and resource management by enabling missions to **accurately assess risks and opportunities** on an ongoing basis and to more effectively adapt to changes in their operational and political environment.

Missions dedicate a lot of effort to gathering local knowledge – indeed, for uniformed personnel and civilian staff based in field offices, this constitutes a large part of their day-to-day activities. Knowledge acquisition relies on access, both physical and to the correct people; language skills; trust; and the analytical capacity to accurately interpret cues and

[17] Ibid., 2.
[18] United Nations Department of Peacekeeping Operations and Field Support, *Understanding and Integrating Local Perceptions in Multi-Dimensional UN Peacekeeping* (United Nations, 2013).
[19] Sarah von Billerbeck, "UN Peace Operations and Conflicting Legitimacies," *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 11, no. 3 (2017): 286-305.
[20] K.K. Sharma, "Local Community First: India's Enduring Peacekeeping Ethos," *United Service Institute of India Journal* CLIV, no. 636 (2024).

language.[21] Missions have come up with creative ways to do this, for example by using the CLAs mentioned above.

However, resource limitations, such as the costs involved in traveling to certain locations (especially remote ones), staff time constraints, institutional restrictions on contacting certain people, groups, or places, or blocking of access by certain belligerent groups can hinder efforts to gain comprehensive and nuanced local knowledge.[22] Knowledge gathering is therefore sometimes done in an ad hoc, reactive, or uncoordinated way, with different mission components working independently of each other and with insufficient communication between military and civilian personnel. In addition, a tendency to rely on the same interlocutors again and again, while important for building relationships of trust with them, can mean that certain viewpoints are systematically overemphasized while others are systematically excluded, in particular those that may be hostile to or critical of the UN. In the worst cases, mission personnel can be targeted with disinformation or misinformation, both about the peacekeeping operation and the broader political and security situation in the country, and they may be unable to protect against this or accurately and quickly sort out reliable from unreliable information due to resource limitations.

Equally, **systematic opinion polls on local perceptions** of a mission or the broader political and security situation have not been conducted regularly in most missions and therefore little high-quality large-scale or longitudinal data exist. Instead, missions rely primarily on interviews, focus groups, public meetings, or media monitoring,[23] but this necessarily limits coverage and means that data on local perceptions are sometimes based on the views of a sub-section of the population and/or only represent a snapshot at a particular moment, without tracing change over time. This in turn can lead to blind spots or bias in missions' local knowledge, ultimately hindering effective decision-making and the mission's ability to adapt, to seize unexpected opportunities, and to adjust policies and programs to changing circumstances.

It is therefore important that peacekeeping missions have **resources to gather local knowledge**, including staff time, travel to different locations on a regular basis, and the tools to accurately analyze information. In addition, personnel should be given training in impartial knowledge gathering and missions should regularly self-assess their efforts in this regard to ensure that no important viewpoints are being missed. Finally, missions need the resources to undertake larger perception surveys or to sub-contract this to reliable third parties – indeed, significant expertise exists in this kind of work among academics and analysts who study peace operations. Across all of these activities, **advancements in information technology and the use of AI** could helpfully enhance peacekeepers' ability to gather and interpret perceptions data cost-effectively and at scale.

Managing Expectations and Strategic Communications

While gathering information on the local context and conflict and on local perceptions is critical for peacekeepers, communication must be a two-way street. It is therefore equally important for peacekeepers to **communicate with the local population** about their goals, activities, and roles, to share clear, impartial, and up-to-date information about the political and security situation, to provide updates on mission progress, and to create regular

[21] von Billerbeck et al., "Local Knowledges in International Peacebuilding: Acquisition, Filtering, and Systematic Bias."
[22] Ibid.
[23] United Nations Department of Peacekeeping Operations and Field Support, *Understanding and Integrating Local Perceptions*.

opportunities for the population to respond to and question the mission. Doing so is key to ensuring that local expectations of what the mission can and cannot do are realistic and that local actors view the UN as a reliable partner for peace in their country. As the Future of Peacekeeping report has noted, "a serious **'capability-expectations gap'** emerges when peacekeepers are insufficiently resourced to deliver fully on their mandates or expectations are unrealistically high."[24] Avoiding this kind of misunderstanding through careful **expectations management and strategic communications** will enhance the safety of UN peacekeepers and allow them to focus on mandate implementation.

Of course, with so many diverse stakeholders, managing expectations in UN peacekeeping is a complex task, since what different groups expect and want from a UN presence in their country will vary. In addition, inadequate resources, insufficient personnel and/or peacekeepers deployed thinly over large areas, vague or unrealistic mandates, security challenges, logistical constraints, and resistant political leaders all add to the challenges of managing expectations.

More specifically, mandates sometimes call for broad objectives like nation-building, but peacekeepers are often not trained or equipped to undertake such tasks, provided with little guidance on how to fulfil them, and are not given sufficient resources to complete them, meaning that expectations cannot be met. Equally, local populations often expect peacekeepers to act as an army or government substitute, providing security, governance, and economic aid, but again, these are usually beyond the mandate and are certainly beyond the available resources. Finally, the media can create unrealistic expectations by oversimplifying the role of peacekeepers or portraying failures without acknowledging constraints. Social media in particular spreads both accurate and misleading narratives, influencing public opinion and political pressure, but peacekeeping personnel often lack the resources to counter or balance these effects.

Successfully managing expectations in these conditions involves two sets of actions: first, collecting data on local views, as discussed above, and second, strategic communications. As described, there is a lack of **primary data on local perceptions**, but such data are crucial for understanding the needs, concerns, and trust in the UN of local populations. At the same time, language barriers can pose a challenge, and some areas may be too dangerous for direct surveys. In addition, respondents may be afraid of retaliation from belligerents and refrain from providing honest answers or from responding at all.

Despite these challenges, numerous missions have managed to collect data on public perceptions. The peacekeeping missions in Mali (MINUSMA) and the Democratic Republic of Congo (MONUSCO) used perception surveys to assess local attitudes toward peacekeepers. Perception survey data in Lebanon (UNIFIL) were used to assess the effectiveness of the mission.[25] Direct engagement with community leaders, youth groups, and women's associations was undertaken in Somalia, Sierra Leone, and Eastern Congo by Indian troops.[26] UNMISS in South Sudan regularly conducts dialogues with displaced persons in PoC sites. Such efforts can be supplemented by monitoring social media platforms, radio, and newspapers to track public opinion trends and analyze local perceptions based on digital conversations. In both of these sets of activities, new technologies and AI-supported tools as well as engagement with external experts can help missions to undertake these efforts without heavy investments of UN personnel's time.

[24] Wane et al., *The Future of Peacekeeping, New Models and Related Capabilities* (United Nations, 2024), 10.
[25] A.K. Bardalai, *Keeping the Peace: UN Peace Operations and their Effectiveness – An Assessment* (Pentagon Press, 2022), 120-177.
[26] Sharma, "Local Community First: India's Enduring Peacekeeping Ethos."

Strategic communications entails the use of coordinated messaging to keep all mission components aligned, engagement activities aimed at shaping public perceptions and reinforcing the mission's legitimacy, and efforts to disseminate accurate and timely information about the mission and the political and security situation in the country. Strategic communications can include public information campaigns, media outreach to stakeholders, and communication strategies for crisis management.

In particular, in a conflict-ridden and/or remote areas, populations often rely on radio as their primary source of information. **UN-supported radio stations** provide neutral, fact-based news about peacekeeping efforts, and also serve to build local capacity for disseminating reliable, accurate, and factual information – examples include Radio Miraya in South Sudan, Radio Okapi in DRC, and Guira FM in Central African Republic. These stations broadcast UN and local news, provide fact-based information, and bring in local artists and speakers to highlight culture, common concerns, and community activities, and are often widely viewed as the most reliable news source in a host country.

At the same time, the expansion of **social media** constitutes an additional challenge to expectations management, since **mis- and disinformation** often circulate more – and more quickly – on these platforms. Here, the UN needs to adopt a proactive, multi-layered strategy that includes real-time monitoring, strategic engagement, and community outreach. Again, AI-driven analysis tools could be deployed to identify any false narratives at their early stages and detect viral disinformation trends. The UN mission can also use trusted local voices including religious leaders, village elders, community figures, and respected journalists to counter mis- and disinformation. In Lebanon, UNIFIL has successfully used social media videos to clarify its neutral role amid regional tensions.[27] The UN can also employ CLAs to refute rumors in face-to-face engagements at the community level. Similarly, townhall meetings conducted by a contingent commander in Kailahun, Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL) during crises afforded opportunities to directly address misinformation.

Importantly, these sorts of events also give community members the opportunity to respond to the UN, share grievances, and ask questions, which can help to build trust in and legitimacy for the mission. By investing in community engagement, data-driven decision-making, and proactive messaging, peacekeeping operations can manage expectations, counter mis- and disinformation, enhance popular trust in the UN, and thereby improve their effectiveness.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Improving local perceptions of UN peacekeeping is only possible if UN personnel:

- Engage with local conflict dynamics and local peace initiatives
- Enjoy legitimacy at the local level
- Have adequate, accurate, and deep knowledge of the local context and of the concerns of local populations
- Regularly work to manage expectations and engage in strategic communications

Unfortunately, unrealistic or vague mandates, resource constraints, security restrictions, a lack of training, a lack of access to advanced technologies, and institutional incentives frequently leave mission personnel unable to fully engage in these activities.

[27] United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon, "Social Media," https://unifil.unmissions.org/social-media (accessed on 16 April 2025).

However, **investment by member states, alongside strong support from UN headquarters**, can enable staff to engage more deeply, regularly, and widely with local populations. This investment will in the long run render peacekeeping more successful and cost-effective, leading to sustainable results and reducing risks to personnel. This in turn can prevent conflict spillover into neighboring states, forestall conflict recidivism, alleviate humanitarian crises, and reduce refugee outflows.

Specifically, we have the following recommendations:

- Member states should adequately **resource the work of missions at the local level**, including regular engagement activities with the local population through **joint programs, listening sessions, and feedback opportunities for the population**, as well as travel allowances, the provision of neutral spaces, the provision of technical expertise and mediation support, and the continued engagement of and adequate support to CLAs.
- Member states should provide **continued funding for QIPs**, and missions should coordinate funding for local-level projects across civilian and military components to both maximize benefits for the local population and ensure that they align with overall mission objectives.
- Mission leaders and member states should promote **civil-military coordination frameworks** that ensure a shared understanding of objectives, including regular **joint planning sessions** at mission headquarters and in field offices and **integrated training programs**.
- Missions should form **partnerships with actors who are able to address longer-term drivers of conflict**. This includes national and local actors, the UN country team, and other development teams that can implement sustainable solutions.
- Missions should provide **training for military and civilian personnel about how to gather local knowledge** in a comprehensive way that avoids blind spots and bias and invest in tools that enable missions to **self-assess** these efforts.
- Member states should invest in **new technologies and AI-assisted tools to monitor public opinion and combat mis- and disinformation** and in **larger public perceptions** surveys, potentially through external experts and academics.
- Member states should provide **resources for enhanced strategic communications** by missions that highlight UN support to the local population, local ownership of the peacebuilding process, ensure cultural sensitivity, and highlight the benefits and limits of what UN peace operations can do. This includes funding for **UN radio stations, social media campaigns, and other media engagement**.

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