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Effectiveness of Peace Operations Network

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

UN Peace Operations &

Human Rights

A Thematic Study

Prof. Charles T. Hunt

Emma Bapt, Dr Adam Day, Dr Fiifi Edu-Afful,
Abigail Gérard-Baldé, Hafsa Maalim, Wendy MacClinchy,
Nadia Nata & Dr Claudia Pfeifer Cruz



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Visiting address: C.J. Hambros plass 2d

Address: P.O. Box 8159 Dep. NO-0033 Oslo, Norway

Internet: effectivepeaceops.net | www.nupi.no

E-mail: info@nupi.no

Fax: [+ 47] 22 99 40 50

Tel: [+ 47] 22 99 40 00

EPON Report

UN Peace Operations and Human Rights: A Thematic Study

Lead author

Prof. Charles T. Hunt – Senior Fellow, United Nations University Centre for Policy Research/
Senior Research Associate, Institute for Security Studies/Professor of Global Security, RMIT
University

Co-authors

Ms Emma Bapt – United Nations University Centre for Policy Research

Dr Adam Day – United Nations University Centre for Policy Research

Dr Fiifi Edu-Afful – Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping Training Centre (KAIPTC)

Ms Abigail Gérard-Baldé – Center for Civilians in Conflict (CIVIC)

Ms Hafsa Maalim – Independent researcher

Ms Wendy MacClinchy – Center for Civilians in Conflict (CIVIC)

Ms Nadia Nata – Independent researcher

Dr Claudia Pfeifer Cruz – Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI)



Election in the DRC, Kinshasa, the country would vote on 20 December 2023, for the presidential, legislative and local elections. Photo: MONUSCO/Radio Okapi / Myriam Asmani.

Executive summary

Today's conflicts are exacerbated and prolonged by recurring instances of exclusion, discrimination, and the infringement of human rights, all occurring alongside elevated levels of corruption and a widespread decline in the enforcement of the rule of law and accountability.¹ The United Nations (UN) system has acknowledged that effectively addressing underlying grievances, rights violations, and different forms of exclusion are fundamental to ending cycles of violence and transitioning to sustained peace.² These lessons highlight the strong relationship between the UN's work on human rights and its efforts to promote peace and security.

Over the past 30 years, UN peace operations have increasingly included strong human rights mandates and capacities. This reflects the growing awareness of the links between human rights and conflict management, including the protection of civilians and deeply entrenched governance shortfalls in many fragile, conflict-affected settings. However, in the last few years, there has been rising pushback on human rights language (especially related to the Women, Peace and Security agenda and child protection) in peace operations mandates, including instances where permanent members have explicitly stated that these elements resulted in abstentions

1 UN. (2023). "Report of the Secretary-General on the Overall performance of United Nations peacekeeping operations". S/2023/646. New York: UN. <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N23/248/31/PDF/N2324831.pdf?OpenElement>, para 12, p. 4.

2 The UN and World Bank (2018) "Pathways for Peace: Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Conflict" report highlighted that "exclusion from access to power, opportunity, services, and security creates fertile ground for mobilizing group grievances to violence, especially in areas with weak state capacity or legitimacy or in the context of human rights abuses" (p. xviii). Furthermore, the report highlighted the link between inequality and violent conflict as one of the "oldest issues in political economy" (p. 109). The "A New Agenda for Peace" (2023) also emphasised the political economy of conflict, arguing that "inequality can lead to conflict when it overlaps with differences in access and opportunities across groups defined around specific identities" (p. 6).

on mandate renewals.³ Furthermore, the UN’s prioritisation of human rights can present challenges for UN peace operations, which rely on host state consent for their operations, and which are often involved in delicate political processes. It is a continuing challenge for the UN system to navigate the complex political terrain of conflict settings and leverage the combined efforts of human rights and other aspects of peace operations. Indeed, the challenge may become more acute in the context of downward pressure on large peace operations and the need to preserve core human rights capacities in periods of transition.

This study by the Effectiveness of Peace Operations Network (EPON) examines the contributions of the UN’s human rights work within a wide range of UN peace operations, including peacekeeping missions, special political missions (SPMs), and regional prevention offices. The core questions of this study were: (1) How does the UN’s human rights engagement contribute to the overall impact of UN peace operations, including the protection of civilians? (2) Overall, how do UN peace operations themselves contribute to human rights outcomes? (3) What lessons can be drawn by comparing different UN peace operations in terms of building better synergies between human rights-focused activities and the other work of missions? The goal of the report is to offer a comparative, empirically backed assessment of the ways that efforts by UN peace operations to advance human rights contribute to mission effectiveness and broader mission objectives.

Key Findings

The violation and abuse of human rights are both a root cause and direct driver of violent conflict around the world. This study has produced and consolidated evidence demonstrating that **UN peace operations efforts to advance human rights contribute to a reduction in violence levels and to longer-term sustainable peace.** The impact is not always direct – indeed, in many cases, the contribution of human rights components is difficult to identify, let alone establish causation. However, across a wide range of settings, there is a record of human rights efforts improving the early-warning, protection of civilians, conflict management, and peacebuilding outcomes of peace operations.

These findings reinforce a growing body of scholarship and internal UN assessments that recognise the significance of human rights activities, norms and principles in peace operations.⁴

3 For instance, human rights language has been the subject of intense negotiations for mandate renewals of UNSMIL (SPM) (circa 2020/2021), MINUSMA (2022), and MONUSCO (2022).

4 See for example, Day, A. & Hunt, C.T. (2021). “Protecting Together: Lessons from Mali and South Sudan on coherence between human rights and military components in UN peace operations”. New York: UNU. http://collections.unu.edu/eserv/UNU:8263/UNU_ProtectingTogether.pdf; OHCHR. (2013). “United Nations Peace Operations Guidance Note: Integrating Human Rights in United Nations Military Components: Good Practices and Lessons Learned”. Geneva: OHCHR; Mamiya, R.H. (2020). “Going Further Together: the contribution of human rights components to the implementation of mandates of United Nations field missions”. New York: UNDPO and OHCHR. https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Press/WebStories/Going_Further_Together_advance_unedited_version.pdf; UN. (2020). “Integrating Human Rights into Peace Operations Brings Missions Closer to People, Advances Inclusive Development, High Commissioner Tells Security Council”. SC/14242. <https://www.un.org/press/en/2020/sc14242.doc.htm>.

Notably, human rights activities help peace operations achieve a wide range of objectives central to their mandates. Concurrently, peace operations are crucial vehicles for improving human rights outcomes in conflict settings. An important finding of this study is that **the positive benefits of human rights work accrue across various kinds of missions and at different moments in conflicts**. Whether a small envoy's office or a large, multidimensional peacekeeping mission, human rights-based engagement can enable more effective operations. Whether deployed at the earliest onset of violent conflict or well after the height of hostilities, human rights efforts within UN missions have a unique and tangible value to add.

As the UN system – in particular the Security Council and General Assembly – takes up the New Agenda for Peace's call to reflect on the limits and future of peacekeeping, human rights will need to be kept front and centre.⁵ Indeed, if the future of UN peace operations is likely to be smaller missions with lighter footprints, then the imperative to use all available tools beyond the use of force may provide further impetus for upscaling and prioritising human rights work. Furthermore, as larger missions continue or begin their transition out of some of the most conflict-affected settings, **human rights-focused presences may be some of the most crucial bridges to prevent a relapse into war**.

At the same time, this study also highlights several challenges to UN operations pursuing human rights-based approaches. In some settings, the promotion of human rights is viewed with suspicion as an outside, intrusive agenda and/or a risk to a fragile peace process. In a distortion of the purpose of the UN Charter, some Member States characterise human rights as an imposition on state sovereignty. Within missions, there can also be a tendency to sideline human rights-focused efforts as a detriment to delicate political processes or a burden on already stretched operational needs. The findings in this study suggest that this is a “false dichotomy” – in the overwhelming bulk of cases, human rights components enable better outcomes in political processes, the protection of civilians (POC), delivery of humanitarian assistance, and improve the governance functions of conflict-affected states.

These findings come at an important juncture for the broader human rights discourse, including the 75th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). At a moment of unprecedented geopolitical fracture and a “significant global retrenchment of human rights”,⁶ the downward pressure on the UN's peace and security work is stronger than ever. Indeed, the scepticism by many Member States concerning the role of human rights in peace operations may well result in a reduction of human rights capacity at precisely the moment when many mission settings are facing some of their greatest challenges.⁷ Attempts by some Member States to cut

5 UN. (2023). “A New Agenda for Peace: Our Common Agenda, Policy Brief 9”. <https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/our-common-agenda-policy-brief-new-agenda-for-peace-en.pdf>.

6 Ibid, p. 7.

7 International Crisis Group. (2023). “Ten Challenges for the UN in 2023-2024”. Special Briefing no. 11, 14 September. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/global/sb11-ten-challenges-un-2023-2024>. See also: Gowan, R. & Forti D. (2023). “What Future for UN Peacekeeping in Africa after Mali Shuttles Its Mission?” *International Crisis Group*, 10 July. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/global-mali/what-future-un-peacekeeping-africa-after-mali-shuttles-its-mission>.



Ghanaian peacekeepers pictured during a patrol in the Internally Displaced Persons camp in Bentiu, South Sudan, on 30 October 2021. Photo: Gregório Cunha/UNMISS

funding for human rights components within budgeting processes via the Fifth Committee of the General Assembly are growing stronger, while many Member States are shifting emphasis toward more militarised actions. The findings of this study point in the opposite direction: **if peace operations are to become more effective presences on the ground, capable of addressing both the immediate causes of violence and the deeper drivers of instability, they will need to be capacitated with robust human rights mandates and components and strong support from the broader UN architecture and Member States.**

On this basis, the following recommendations offer specific and concrete actions that the UN Security Council, host governments, UN Secretariat, Member States, and mission leadership can take to ensure they are harnessing human rights for the maximum impact in conflict settings.

For the UN Security Council

1. Frame human rights principles, capacities and activities as enablers for mission mandates

Often, mandates silo human rights into a discrete set of activities and outcomes, contributing to a perception that rights are a standalone mission function. While it is important for human rights to receive targeted attention, this report suggests that a rights-based approach could also be worked across more mission mandate areas, including political processes, local conflict resolution, protection of civilians, and humanitarian engagement. The term “rights-based approach” is not well-defined in the peace operations context, and perhaps an initial step would involve a Security Council discussion – supported by the Secretariat – to develop a common understanding of the concept.

2. Leverage human rights actors as a bridge for mission transitions.

As some of the largest missions begin to transition out of volatile settings, there is a risk that large-scale conflict may return. In particular, as missions reduce their static footprint and related early-warning capabilities, the UN may be poorly positioned to anticipate new signals of escalation and/or carry out POC work. Ensuring that human rights actors are able to maintain a strong footprint and mandates on the ground, and considering how rights can form one of the backbones of mission transition planning, could help the Security Council reduce relapse risks. The dual role the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) can play – reporting both within UN missions and as an independent actor – can be especially important in transitional moments.

3. Protect human rights from downward pressures

There is a clear link between mandate language and the ability of missions to maintain critical functions in the face of downward budgetary pressure. The Security Council can buttress human rights components against this pressure by maintaining specific mandate language, benchmarks, and core capacities related to human rights in peace operations. Specific in-briefings organised by the Security Council for incoming E-10 Members and focused on the value of human rights to peace operations could help build a positive culture across the Council.

4. Reaffirm human rights as a point of consensus

The Security Council remains deeply divided, and there is a risk that negative dynamics amongst Council members will undermine much-needed political support for UN peace operations.

At the same time, all Members of the Council have agreed on the UDHR, and there is a strong track record of Council Members reaching consensus on human rights language across its work. This could be built upon by taking steps including dedicated sessions reaffirming the importance of human rights to the Council's work, informal sessions amongst Council members to explore consensus issues on rights, and a dedicated discussion on the role of human rights in the "reflection" called for by the New Agenda for Peace.

For Host Governments

Policy reports seldom have a section of recommendations dedicated to host governments, but we believe the findings of this report warrant three recommendations in particular:

1. Lean into human rights

Across the cases, governments that expressed a willingness to work directly on and in support of human rights issues gained a wide range of benefits including: (1) positive visibility with donors; (2) increased capacity-building support; (3) a greater likelihood of receiving resources for key processes like elections; and (4) a positive narrative with the Security Council. The risks of ignoring human rights are also significant, allowing other actors to shape the approach and lead to a potential decreased willingness of donors to engage. Governments can reap immediate benefits through: (1) ratification and compliance with international human rights treaties obligations and mechanisms; (2) budget allocations to support human rights bodies and their activities, including the Justice Chain Actors and the National Human Rights Institutions (NHRIs); and (3) public statements on the importance of human rights to the work of UN missions in country.

2. Embrace the Human Rights Due Diligence Policy (HRDDP)

The HRDDP is a powerful tool to build the human rights capacity of the national military and police and for increasing accountability, even in the absence of strong state institutions. In addition to advocating for human rights promotion and protection, the HRDDP can be instrumental in strengthening weak governance capacities by identifying and reducing risks, incentivising behaviour improvement, and garnering positive donor support for security sector reform. Indeed, the HRDDP can help channel resources to a wide range of governance activities related to non-UN security forces and relevant governance structures, adding much-needed support to states with weak infrastructure and institutional capacity.

3. Build more clarity on mission plans, approaches and goals from the outset

A recurrent challenge in peace operations is the difference in view between the UN and host governments about the core purpose of a mission. This lack of common understanding is an especially acute problem in large missions with broad mandates and can result in disagreements around the role of human rights, in particular. Host governments can take a proactive role by seeking greater granularity on mission plans, approaches, and goals from the outset. How the UN sees its human rights mandate unfolding over time and at key moments (for example, in elections or in the case of an escalation into violence) is something governments should actively seek to understand early on in a mission. This could even take the form of a “compact” between the mission and host government, setting out agreed areas of work and avoiding the misunderstandings that have existed in the past.⁸

For the UN Secretariat

1. Develop a clear narrative on the contributions of human rights to UN peace operations

As this study has shown, there is ample evidence demonstrating the important contributions that human rights make to UN peace operations, including tangible results that improve the lives of people in conflict-affected settings. The UN Secretariat could helpfully promote the concept of human rights as a problem-solving, conflict management tool, including in areas of work that are traditionally seen by some as more difficult, such as the pursuit of justice and accountability for past crimes. This may help address the longstanding concern amongst some, including those in the so-called Global South, that human rights represent a Western agenda or an intrusive set of interventions into the domestic affairs of states. Reframing the human rights agenda as an enabler of improved governance, a capaciator of the Sustainable Development Goals, and an integral part of sustainable peace could help shift the narrative. This could be part of a broader effort to define a “rights-based approach”.

This value proposition could include a series of simple, empirically backed statements, echoing core New Agenda for Peace messages such as:

- Protecting civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights has a direct impact on stability and the risks of violent conflict.⁹

8 Similar suggestions have included a memorandum of understanding (MoU), to be established by the Council with the main conflict parties prior to authorising a peace operation, which would “serve to codify political consent and outline key points of agreement, including the intended core purpose and objectives of the mission”. See: Gregory, J. & Sharland, L. (2023). “Host-Country Consent in UN Peacekeeping”. Washington, DC: Stimson Center, p. 42.

9 Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies. (2021). “From Rhetoric to Action Delivering Equality & Inclusion, Flagship Report – September 2021”. NYU Center on International Cooperation. <https://s42831.pcdn.co/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2023/03/From-Rhetoric-to-Action-Flagship-Report-2021-WEB.pdf>.

- Serious violations of human rights are a direct driver of large-scale violent conflict, meaning addressing human rights results in reduced conflict risks.¹⁰
- Protecting human rights is one of the most important ways a country can end cycles of violence.¹¹
- Access to justice reduces the risks of violent conflict in a wide range of settings.¹²
- Peace agreements with strong human rights aspects are more durable and effective.¹³
- Dealing with legacies of serious human rights violations and addressing communities' grievances and justice demands helps stabilise society, build trust, and foster social cohesion and reconciliation.¹⁴

2. Support flexible approaches by missions

In many of the missions covered, human rights discourse can act as a lightning rod that may sour relations with host governments or other important partners. Overly vocal or visible human rights approaches in these situations may undermine other mission priorities or even the ability of missions to carry on in country. However, there is positive practice in a range of mission settings where human rights issues are pursued under the radar or under the rubric of broader thematic agendas. One example is the work of UNMHA in Yemen, conducted under the theme of international humanitarian law, but also producing positive human rights impacts. The Rule of Law and Security Institutions Section in South Sudan has also achieved significant gains in capacitating institutions against impunity, much of which has not been explicitly framed as human rights per se. As one expert suggested, some of the best human rights work is about “doing it without saying it”.

Here, the UN Secretariat (Integrated Operational Teams (IOTs) in particular) can support missions by providing flexible support that allows maximum freedom for mission leadership to change direction when needed. Rather than demand New York-centric mandate implementation plans, delegating greater authority to missions to use resources as they see fit may allow this

10 Cingranelli, D., Mark, S., Gibney, M., Haschke, P., Wood, R., & Aron, D. (2019). “Human Rights Violations and Violent Internal Conflict”. *Social Sciences*, 8(2), 41. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci8020041>.

11 Shay, C. W. (2023). “Swords into ploughshares? Why human rights abuses persist after resistance campaigns”. *Journal of Peace Research*, 60(1), 141-156. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00223433221140432>.

12 Andersson, D. (2023). “Rising to the challenge: Building peaceful, just, equal, and inclusive societies in a divided world”. *Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies*. https://www.sdg16.plus/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2023/07/Rising-to-the-Challenge_FINAL_7Jul23.pdf.

13 Pospisil, J. (2022). “Peace Accords and Human Rights”. In R. Mac Ginty, & A. Wanis-St. John (Eds.), *Contemporary Peacemaking: Peace Processes, Peacebuilding and Conflict*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 427-445. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-82962-9_21.

14 UN. (2023). “Guidance Note of the Secretary-General: Transitional Justice A Strategic Tool for People, Prevention and Peace”. https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/issues/transitionaljustice/sg-guidance-note/2023_07_guidance_note_transitional_justice_en.pdf.

kind of creative approach in more settings. Experiences in missions like the UN Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) – which has developed its own mission concept and POC implementation plans – offer good examples of the benefits of giving missions autonomy and flexibility.

3. Strengthen peace operations' capacities on economic, social and cultural rights

As the landmark UN-World Bank Pathways for Peace report underscored, horizontal inequalities amongst groups are some of the most important drivers of violent conflict.¹⁵ Nevertheless, the term “horizontal inequality” is a euphemism: most people in conflict settings experience inequality as violations of their rights to assembly, livelihoods, and development. The tendency of UN peace operations to focus almost entirely on political and civil rights means this basket of rights is often overlooked, despite being critical to sustainable peace. Indeed, field missions are seldom mandated or equipped to engage on socio-economic issues, beyond fairly light cooperation with UN Country Teams in some settings.

This is a missed opportunity and could be addressed by using the human rights infrastructure to understand and respond to social and political concerns. As the OHCHR Office Plan suggests, addressing horizontal inequality is already a top priority. Bringing this priority more centrally into the work of peace operations could create a positive knock-on effect. Such a shift would also clearly align with the emphasis on the political economy of conflict highlighted in the New Agenda for Peace.

4. Align human rights more directly with peace and security outcome

Human rights engagement and peace and security outcomes in UN peace operations should be explicitly aligned. Whether reserving the right to issue some sensitive reports in the OHCHR's name only or flexibly publishing some reports around key moments in a country's trajectory (e.g., avoiding elections periods), there are many good practices that help to align the work of the OHCHR and the peace and security outcomes of missions.

This could be made more systematic via additional **joint guidance for OHCHR and the Departments of Peace Operations and of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPO/DPPA)** that would go beyond extant guidance¹⁶ to offer leadership in missions' good practice, key decision considerations, and advice on using human rights effectively.

15 UN and World Bank. (2018). *Pathways for Peace: Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Conflict*. Washington, DC: World Bank.

16 For instance, the 2008 policy on public reporting and the 2011 policy on integration and other guidance were not technically co-signed by OHCHR. However, the OHCHR was extensively involved in its development (e.g., the Standard Operating Procedure on accountability for crimes against peacekeepers, and Standard Operating Procedure on detention).

An even more important step would involve joining the peace and security architecture more directly with the human rights apparatus. Significant effort has gone into building a robust human rights presence in New York, including a strong team that advises UN peace operations at all levels. The same is not true of Geneva, where the DPO, DPPA and Peacebuilding Support Office (PBSO) have no presence. **Establishing a small advisory team of DPO/DPPA peace and security experts in Geneva** could help connect the strategic levels of the two pillars of the UN, replicating what has been a very positive initiative by the OHCHR in New York. Beyond the immediate positive benefits of adding a peace and security lens to the work of human rights actors in Geneva, this would send a helpful signal that the work of human rights is, at its core, about prevention.

Other actions that could align the human rights architecture with the UN's peace and security work include:

- Inclusion of the recommendations of Human Rights Council (HRC) mechanisms in conflict analyses and needs assessments for peace operations mandates.
- Formalising the exchange of reports between councils through the Secretary-General (SG).
- Involvement of Resident Coordinators (RCs)/triple-hat Deputy Special Representatives of the Secretary-General (DSRSGs) in country-specific HRC meetings.
- Enhancement of communication and information sharing between the mission and UN Country Team (UNCT) concerning HRDDP.
- Strengthen the mandate of Human Rights Advisers of Special Envoys' offices, including by ensuring they are part of the Envoys' Senior Management Team and have a double reporting line to the OHCHR.

5. Be a strong backbone for human rights

One of the most important roles the UN Secretariat can play is to support mission leadership in their human rights stance. Especially when governments place strong pressure on human rights issues (e.g. the expulsion of MINUSMA's head of Human Rights Division (HRD) in early 2023), it is all the more critical that leadership is given visible, vocal support. This does not mean overly strident public comments, but it does mean sending **a strong message that human rights engagement is non-negotiable** and that missions have an integral mandate to pursue a human rights agenda. Indeed, having strong top cover from Headquarters is often crucial to allowing field-based actors to conduct quieter human rights work.

There is a real risk in the coming years that some governments may seek to remove human rights activities from the mandates and capacities of UN presences that follow from outgoing



Abdou Abarry, Special Representative of the Secretary-General and Head of the United Nations Regional Office for Central Africa, briefs the Security Council meeting on the Central African region. The Council heard a Report of the Secretary-General on the situation in Central Africa and the activities of the United Nations Regional Office for Central Africa. Photo: UN Photo/Eskinder Debebe.

peace operations. The pressure from some Security Council members to put human rights “first on the chopping block” for mission downsizing is a worrying trend. From the SG down, the message should be clear: UN peace operations are founded on human rights, and mission leadership has the unwavering support of Headquarters. Indeed, in some cases, the strongest human rights messages may need to come from New York (particularly from Council Members), leaving more flexibility for Special Representatives of the Secretary-General (SRSGs) to operate on the ground. According to a wide range of experts and mission staff, this dynamic has not been the case in recent years.

6. Drive rights-based mission transitions

As missions transition out or undergo major reconfigurations, there are often higher risks of relapse into open conflict. This “double transition” effect occurs because mission transitions are often concurrent with major changes in country (new governments and/or peace processes). The above cases suggest that human rights components play an indispensable part of mission transitions, maintaining a dynamic field presence and early-warning function even as other mission presences leave. Notwithstanding challenges with ensuring that early warning translates into rapid responses, this is particularly important given that some of the most acute risks in transition moments concern a power grab by elites (e.g., the coups in Mali and Sudan), which can lead to large-scale violations of political rights as new governments crackdown on dissidents.

Existing UN guidance already requires that mission transition planning ensures sufficient capabilities to monitor and report on human rights issues. The experience of UNITAMS during Sudan’s coup points to the strategic importance of transition processes having strong human rights monitoring and reporting functions. Our findings strongly support this approach, and would go further, suggesting that a rights-based mission transition approach could help to position follow-on missions more strategically for the issues likely to arise during fragile moments in a country’s own transition. **Specific human rights benchmarks measuring the protection of political space, reduction of abuses, and increases of governance capacities in the areas of rule of law, justice, and policing should be part of transition plans.** Moreover, clear red lines in the areas of protection of civilians – allowing for a pause of transition processes if major changes occur on the ground – would provide the UN with important leverage through transition processes.¹⁷

On a more technical level, the OHCHR should be part of all mission assessment/planning processes, Technical Assessment Missions (TAMs), and Strategic Assessment Missions (SAMs) that inform and shape mission transitions. Furthermore, the OHCHR representatives must be at the right level of seniority to counter the weight of other parts of the UN taking part in the assessment.

17 There is also a need for the OHCHR to be ready to take over (including through early resource mobilisation, particularly in cases where the establishment of a stand-alone OHCHR presence is: 1) possible and 2) necessary, e.g., in case of transitions from UN peace operations to UNCTs).

Our findings suggest that multidimensional mission transitions pose a specific challenge for maintaining a human rights presence and capacity as an operation leaves a country. Many human rights components rely on mission team sites for their presence and ongoing operations. As those sites drawdown, this leaves human rights without a physical base, often meaning the mission loses important eyes and ears at a time when awareness and early-warning are crucial (the same problem exists for civil affairs). Part of **future mission transition plans should include a specific effort to maintain the physical presence of human rights capacities beyond the lifespan of military team sites.** Furthermore, where no follow-on mission is envisaged, lessons can be learned from creative Peacebuilding Fund (PBF) support to maintain human rights activities beyond the mission's time on the ground.¹⁸

7. Adopt a multi-scalar national-regional-international approach

In recent years, the UN has developed a wide range of regional approaches and capacities, including new regional groupings in UN Headquarters, regional strategies for most conflict-affected arenas, and the creation of new regional offices (e.g. the Horn of Africa). These offer important forums for advancing the human rights agenda, particularly when the UN faces strong national constraints on its work or where rights concerns have a transnational aspect. **Embedding rights-based analysis and objectives more directly in regional strategies** would help the UN move more fluidly between national, regional, and international levels. In highly contested elections, the immediate aftermath of coups or moments where authoritarian leaders are limiting political space in country, it can be more useful for the UN to engage regional actors on issues of rights abuses. Particularly in the African context, the cases examined demonstrate the crucial role that sub-regional organisations can play in engaging on delicate issues when the UN is unable to.

8. Invest in adaptive peace and organisational learning

Some of the cases studied in this report display an extraordinarily creative set of approaches from mission leaders and staff, often finding innovative ways to pursue a rights-based agenda without following traditional or visible pathways. In South Sudan, a joint special mobile court was created in 2021 by national authorities, with support from the Mission, to enforce a local peace agreement regulating cross-border cattle migration between two neighbouring states in the country and to respond to past violence.¹⁹ The court, which works to sentence those convicted and order compensation in alignment with local traditions, has received broad praise from local communities for bringing peace to an area once considered a flashpoint of sub-national violence.

18 See Liberia, Burundi. See also examples from the forthcoming “UNU-CPR Thematic Review on Human Rights and Peacebuilding”, specifically the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) case study which examines four PBF-funded projects with relevant insights for programming in the context of MONUSCO's gradual withdrawal from the country, as well as broader insights for pursuing programming in mission transition settings.

19 UNMISS. (2023). “Joint special mobile court resuming work on cases related to cross-border cattle migration”, 10 February. <https://unmiss.unmissions.org/joint-special-mobile-court-resuming-work-cases-related-cross-border-cattle-migration>.



A multidisciplinary delegation from MINUSMA holds discussions in June 2022 on the best ways and means to strengthen security in the affected areas of Gao, Mali, following attacks there.

Photo: MONUSCO/Michael Ali.

The ability of missions to adapt to new circumstances and creatively deploy their resources often comes up against the strictures of results-based budgeting and the inflexible requirements of New York-driven plans. However, as a growing body of scholarship demonstrates, nimble, adaptive forms of peacebuilding can deliver more effective and tailored results, achieving a wider range of benefits by responding to the needs of populations on the ground.²⁰ Building iterative approaches where theories of change are tested on the ground, and where resources follow proven pathways for impact, is essential to an adaptive approach.

Our findings align with this scholarship and add an important element to the equation: human rights reporting and analysis are crucial to this learning/adaptation process. Experts across missions pointed to the relevance and timeliness of human rights information, suggesting that it offered some of the most important indicators for how situations were developing, early signals of changing risk landscapes, and some of the most accurate depictions of how local populations were experiencing conflict.

An adaptive, iterative approach to peace operations should draw heavily on human rights components to ensure that it is able to shift resources to the activities most likely to deliver results. This also points to the priority of maintaining a strong human rights component throughout the lifespan of missions.

For Peace Operations

Across UN peace operations, there was a clear understanding that human rights were, in principle, a crucial part of the UN's mandate. However, in practice, some UN staff continued to see human rights components as a largely independent entity, reporting to Geneva more than the SRSG, and possessing a set of liabilities for the broader mission mandate. This was not a universal view, and our research suggests that human rights is increasingly being accepted as a “force multiplier” for missions. However, it will require continued efforts to build a common sense of synergy across missions. The following recommendations are geared toward this synergy.

1. The political primacy of human rights

One of the most constant phrases in UN peace operations is the need to pursue “political solutions” with “political primacy”, a near-universal mantra.²¹ In general terms, “political solutions”

20 de Coning, C. (2018). “Adaptive peacebuilding”, *International Affairs*, 94(2), 301-317. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iix251>

21 UN Peacekeeping. (2018). “Action for Peacekeeping: Declaration of Shared Commitments on UN Peacekeeping Operations”. <https://peacekeeping.un.org/sites/default/files/a4p-declaration-en.pdf>; High-Level Independent Panel on UN Peace Operations. (2015). “Uniting Our Strengths for Peace: Politics, Partnership and People”. A/70/95-S/2015/446. https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BF6CF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_2015_446.pdf, p. 24.

merely means understanding the whole picture, as well as understanding that there are no purely technical solutions to complex conflict dynamics. Beyond this, the term “political” tends to lose meaning and become a word that is used to describe the various elements of a national-level peace process or high-level engagement.²²

The cases suggest that a rights-based approach can add much-needed texture and specificity to the concept of political primacy in peace operations. When mission priorities are described in terms of promoting respect for and protecting human rights, this can help to clarify tasks and objectives for mission leaders at all levels. For example, the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) priority tasks of constitution-making, protection of civic and political space in elections, and strengthening the rule of law and accountability mechanisms were all described by senior mission leadership (SML) in terms of human rights protections. According to mission staff and experts, this was a crucial step in providing field-level leadership with clear plans and objectives in a fragile moment for South Sudan.

The cases in this study also suggest that a rights-based approach that affirms the rights of local populations and actively seeks to support them can deliver tangible outcomes and build trust in the UN.²³ Where mission leadership is involved in sensitive negotiations on peace processes, human rights reporting and analysis can further provide important leverage with the parties. Of course, not all mission strategies need to announce human rights objectives stridently, but our cases point in the direction of missions gaining leverage, clarity, and strength by framing their strategies in rights-based terms.²⁴

2. The early-warning function of human rights

Across the missions, there was evidence that human rights reporting and analysis generated important early-warning signals of risks, including longer-term risks of relapse or escalation. This points to the need for missions to integrate human rights directly into their early-warning/response structures (most of them do already). However, it also suggests that **human rights can be a bridge between the short-term protection risks to civilians and the longer-term risks of instability, such as issues of inequality, grievance, governance capacity, and trust between state and citizen.** As missions develop their strategic plans, it will be helpful to consider this dual function of human rights and position rights-based benchmarks and objectives accordingly.

22 See: Day, A., Gorur, A., Holt, V.K., & Hunt, C.T. (2020). “The Political Practice of Peacekeeping: How strategies for Peace Operations are developed and implemented”. New York: United Nations University. <https://www.stimson.org/2020/the-political-practice-of-peacekeeping>.

23 Mamiya, R.H. (2020). “Going Further Together: the contribution of human rights components to the implementation of mandates of United Nations field missions”, https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Press/WebStories/Going_Further_Together_advance_unedited_version.pdf, p. 26.

24 Russo, J., & Mamiya, R. (2022). “The Primacy of Politics and the Protection of Civilians in UN Peacekeeping”. International Peace Institute, 7 December. <https://www.ipinst.org/2022/12/primacy-of-politics-and-protection-of-civilians-in-un-peacekeeping>.



A Human Rights Officer (right) serving with the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) interviews a displaced witness in Menaka. A delegation led by Human Rights Officers travelled to region in northern Mali to investigate recent armed attacks in the settlements of Aklaz and Awakassa, in which at least 47 people were killed.
Photo: UN Photo/Marco Dormino.

3. Due diligence as an enabler

The evidence from the cases is clear: the Human Rights Due Diligence Policy (HRDDP), when properly and strategically applied, can be an enabler of more effective, impactful operations. Strategic use of the HRDDP can develop better relationships with a range of partners, build capacity amongst state security actors, and mitigate some of the worst risks of operating in conflict settings. In settings like MONUSCO – with a long history of using the HRDDP – a practice has developed where SML treats due diligence as a strategic and helpful function. This positive practice is in part the result of a concerted effort by DPO and OHCHR in recent years.²⁵

However, in several missions, there was a lingering perception that the HRDDP was a burden that inhibited operational priorities, a “speedbump that slows us down”, as one mission staff remarked.²⁶ These views were a clear minority, and there was, in fact, support across missions for the HRDDP (e.g. including in areas of transitional justice and rule of law work in Eastern DRC). This points to the need for mission leadership to send strong and clear messages about the enabling and strategic function of the HRDDP, as well as its utility in mitigating risks. Rather than consider the HRDDP as a “ban on generals flying on our planes,” the policy should be seen as one of the tools that can give missions leverage, build capacity, and deliver impact. Missions should also enhance strategic communication with state authorities in relation to human rights screening and decisions when these are taken. This would aim at mitigating the impact that the implementation of HRDDP might have on relationships with authorities in host states.²⁷

4. Flexible integration of human rights into mission structures

A cross-case comparison suggests that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to integrating human rights into mission structures and operations. Indeed, any attempt to force missions to adopt strict guidance on integration may reduce their ability to use human rights work flexibly and to its best advantage. However, some clear lessons emerged from the case studies that could feed mission policy and planning:

- ***Human rights analysis has clear value to mission planning at all levels.*** Human rights information and analysis is a unique and valuable source of information. It is also sometimes the most sensitive information that may require additional security protocols to protect sources and data. According to experts within many missions, bringing human rights actors directly into the mission planning process has had a measurably positive impact.

25 Mamiya, R.H. (2020). “Going Further Together: the contribution of human rights components to the implementation of mandates of United Nations field missions”, p. 30.

26 Interview with MINUSMA official, 19 October 2023, online (Interview #211).

27 NB: OHCHR has developed draft operational guidance on HRDDP for peacekeeping operations (PKOs and SPMs).

- ***Decision-making should be human rights informed.*** Missions that have brought the human rights division directly into senior leadership and operational decision-making point to the valuable contribution this has had on difficult decisions. In particular, when complex environments present dilemmas (e.g. around immediate protection concerns and longer-term risks), mission leaders have pointed to a rights-based approach as helping them balance interests.
- ***Protocols for information-sharing help.*** Especially in peacekeeping missions, where the military and police components tend to operate via strict top-down protocols, having clear guidance on information-sharing and integrated analysis has proven helpful in breaking down silos. Here, cross-mission learning may be useful: UNMISS protocols on information sharing offer a good example for other peacekeeping missions. Furthermore, efforts should be made to improve the harmonisation of databases and sources for databases from HRD and other mission sections on human rights violations and violent events.
- ***Focal points and secondments also help.*** The practice of establishing human rights focal points and secondments of OHCHR staff into other mission components has grown and become a useful aspect of many missions. This is especially the case in peacekeeping but could become more routinely done in SPMs as well. Missions could also consider “cross-fertilisation”, where staff from other components (e.g. police, civil affairs, political affairs) join human rights divisions for their work.

5. Towards a culture of human rights across peace operations

The value proposition of human rights to peace and security is clear and well-supported by a growing body of evidence. However, there is often a lag between the evidence of impact and a shift in organisational culture. While this report points to many positive shifts across UN peace operations – including a sense that mission leadership is generally adopting more of a rights-based approach – a number of steps could accelerate the cultural shift towards human rights as an enabler and core aspect of missions:

- ***Human rights literacy as a requirement of leadership recruitment.*** While there have clearly been exceptions, the tendency to recruit leaders from a pool of foreign ministry and political class means that many mission leaders are adept in diplomacy but largely ignorant of human rights. They are thus subjected to a sort of “crash course” in human rights during induction but may not be as fluent in human rights discourse as they should be. The Senior Leadership Appointments Section of the UN can address this by requiring “human rights literacy” as part of mission leadership positions and encouraging Member States to put forward candidates with relevant human rights experience.
- ***A human rights “compact” for mission leadership.*** Today, SRSGs sign a compact with the SG that defines their responsibilities towards the Organisation. While there are human rights aspects to these compacts, the practice could be strengthened and expanded, with

more specific commitments to uphold human rights by both SRSGs and the SG. For example, the SG could commit specifically to supporting SRSGs facing expulsion by governments on the grounds of human rights reporting.

- ***Building human rights components beyond technical capacities.*** Interviews with a range of human rights officers in missions suggested that many had excellent technical and legal skills, but that their political and strategic skill-set had been under-emphasised. Just as the political leadership of missions needs to become conversant in the language of human rights, the OHCHR should place more emphasis and resources on building a cohort of human rights officers who can meaningfully contribute to the political aspects of peace operations. Training in political economy analysis, power-sharing arrangements, and conflict resolution could be concrete steps forward. Based on interviews conducted, such a push would be welcomed by human rights officers on the ground, many of whom are keen to expand their contributions to missions and avoid the tendency to be siloed as technical experts.
- ***An institutional rolodex.*** Across missions, there was a strong sense that interpersonal relationships mattered a great deal, particularly in the highly sensitive arena of human rights. When mission staff rotate out, this set of relationships is lost, often without any formal system for handing over contact lists. A relatively simple step that could address this would be a requirement for outgoing mission staff to feed into a common “Rolodex” of contacts or for missions to put in place sufficient overlap for outgoing staff to introduce incoming colleagues to key contacts.

Annexure: The Effectiveness of Peace Operations Network (EPON) Project summary

Peace operations are among the most important international mechanisms for contemporary conflict management. However, their effectiveness remains the subject of confusion and debate in both the policy and academic communities. Various international organizations conducting peace operations, including the United Nations (UN), the African Union (AU), and the European Union (EU), have come under increasing pressure to justify their effectiveness and impact. Although various initiatives are underway to improve the ability to assess the performance of peace operations, there remains a distinct lack of independent, research-based information about the effectiveness of such operations.

To address this gap, the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI), together with over 40 partners from across the globe, have established an international network to jointly undertake research into the effectiveness of peace operations. This network has developed a shared methodology to enable the members to undertake research on this topic. This will ensure coherence across cases and facilitate comparative research. The network produce a series of reports that are shared with stakeholders including the UN, AU, and EU, interested national government representatives, researchers, and the general public. All the EPON reports are available via <https://effectivepeaceops.net>. The network is coordinated by NUPI. Many of the partners fund their own participation. NUPI has also received funding from the Norwegian Research Council and the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs to support the Network and its research, including via the UN Peace Operations project (UNPOP) and the Training for Peace (TfP) programme.

Contact

For more information, please contact:

Dr. Cedric de Coning
Research Professor
NUPI Center for UN and Global Governance
cdc@nupi.no | @CedricdeConing | +4794249168



Simulation exercise of a team of Egyptian peacekeepers made up entirely of women in Douentza, in the Mopti region. This search and detection team is trained to identify improvised explosive devices (IEDs). Photo: MINUSMA/Harandane Dicko.

Over the past three decades, UN peace operations have increasingly integrated robust human rights mandates, recognizing their vital role in conflict prevention and management, especially concerning the protection of civilians and governance deficits in fragile, conflict-affected areas. However, growing resistance to human rights language in peace operation mandates in recent years, coupled with diminishing host state consent and heightened political sensitivities, pose increasing challenges to the UN's prioritization of human rights. These challenges are exacerbated in a context of downward pressure on large peace operations and the indispensable need for core human rights capacities during transitions or withdrawals.

This study assesses the impact of UN human rights efforts across various peace operations, including peacekeeping missions, special political missions, and regional prevention offices. Drawing on a year of empirical research and case study findings from ten mission sites, it explores how UN engagement with human rights enhances peace operation effectiveness, particularly in safeguarding civilians, and how peace operations contribute to improved human rights outcomes. Through comparative analysis, the study offers empirically supported insights into how human rights efforts within missions enhance early warning systems, civilian protection, peacebuilding among other mission activities and objectives, contributing to overall effectiveness across diverse mission types and conflict stages. Recommendations target the UN Security Council, host governments, the UN Secretariat, member states, and mission leadership, urging concrete actions to maximize human rights impact in conflict settings. Overall, the report underscores the indispensable role of human rights in shaping effective peace operations in these challenging times and in light of the future.



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