

SEEN BUT NOT HEARD

Community Voices on Peacekeeping in CAR, DRC, Mali and South Sudan

What affected populations say about trust, protection and peacekeeping reform.

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Yvonne and her two daughters prepare a meal next to their home on the Cesacoba site near Bangassou, Central African Republic, 2021. Adrienne Surprenant/ Oxfam

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INTRODUCTION

Armed conflicts pose the principal threat to civilian safety in Central African Republic (CAR), Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Mali and South Sudan. Civilians, particularly women and children are exposed to serious and systematic threats including sexual and gender-based violence, attacks on life and physical integrity, destruction of fields and homes, forced recruitment and use of child soldiers, attacks on freedom of movement, and forced displacement.

Faced with these threats, civilians can call to various actors to protect them, such as the UN peacekeeping operations, the national armed forces, the police, in certain cases self-defence groups, and traditional community pillars. The level of trust in, and effectiveness of these entities vary, leaving communities regularly exposed to violence and with no one to rely on for protection.

While UN peacekeeping operations have been deployed to those four countries with the primary goal of ensuring the protection of civilians, and while the missions have succeeded at maintaining a partial level of stability, affected populations are still exposed to protection threats on a daily basis. With an increasing mismatch between resources and inflated mandates, a widening gap between populations' expectations and reality, and increasing levels of distrust, UN peacekeeping operations have struggled to sustain their legitimacy and remain relevant. The peacekeeping missions in Mali (MINUSMA) and DRC (MONUSCO) have already been expelled totally and partially by the national governments, raising questions about the future of peacekeeping and their role in ensuring the protection of civilians.



The key objective of this research is to understand the experiences and perceptions of affected communities from the Central African Republic (CAR), the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Mali and South Sudan, on the protection of civilians, the role of the peacekeeping operations and other security and protection structures, and to highlight their messages and recommendations.

METHODOLOGY

This study relies primarily on primary qualitative data, obtained through focus group discussions with community members divided into categories (youth, women, men, internally displaced persons, host communities), as well as individual interviews with key informants. The collected data was anonymised and was analysed and treated in confidentiality, to ensure the protection of consulted individuals. This report's arguments are grounded in the data we collected in the four countries, and quotations from the people we consulted are incorporated throughout the report. The study was carried in the areas where Oxfam operates in CAR, DRC, Mali, and South Sudan¹, between July 2024 and March 2025. A total of 1601 people were consulted, of which 765 women and 836 men². The findings have been triangulated with discussions with Oxfam's country teams and strategic partners to ensure the data was contextualised and encompasses to the best of our capacity the realities on the ground.

This study faced a number of limitations and delays, mostly due to the security contexts in those four countries. In particular in DRC, while the research was carried out, the security context radically changed. As an adaptation measure, Oxfam carried a subsequent round of consultations with local partners to ensure the study integrates the recent evolutions.

The perspectives raised in this report cannot and do not represent communities' views wholly, and this report cannot be viewed as a complete reflection of community sentiments. The objective of the report however is to shed light on trends in community perspectives that are often neglected.

THE UN PEACEKEEPING MANDATE

The UN peacekeeping operations' strategic priorities vary across countries and across contexts, but the protection of civilians remains a core and integral part of the mandate.

United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS): UNMISS was initially established on 9 July 2011, the same day as the birth of the Republic of South Sudan. As it stands today, the Mission's mandate includes four pillars, namely, protection of civilians; creating conditions conducive to the delivery of humanitarian assistance; supporting the implementation of the Revitalized Agreement and the peace process; and, monitoring, investigating, and reporting on violations of humanitarian and human rights law³.	United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA): MINUSMA was established on 25 April 2013. MINUSMA's main strategic priority was to support the implementation of both the Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in Mali, and the full realization of the political transition. The second strategic priority, added in 2022, was to support the Malian government in the implementation of a comprehensive strategy that supports stabilization and the restoration of State authority. MINUSMA closed on December 31, 2023⁴.
United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA): MINUSCA was established on 10 April 2014 with the central priority of protecting civilians and implementing the transition in CAR⁵. MINUSCA's priority tasks include protecting the civilian population under threat of physical violence, taking active measures to anticipate, avert and counter any serious threat to the civilian population in an effective and dynamic manner, supporting local mediation initiatives, improving its relations with the civilian population, and maintaining a proactive and flexible deployment. The second main pillar of MINUSCA is support for the extension and preservation of State authority, through technical and logistical support for the gradual redeployment of the Central African Armed Forces (FACA)⁶.	The United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO): MONUSCO was established on 1 July 2010, following MONUC which had been previously established in July 1999, reflecting a new phase reached in the country, with a new focus on stabilization. MONUSCO's priority tasks, which have been revised regularly over the years, focus primarily on the protection of civilians and support the stabilization and strengthening of the State institutions. In 2018, for the first time the UN Security Council (UNSC) called for the development of a progressive and comprehensive exit strategy⁷. In June 2024, MONUSCO completed its withdrawal from South Kivu, marking the end of the first phase of its disengagement from the country⁸. In December 2024, amidst the ongoing crisis, the UNSC extended MONUSCO's mandate through December 2025.

THE EVOLUTION OF PEACEKEEPING (PKO) MANDATES THROUGH THE YEARS

Through the years, the UN Security Council has taken measures to adjust the Peacekeeping mandates to the evolution of the countries' contexts. In several cases, this has resulted in adding additional tasks without augmenting the budget. It becomes increasingly difficult for the missions to achieve their mandate, notably the mandate of protection of civilians, which is often the most challenging and the most resource-consuming, within the existing resources⁹.

In the case of **DRC**, mandate expansions were made by both the Security Council and the Fifth Committee, without a commensurate shift in expectations about the mission's ability to protect civilians. One of the most notable evolutions was the authorization of the Force Intervention Brigade (FIB) in March 2013, which was specifically tasked to carry out targeted offensive operations to neutralize and disarm non-state armed groups. The creation of this Brigade represented a radical change in UN efforts and a strong interest in considering more robust approaches¹⁰. This shift also exposed a fundamental tension within MONUSCO's mandate. Its dual role as both peacekeeper and combatant has led to confusion on the ground and scepticism among local communities, particularly when the mission is perceived as aligned with the Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (FARDC), itself accused of abuses¹¹. As a result, MONUSCO's legitimacy and effectiveness in protecting civilians have been increasingly questioned. The last extension (2025) maintained and renewed the deployment of the FIB.

In **Mali**, MINUSMA's mandate had been repeatedly expanded through the years to include disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) programs, support to elections, human rights monitoring, anticipation and deterrence of threats, and direct action where needed. These mandate evolutions were not accompanied by proportionate resource allocation, rendering MINUSMA's mandate execution challenging or virtually impossible¹².

In the case of **CAR**, in 2018 the Security Council included an additional task in the mission's mandate to provide support for the redeployment of the country's armed forces "within existing resources". This decision required the mission to absorb the additional costs associated with the task by shifting funding from other budgeted tasks¹³. These decisions pose a grave obstacle to effective mandate implementation and contribute to the grievances of local communities who are not receiving the protection they were promised.

In the case of **South Sudan**, UNMISS had to be reinforced and concentrate its efforts on the protection of civilians amid the eruption of violence in 2013. The mission engineered protection sites inside the UNMISS compounds, with the intent to shelter and protect civilians in times of crisis. Considering the subsequent massive influx of civilians into the UN premises, the UN Security Council passed a resolution to temporarily increase the troops and police strength. In 2014, the Secretary General suggested that UNMISS should focus primarily on the protection of civilians, human rights and the creation of safe conditions for humanitarian assistance. Since the Revitalized Peace Agreement of 2018, many protection sites were gradually redesignated as sites for internally displaced people (IDPs), under the sovereign control of the Government of Sudan¹⁴.

WOMEN PEACEKEEPERS

For decades, women were primarily absent from UN peacekeeping missions, and while this is changing, the process is very slow. In 2022, 7,9% of military, police, justice, and corrections personnel were women. This is a stark increase from just 1% in 1993 but remains marginal. When we break it down, women made up only 5,9% of military contingents, while they comprise 30% of civilian personnel¹⁵. Evidence suggests that having a higher proportion of women peacekeepers can ensure improved operations and performance, better access, more and deeper confidence with the local communities, and it sets out a positive example¹⁶.

Additionally, it is worth noting that the vulnerable communities who require protection and assistance the most, are overwhelmingly women and children, whilst the peacekeepers are overwhelmingly men. In general, women peacekeepers are better accepted by the local population, they are more approachable, and better able to talk about the special needs of different groups. Achieving a better level of community engagement with the community not only builds up acceptance but also makes it easier for peacekeepers to protect them¹⁷.

THE PRINCIPLE OF NON-USE OF FORCE

United Nations peacekeeping is defined by three principles, one of which is the "non-use of force except in self-defence or defence of the mandate". Missions may use force at the tactical level, with the authorisation of the Security Council, to defend themselves or their mandate. In some cases, missions have deployed a "robust" mandate granted by the Security Council authorising them to "use all necessary means", in particular to protect civilians in the event of an imminent threat to the physical integrity of the affected populations. In general, it is understood that peacekeeping operations must use force only as a last resort and in a precise, proportional, and appropriate manner¹⁸.

The founding principles of peacekeeping are based on the consent of conflicting parties, impartiality, and the limited use of force. Peacekeeping is supposed to create space for peace to occur, not to enforce it. But the topography of violence and armed groups has completely changed since then. The bulk of the armed violence is carried by a vast array of different and not always clearly identifiable groups, which are more and better armed than ever before. The local and national authorities as well as the communities, faced by extreme violence and conflict, have expected peacekeepers to fight against those groups, which is not what they are geared for. The gap between what the host country authorities and citizens expect, and what the peacekeepers can deliver, is where the problem lies¹⁹.

ACCEPTANCE AND CONSULTATION OF LOCAL COMMUNITIES

ENGAGEMENT WITH COMMUNITIES TO CLARIFY THE MANDATE

During the discussions with communities, various interpretations of the peacekeeping mandates were recounted, in some cases in a precise and accurate manner, while in other cases, the communities were unfamiliar with the mission's role in the country and expressed a desire for a better understanding.

"Let them tell us what they have come to do here, because I do not understand why MINUSCA is here". (Internally displaced woman, Bria, Central African Republic)

Consulted communities request that the missions clarify their mandate better, especially during conflicts.

In the case of **CAR**, there is a considerable discrepancy between the peacekeeping mandate, which states that it is to take "active measures to anticipate, avert and counter effectively and dynamically any serious threat to the civilian population"²⁰, and the reality as perceived by the communities. The communities consulted in this study generally expressed frustration with MINUSCA's mandate, which they perceive as reluctant to take military action in the event of violence against civilians.

MINUSCA's mandate, perceived by communities as 'defensive' rather than 'offensive' is not well understood by the civilian population, who perceive it as an obstacle that prevents MINUSCA from protecting them effectively.

In **Mali**, communities have also expressed frustration at the mandate which they perceive as insufficiently robust.

"MINUSMA did not have a robust mandate to fight the terrorists." (man, host community, Mopti, Mali)

This discrepancy between the expectations of the civilian population and the mission's mandate generates a continuous perception of failure. It is the peacekeepers' responsibility to clarify and explain their mandate to the communities so that they can understand and accept it and rebalance their expectations.

In the case of **South Sudan**, UNMISS' mandate was largely understood and familiar to the consulted communities, with the protection of civilians playing a pivotal role in the mandate implementation.

"Since its inception, UNMISS has focused significantly on the protection of civilians. This has been demonstrated with the establishment of protection sites where displaced persons can seek refuge from violence." (Man, host community, Nyirol, South Sudan)

However, a portion of the population and especially the most vulnerable people in remote areas and at higher risk of protection threats, are not familiar with UNMISS' mandate and their role in the protection of civilians. There also remains an underlying assumption that peacekeepers should take up their weapons and play a more offensive role in times of conflict.

"Sometimes UNMISS' intervention can be through dialogue, and the white army²¹ will not listen to them. UNMISS need to behave like actual soldiers in their nation so that they can protect civilians in South Sudan." (Man, civil society, Akobo, South Sudan)

In the DRC, while the MONUSCO mandate was understood to some extent, communities expressed frustration over the gap between the mission's extensive scope of intervention and its limited impact on the ground.

"We expected MONUSCO to attack the local armed groups that pose a constant threat to us, but unfortunately that has not been the case." (Internally displaced woman, Bijombo, South Kivu, Democratic Republic of Congo)

Despite MONUSCO's exceptional mandate, communities stressed that after more than twenty years of presence, insecurity persists, and attacks against civilians continue unabated. Numerous testimonies highlighted incidents where MONUSCO remained passive in the face of violence, including attacks occurring near its bases. Patrols are widely perceived as symbolic and ineffective, without tangible impact on the population's safety. In several instances, communities have reported cases of civilians seeking refuge being turned away from MONUSCO bases. This has fuelled a deep sense of abandonment and frustration with the mission.

DIALOGUE BETWEEN UN PEACEKEEPING OPERATIONS AND COMMUNITIES

Direct contact between communities and peacekeeping missions leads to a more positive perception of their intervention. If the people interact directly with the peacekeepers, or live near them, they are more likely to perceive them more positively. This is mainly because this interaction with the missions makes their work and their contributions tangible and positive, and also because the populations close to their bases perceive the missions as sources of employment and economic development²².

In the case of DRC, one of the most critical challenges undermining MONUSCO's legitimacy and effectiveness is the significant communication gap between the mission and the local population. MONUSCO is often perceived by consulted communities as closed off, preferring to engage with authorities in offices rather than with communities in the field. Civil society actors and community members have testified during this research that attempts to reach the mission are frequently blocked or discouraged, and when communication does occur, it is deemed superficial or unhelpful. As a result, MONUSCO is perceived as physically and psychologically distant, both inaccessible and unresponsive, as well as excluding local voices from planning and decision-making processes, which further alienates the population, reinforcing the sense that the mission is imposed from above rather than grounded in local realities.

In the case of Mali, the lack of acceptance from local authorities and communities is one of the key cited factors that led to their withdrawal²³. Within the current crisis of national sovereignty in the Sahel as well as globally, foreign missions are not accepted as face-value; they need to demonstrate their effectiveness, seek acceptance of local communities and authorities, and

respond to accountability mechanisms, without which it is impossible for them to operate.

In the case of MINUSCA in CAR, although the mandate requires it to improve relations with the civilian population²⁴, the communities consulted as part of this study expressed a sense of distance and detachment from the mission.

"MINUSCA is detached from the population, it is not close to the people who need protection. (Woman, civil society, Bangui, Central African Republic)"

The first obstacle is communication, which is perceived as centralised, inaccessible, and hampered by cumbersome procedures. Several participants reported they did not know how to contact MINUSCA, and that the procedures were too complex.

THE LANGUAGE BARRIER

This perceived distance is exacerbated by the language and cultural barriers, identified by most participants across the four countries as a fundamental obstacle to communicate and interact with UN PKO personnel. International peacekeepers only rarely speak the local languages, making them inherently unapproachable. Within the communities, the people who speak English or French are mostly younger generations who live in city centres and have had access to education. The language barrier is therefore significant and adds an additional layer of marginalisation which disproportionately affects the most vulnerable people, who are most in need of dialogue with peacekeepers.

"There is not good communication between MINUSCA and the community. There was a time when there was an incident that I wanted to explain to MINUSCA contingents when they were still near the IDP site, but we could not understand each other." (Woman, host community, Batangafo, Central African Republic)"

Community liaison officers and language assistants play a pivotal role in facilitating communication between the local population and peacekeepers. However, in many cases, communities perceived that they are either insufficient, unavailable, or that they do not translate veraciously the information shared.

"There is a communication barrier because UNMISS recruited language assistants, but we do not trust them because sometimes they do not speak out the real information needed by the community." (Young man, Rumbek, South Sudan)"

In **DRC**, although MONUSCO maintained some effective communication channels with local communities in certain areas, notably through Community Liaison Assistants and interpreters familiar with local dialects, these efforts were uneven and insufficient to overcome broader, systemic barriers. While mechanisms like community early-warning systems functioned relatively well in places such as Bijombo in South Kivu, the mission's overall reliance on official and international languages, coupled with a tendency to prioritize dialogue with local authorities over civilians²⁵, contributed to widespread perceptions of MONUSCO as distant and inaccessible.

LISTENING TO COMMUNITIES

Communities expressed grievances about being insufficiently consulted by UN peacekeepers, particularly on issues relating to the protection of civilians.

"MINUSCA should communicate and exchange a lot with the community to find out what their real protection problems are." (Man returnee, Batangafo, Central African Republic)

The lack of consultation with local communities and the most vulnerable people makes it difficult for peacekeepers to perceive the real needs and aspirations of the affected populations who most need their service and protection.

"One of MINUSMA's biggest obstacles was that they did not involve the populations in decision-making. They did not communicate enough with the authorities and the communities." (Woman, civil society representative, Ségou, Mali)

This is also a cause for concern when it comes to the consultation and consideration of women's voices, which are too often excluded from consultations and decision-making at the national strategic level²⁶. Almost 25 years have passed since Security Council Resolution 1325, which called on all international peace and security actors to take explicit account of the needs and priorities of women and girls when implementing peace agreements, to understand the role of women in peace-building and to measure the impact of conflict on women and children²⁷, but this is still far from being the case.

Additionally, some of the young participants expressed a feeling of exclusion from the consultations that take place with community leaders, and which do not sufficiently address the subjects that are important to young people.

The lack of dialogue, consultation and consent with local communities means that peacekeepers' intervention is not fully understood or accepted. Lack of cooperation with local communities undermines the mission's ability to fulfil its mandate and creates a climate in which the mission has less capacity to respond quickly and effectively.

"Their actions do not necessarily meet the needs of the population. Sometimes what they do [e.g. infrastructure] is not used by the communities because there is no consultation at local level. (Man, civil society, Bangui, Central African Republic)

This distance between peacekeeping missions and the communities is detrimental for everyone. It has been demonstrated that when people are aware of and support the presence of peacekeeping missions, they can implement their mandates more effectively, contribute to lasting peace, and better ensure the safety of civilians and mission staff²⁸. It is in everyone's interest for peacekeepers to maintain close relations and dialogue with the communities.

"They are not working closely enough with the local stakeholders. And they are not good at empowering locals. They do not recruit locals in officers' positions where they can participate in decision-making. They only recruit them as assistants" (Man, civil society representative, Rumbek, South Sudan)

A QUESTION OF LEGITIMACY

Dialogue between peacekeepers and communities, including traditional and religious leaders, as well as the most vulnerable people (including women, internally displaced persons and young people) on their needs and experiences is essential. Communities want to be included in peace processes and protection measures that affect them, and they want to have their say. When communities feel insufficiently consulted and without their informed consent, the question of the legitimacy of the mission arises, and whether they should be taking decisions and carrying out a process on their own, without the backing of the populations concerned.

When the mission carries out activities that directly serve their mandate but also the expressed needs of the community, their impact will be stronger and more lasting²⁹.

The question of local legitimacy is crucial for peacekeeping missions for both normative and operational reasons. Normatively, the question arises as to whether the mission should be present in the country if it lacks legitimacy in the eyes of the populations it is supposed to protect and serve. Operationally, the peacekeeping activities depend entirely on local cooperation. So, for missions to be able to protect populations, it is vital that they are close to the people, understood, accepted and respected³⁰.

The legitimacy of the mission is strongly affected by the perceptions of its performance. The success rate of UN peacekeeping is historically much better than its notoriety suggests. Studies have shown that levels of violence – including sexual violence – are lower and civilian casualties fewer where peacekeepers are deployed³¹. Yet UN peacekeeping is perceived by affected communities as widely ineffective and problematic.

PERCEPTIONS OF THE MISSIONS' PERFORMANCE IN PROTECTION OF CIVILIANS AND PEACE

ESSENTIAL ROLE IN PROVIDING SAFETY AND SECURITY

People's perceptions of peacekeeping missions depend greatly on their performance and ability to deliver results. In particular, the effectiveness of the missions in responding to threats against civilians is the first element to influence the perception of communities³².

In **South Sudan**, and in particular the regions of Akobo and Pibor, communities were highly satisfied with the protection they received from UNMISS, in great part due to the establishment of protection sites.

"The installation of protection of civilians sites has provided immediate safety for many civilians during acute crises." (Woman, host community, Nyirol, South Sudan)

Indeed, when the conflict erupted in 2013, tens of thousands of civilians fled from areas where large numbers of killings were taking place and arrived at UNMISS compounds to seek refuge. Since then, according to UNMISS, as many as 85,000 civilians sought protection in eight compounds across the country³³. Those are perceived to have protected and saved many lives.

"UNMISS have been so impactful to save lives of the local population through the provision of Protection of Civilians sites in their compound, that provided shelter and protection to the women, elderly and children who seek refuge. We always feel safe in their compound." (Man, civil society, Pibor, South Sudan)

Peacekeepers also protected local populations by informing them about external protection and security threats that may affect the community.

"Yes, UNMISS is fulfilling the role of protecting civilian. If UNMISS was not there during the conflict in 2013, most of the civilians would have died." (Young man, returnee, Akobo, South Sudan)

Communities perceived that beyond immediate protection in times of crisis, the peacekeepers' intervention has reduced the protection risks, as a result of training provided to traditional authorities, local police, and other security institutions.

In the case of the **Central African Republic**, in general, the communities expressed partial satisfaction with MINUSCA's ability to restore security in their communities.

"It is thanks to MINUSCA that we are safe today and our children are back in school." "Since MINUSCA has been here, the community has lived in peace and security is ensured." (Internally displaced woman, Bria and Internally displaced man, Paoua, Central African Republic)

Patrols in particular were considered an effective deterrent for crime and violence, although patrols were perceived to be mostly carried in urban areas, leaving communities in rural or hard-to-reach areas who face higher degrees of threats and risks, vulnerable.

In **Mali**, the consulted communities' assessment of MINUSMA's performance is largely negative across the areas covered by this research. While it was considered by some, and particularly in the region of Gao, as a key actor for stability, it was deemed largely passive, slow and ineffective in protecting civilians. Communities mostly in the regions of Ségou and Mopti even correlated MINUSMA's presence to an upsurge in violence and threats.

"They were not good enough, because villages were attacked and burned down while they were there." (Man, Ségou, Mali)

The most recurring criticism lays in the fact that conflict and violence has not subsided despite the peacekeepers' intervention, in fact it has consistently remained concerning³⁴.

In the **Democratic Republic of Congo**, community's perception of MONUSCO's performance in protecting civilians has been mixed and highly location dependent. In areas like Bijombo and Minembwe in the South Kivu province, many community members acknowledged that MONUSCO's presence provided a degree of deterrence against armed groups and improved protection in specific zones, especially for displaced populations, women, and young people.

"Before MONUSCO arrived, we women were afraid to go to our fields and collecting firewood. When MONUSCO arrived here, its presence improved the situation, and we began to gain access to some of our fields." (Internally displaced woman, Bijombo, South Kivu, Democratic Republic of Congo)

Actions such as securing camps, escorting civilians, and facilitating humanitarian access were valued, and the mission's involvement in peace dialogues and medical evacuations was positively noted.

"MONUSCO contributed greatly to our security and protection." (Internally displaced man, Bijombo, South Kivu, Democratic Republic of Congo)

In other areas such as Butembo, communities were a lot more critical of MONUSCO's intervention.

"MONUSCO was accused of failing to protect the population, as it did not fulfill its mission." (Woman, civil society, Butembo, North Kivu, Democratic Republic of Congo) disparities between areas

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN REGIONS

The perception of peacekeepers' intervention varies greatly between different areas.

In **CAR** for instance, there is a significant difference between urban communities, which are more exposed to MINUSCA's intervention, and communities in rural or remote areas, which face more threats, are less familiar with MINUSCA and have in certain cases benefited little or not at all from its intervention.

Deterrent patrols, youth training and social cohesion dialogues can be seen in towns and outlying areas, but these do not necessarily reach villages or neighbourhoods where the most vulnerable communities with the greatest needs are located.

In **South Sudan**, the opposite logic applies. In rural regions such as Pibor, communities have witnessed and benefitted from UNMISS' intervention, notably the protection sites which have been perceived as overwhelmingly efficient and appreciated, and they widely consider the peacekeepers as a protection force. However, in the capital Juba, communities were less enthusiastic about UNMISS' performance. This was particularly noticeable due to a perceived lower level of direct protection interventions in the capital, and because UNMISS has engaged in less community outreach programs, rendering their work less visible to the ordinary citizen.

Additionally, in certain areas, communities felt neglected, as UNMISS did not pay attention to certain conflicts which were at the source of most of the violence at community level. UNMISS was perceived to focus on inter-community conflicts and neglected conflicts taking place among members of the same community, such as in the case of age-set fighting within the communities of Pibor (conflict between different age groups).

"Yes, they [UNMISS] have partially fulfilled their mandate in protecting civilians, however the Pibor context is mostly affected by age-set fighting which has limited UNMISS' intervention since it's a conflict between same community members." (Man, civil society representative, Pibor, South Sudan)

While the communities expressed understanding about why certain conflicts should be resolved at local level with community leaders, they also expressed disappointment and frustration at the biggest protection threat in their area being disregarded by the UN peacekeepers.

In **Mali**, there was a significant disparity between the perceptions in Gao, where communities recognised and appreciated MINUSMA's contribution to security, and in Ségou and Mopti where perceptions were considerably more negative. This can be understood because MINUSMA had a larger presence, they invested more resources and efforts in the area of Gao, they have engaged more with the local populations, and for many years they also brought a lot of employment for youth in the area.

In **DRC**, there are significant disparities between regions with and without the presence of MONUSCO. In areas like Beni-Oicha and Mangina, where MONUSCO is still present, the community relies on its support for logistical aid, protection, and stability, despite widespread dissatisfaction with its effectiveness. In contrast, in Kimbulu and Musienene, where MONUSCO has withdrawn, there is a noticeable deterioration in security, with a resurgence of armed groups and heightened violence, particularly targeting vulnerable populations like women and children.

LACK OF ACTION IN THE FACE OF THREATS

A 2014 report by UN internal investigators found that peacekeepers globally only immediately responded to one in five cases in which civilians were threatened and that they failed to use force in deadly attacks³⁵.

The most frequent grievance raised by the communities during this study was indeed peacekeepers' inaction and ineffectiveness in a moment of crisis where civilians are faced with violence. Communities perceive that when a crisis emerges, the mission is insufficiently reactive, and too slow in its intervention.

The nature of the intervention is not well understood and does not always meet the expectations of the communities, who would like to see direct intervention to respond to protection threats. Other forms of intervention are considered insufficient or inadequate,

particularly because they are not understood, and the results of the intervention are not shared with them.

"In my opinion they [UNMISS] have not fulfilled their mandate because they only show up after the damage is done" "They only report and they do not protect the civilians." (Woman, civil society representative, Juba, South Sudan)

In the case of the **Central African Republic**, the lack of trust is further exacerbated by the perception that MINUSCA's strategic decisions are taken by a hierarchy that is elsewhere, unknown, and far removed from the realities facing civilian populations.

"Some people were attacked in front of MINUSCA, but MINUSCA did not intervene. They said they had to get an approval from their superior before intervening. There were deaths because people were waiting for orders which came from their superiors far away from here." (Internally displaced man, Bria, Central African Republic)

This generates frustration and disappointment among the communities who place their trust in peacekeepers, but in times of need, the intervention is slow to arrive, or in some cases does not arrive at all.

Some negative perceptions of PKO interventions are reinforced by a lack of trust and acceptance of the mission's role and objectives. Indeed, a recurring argument is that if PKOs were successful, armed groups would be eradicated, and violence would subside³⁶.

Finally, communities have sometimes considered PKO's interventions to be poorly contextualised, lacking sensitivity to the conflict and potentially harmful.

In the **Democratic Republic of Congo**, communities criticize the mission's perceived inaction in the face of violence and its lack of tangible results. Repeated incidents such as unfulfilled protection promises and confrontations during protests have further damaged trust and reinforced the perception that MONUSCO is more symbolic than impactful. Indeed, in and out of the zones of intervention, violence persisted, including assassinations, ambushes, and sexual violence leading some, particularly young people, to perceive MONUSCO as ineffective in preventing atrocities despite its proximity.

"MONUSCO is not fulfilling its role of protecting the civilian population." (Woman, North Kivu, Democratic Republic of Congo)

This sentiment is aggravated by the view expressed by the communities that MONUSCO operates in a bureaucratic, top-down manner, often prioritizing relations with state institutions over direct community engagement. In the eyes of many, its continued presence is not only ineffective but, in some cases, even counterproductive.

In the four countries, the lack of sufficient action in times of crisis is deplored by the communities, who also perceive that the peacekeeping missions are operating with insufficient accountability mechanisms, especially towards the communities and authorities. The consulted populations have expressed dissatisfaction with the continuous failures from the missions, especially in protection of civilians, and the subsequent absence of recognition of these failures, even in cases where they cause preventable civilian deaths.

ROLE IN CONFLICT RESOLUTION

In **South Sudan**, communities have observed and benefitted from extensive peacebuilding programs carried by UNMISS. UNMISS facilitates dialogue between conflicting parties at various levels, promoting reconciliation efforts within communities. The mission also strengthens local capacities in peacebuilding to ensure the impact is durable.

"UNMISS has brought peace and stability and are continuously building capacity of youths on peacebuilding and help them deter from violence and create a safe environment for the community." (Young girl, host community, Pibor, South Sudan)

UNMISS has carried inter-community programs focused on resolving and preventing conflicts between communities and building peaceful relations.

"The relationship between Murle and Akobo communities are now improved through UNMISS support. The communities are now reaching the extent of advocating for peace and talking about the negative impact of women and child abduction. They are now returning abductee children to their parents." (Young woman, returnee, Akobo, South Sudan)

Communities have appreciated the role played by UNMISS in mediating peace talks between conflicting factions within South Sudan's political landscape, contributing to agreements aimed at ending hostilities.

CIVIL AFFAIRS – A WAY TO COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

In addition to maintaining security and protecting populations, civil affairs are essential to improving living conditions and are pivotal to ensuring that peacekeepers are close to and responsive to communities and local authorities³⁷. And indeed, when consulted on the positive impact of the peacekeeping missions in their communities, participants throughout the four countries provided many examples, which focus primarily on humanitarian and social support, support for social cohesion and peace, support to civil society, and the restoration of the State authority.

Humanitarian and social support	Support to social cohesion and peace
Construction and renovation of social infrastructure such as schools, roads, dams, hospitals, and health centres	Awareness-raising about social cohesion
Provision of drinking water	Facilitation of community and inter-community dialogue
Creation and restoration of markets in areas that have been secured	Disarmament and support for the economic reintegration of non-state armed groups
Income Generating Activities (IGA) for vulnerable people and communities	Training to young people on hate and tolerance
Sensitization on child marriage and other harmful cultural norms	Implementation of programs on the prevention of children recruitment into armed groups
	Football games to promote social cohesion

Financial support to community projects Humanitarian support in cases of natural disasters	Training to government officials about peacebuilding
Restoration of the State authority	Support to civil society
Construction of state infrastructure such as town halls, police offices and local courts of justice Financial and logistical support for the government Deployment of civil servants in the field Support the return of state agents (mayors, police, gendarmerie etc) to areas that have been secured	Trainings and capacity building to local civil society organizations Financial support for national NGOs and associations to carry out their activities Construction of infrastructure for women associations

A CRISIS OF TRUST

POLITICAL CLIMATE NON-CONDUCTIVE TO TRUST

The political climate in the four countries has to varying levels hampered the work of the UN peacekeeping operations. The lack of well-established institutions, specifically in remote areas, as well as the political instability can pose a significant obstacle to the mission's effectiveness. The lack of political will, mixed with tensions in the collaboration with the authorities, can affect the effectiveness of interventions. The growing mistrust between national authorities and foreign peacekeeping missions is an increasing challenge.

This was certainly the case in **Mali**, where the current authorities have been rejecting the presence of foreign forces including the MINUSMA.

*"MINUSMA's presence in Mali created a hindrance to the sovereign mission of the State."
(Man, civil society, Mopti, Mali)*

This narrative has been strongly imposed by the authorities, and has trickled down to the communities, who in some cases perceive the UN peacekeeping operation as a hindrance to the sovereignty of the nation and thereby reject it altogether.

ABUSE OF POWER AND MISCONDUCT

Peacekeeping forces, who are deployed and mandated to support and protect vulnerable individuals and communities, have been responsible for committing widespread human rights abuses, including sexual abuse and exploitation. Those crimes almost never result in prosecution or compensation, due to UN peacekeepers' status of immunity, which contributes to a climate of impunity³⁸. These actions, which are a fundamental betrayal of trust and come in complete opposition to the mandate peacekeepers were set to achieve, undermine the work that is carried out and erode the limited trust that has been carefully built with the communities.

"We think they do whatever they want and whatever suits them." (Man, Mopti, Mali)

In **DRC**, there were reports of sexual exploitation and abuse from the onset of the MONUC and continued with MONUSCO. A number of investigations into allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse were made through the years, but there was a systemic failure to adequately investigate the cases, take disciplinary measures, and pursue prosecution for crimes. The lack of action was due in many cases to direct or indirect complicity by senior management, which led to a general atmosphere of impunity³⁹.

In **CAR**, the immunity and the lack of transparency fuels a sentiment of injustice and vulnerability towards the peacekeepers who are meant to protect them.

"There has been so much exploitation and abuse by some MINUSCA officers, which has led to this mistrust." (Woman NGO representative, Bangui, Central African Republic)

SUSPICION AND RUMOURS FUEL MISTRUST

Rumours against peacekeeping missions are commonplace, whether they are based on true events or not. One of the most recurrent rumours which came up in the community consultations throughout the four countries is the belief that peacekeepers are collaborating and colluding with non-state armed groups.

“MONUSCO is suspected of being complicit with the ADF.” (Man, IDP, Beni, Democratic Republic of Congo)

These rumours exacerbate mistrust among the communities, especially those who have not witnessed or benefited from the peacekeepers’ intervention or presence.

The lack of dialogue and trust between the communities and the mission generates a climate of suspicion and a fertile ground for the spread of these rumours. The combination of a lack of communication on the one hand, the perception of an underperforming intervention that does not effectively protect civilians on the other, topped with cases of exploitation and allegations of fraternization with armed groups exacerbate mistrust and fuel suspicions of hidden political agendas.

“They came to exploit our natural resources. They must have come with another motive because peace has never been achieved. [...] MONUSCO is behind the destabilization of our country.” (Man, Musienene, North Kivu, DRC)

Communities were also concerned that peacekeepers came to their countries to exploit natural resources for their personal gain.

“They should stick to their mandate instead of unnecessarily moving into deep forest to collect local natural resources.” (Elderly man, Rumbek, South Sudan)

A PATH TO TRUST

Faced with these accusations, it is essential for peacekeeping missions to put in place a strategic communications plan that reaches out to communities and addresses information and misinformation in a transparent manner⁴⁰. Direct contact with communities has the power to mitigate the risks, and to offer alternative information to that provided by rumours and misinformation campaigns.

But in order to build real trust with the civilian population, it is first and foremost essential that peacekeeping mission personnel are supervised and that accountability mechanisms are applied in all cases of misconduct, sexual exploitation, or abuse. Despite the slogan of zero tolerance, verified incidents and accusations continue to be recorded. These events are tragedies in themselves, and have a negative impact on the mission's reputation, reducing its ability to effectively implement its mandate to protect civilians in the country.

PROSPECT OF WITHDRAWAL: THE CASES OF CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC AND SOUTH SUDAN

A SOMBER PERSPECTIVE

The withdrawal of peacekeeping missions at global and continental level is currently a burning issue. The possibility of withdrawal becomes an option to consider when human rights violations and violence against civilians occur, and the mission finds itself in the position of observer without being able to take effective action to react to or prevent these violations⁴¹.

In countries where the peacekeeping operations are still present, the possibility of their departure is generally a sombre prospect in the minds of the communities.

"Even if MINUSCA does not provide the security we want, their presence alone scares the rebels and stops them from attacking us." (Woman, civil society, Bangui, Central African Republic)

The departure of the PKOs would leave communities, and especially those most vulnerable, at higher risk of violence and threats, and would augment the risks of conflicts.

"UNMISS withdrawal will have negative impact on the local population especially during conflicts, as most people run inside UNMISS for protection. And there will be more violation of human rights in the community where there will be unlawful killings and arrest" (Young girl, host community, Pibor, South Sudan)

AN OPPORTUNITY TO HAND OVER TO THE GOVERNMENT

The departure of peacekeepers could also represent an opportunity for the government to take responsibility for protecting its civilian population.

"If MINUSCA leaves, the people will have to get organised, and that will help the government to take charge of protecting Central Africans." (Man, outskirts of Bangui, Central African Republic)

In the case of the **Central African Republic**, this perspective is interpreted within a sovereigntist lens, whereby the State would be taking over the protection of its population from MINUSCA, an international and foreign institution.

"Our trust is in the government to protect and defend us, because it is the guarantor of peace for all the people. As far as we are concerned, foreign military intervention cannot completely solve our problem in the CAR." (Man, host community, Paoua, Central African Republic)

In **South Sudan**, the eventual departure of UNMISS would require a substantial transition, which according to communities should already start now.

"It is important that UNMISS train the local police now, so that after UNMISS leaves the local police can take over and the protection will remain. It is not yet well-trained, but they have the potential to replace UNMISS" (Man, CSO, Juba, South Sudan)

In both cases, participants strongly expressed the opinion that their governments are not yet ready to take on this responsibility alone. In CAR, communities are concerned in particular about the insufficient support of the international community towards the government in order to protect the communities.

"It is still too early for MINUSCA to withdraw. The government is not yet ready." (Woman, civil society, Bangui, Central African Republic)

In the case of South Sudan, the principal concern was about the current uncertainty the country is facing, and the lack of perspectives in the near future.

"We do not know about the government now and its plan about protection of civilians in South Sudan since there is no positive peace in South Sudan. [...] If UNMISS leave it would have a significantly negative impact because South Sudan is not yet settled after the current crisis" (Man, civil society, Akobo, South Sudan)

For some, the departure of the peacekeeping operations would symbolise the prospect of a vacuum, an absence of intervention but also of the rule of law, in which anything would be possible, and anything would be permitted - a very concerning perspective.

In the case of **Central African Republic**, some perceive MINUSCA as essential to ensure security. The prospect of MINUSCA's departure gives way to a lot of concerns.

In **South Sudan**, participants were concerned that there is no strategy currently in place by the government, so if UNMISS were to leave, the civilians would be left to fend for themselves.

"If they [UNMISS] leave, no one will focus on the protection of civilians." (Man, host community, Dengjock, South Sudan)

THE REALITY AND IMPACT OF A PKO WITHDRAWAL: CASES OF DRC AND MALI

In June 2023, **Mali's** government called on the UN Security Council for an immediate withdrawal of MINUSMA, citing the mission's failure to bring peace to Mali as the main reason. In December of the same year, the mission started its withdrawal, leaving little time for a transition or a process of transfer.

The decision was a consequence of both a deteriorating security situation, and the deterioration of relations between the mission and the authorities⁴².

In **DRC**, the mission began developing an exit strategy almost a decade ago but following a series of protests in 2022 and 2023, accusing the MONUSCO of failure to fight rebel groups⁴³, and the mission's poor handling of the situation, the Congolese government asked to accelerate the withdrawal. The withdrawal process was supposed to be completed by the end of 2024, but the plan was suspended due to escalating tensions in the eastern part of the country.

The disengagement from South Kivu, completed in June 2024, took place amid a deterioration of the security situation and massive displacement of populations, raising tensions around the withdrawal process. Indeed, communities were divided about MONUSCO's departure, and were concerned about security and protection, without a clear plan ahead for the government to take over the mandate, especially in remote areas.⁴⁴

THE PROTECTION OF CIVILIANS- BEFORE AND AFTER

The departure of MONUSCO from certain localities in **the Democratic Republic of Congo** has led to a marked deterioration in the security and protection environment, particularly in volatile areas of North and South Kivu. Within weeks of the handover of bases by MONUSCO to the Congolese government, the posts in South Kivu province had fallen into disrepair, with insufficient staff and resources⁴⁵.

"We saw a temporary respite after MONUSCO left, but the overall situation remains very fragile." (Man, civil society, Butembo, North Kivu, Democratic Republic of Congo)

MONUSCO, despite its contested effectiveness, played a visible deterrent role against the actions of armed groups, as witnessed by affected communities, civil society and humanitarian actors. Its withdrawal created a security vacuum, rapidly exploited by armed groups for example, leading to the repositioning of these factions, increased armed clashes with the FARDC, and a surge in violent incidents targeting civilians. The risk of arbitrary arrests forced recruitment, sexual violence, and the pillaging of civilian property has escalated, while community leaders face growing threats of abduction and targeted violence.

"The withdrawal of MONUSCO has created several gaps, notably a surge in the recruitment of children into armed groups, as well as an increase in arbitrary arrests by existing security services." (Man, civil society, Butembo North Kivu, Democratic Republic of Congo)

The absence of a clear, structured transition strategy exacerbated this situation, exposing the weaknesses of national and regional security forces in protecting civilians effectively. Moreover, the withdrawal disrupted essential protection services, such as the reintegration of former child

soldiers and human rights monitoring mechanisms. Communities expressed a growing sense of abandonment and fear, while intercommunal tensions and armed group alliances with certain state actors further complicated the local security dynamics.

In **Mali**, since MINUSMA has left the country, security threats persist, insecurity remains prevalent, and the protection of civilians is not ensured. MINUSMA provided a minimum level of security; for instance, the road connecting Bamako to Gao, which was secured by the mission, is now vulnerable, making access to basic necessities more difficult and leading to price increases, which are weighing heavily on local populations. MINUSMA also implemented civil affairs programs strengthening social cohesion and the local economy. With their departure, those programs were suddenly ended, which has heightened tensions and risks, particularly for vulnerable populations. The lack of post-withdrawal stability has had a detrimental effect on local communities, delaying their reconstruction efforts. In addition, communities have felt that access to essential services such as health and education has declined, contributing to a general deterioration in the quality of life of the population. MINUSMA's withdrawal also exacerbated unemployment, affecting the local economy, and increasing the risk young people being recruited by armed groups.

Findings suggested that communities partially approved the withdrawal, arguing that it allowed the government to increase control of the national territory. Some have argued that the security situation has in some cases slightly improved, and overall has not drastically worsened, indicating the limited impact that MINUSMA had while they were present. Others have experienced an increase in security and protection threats, notably following an attack that hit Bamako in September 2024.

"Security was better than it is now. MINUSMA would have prevented armed groups from gaining access to the airport. [...] Now there are repeated attacks and robberies." (Woman, civil society, Mopti, Mali)

For some, MINUSMA's withdrawal symbolizes an abandonment, leaving the populations to fend for themselves.

"The departure of MINUSMA has left a vacuum. People, especially in the most remote areas, have been completely abandoned." (Woman, Mopti, Mali)

Finally, many are hopeful that the government will implement a strategy following MINUSMA's departure, which will ensure the protection of civilians.

THE IMPACT OF A SUDDEN DEPARTURE

The concept of an exit strategy in UN peacekeeping refers to a plan for the responsible, conditions-based withdrawal of a mission, ensuring that progress made toward peace is sustained and not reversed. However, despite being a key principle in peacekeeping planning, many missions have lacked clear, actionable exit strategies. The case of MONUSCO is especially emblematic: the Security Council has long signalled its intent to draw down the mission, yet repeated delays have occurred due to persistent insecurity, weak state institutions, and the risk of a protection vacuum. The UN and Congolese government agreed on a joint disengagement plan in 2021, but its implementation has been criticized by affected communities and civil society as being driven by politics rather than real conditions on the ground. Scholars and policy analysts argue that without clear benchmarks, strong national ownership, and robust support for local protection mechanisms, premature withdrawals risk undermining peace gains and exposing civilians to harm⁴⁶.

In **Mali**, the withdrawal of MINUSMA took place without a solid alternative or transition plan. No structure has been put in place to replace the functions performed by MINUSMA, particularly in terms of protection and economic support. This vacuum has exacerbated insecurity and social challenges, highlighting shortcomings in the management of the transition.

"The departure of MINUSMA should have been prepared without haste. Negotiations were necessary for the well-being and safety of the communities." (Man, civil society, Mopti, Mali)

The State has resumed security operations but lacks sufficient capacity to provide widespread protection. Community mechanisms, while crucial, have become the main source of protection but remain inadequate given the scale of the threat.

The consulted communities were divided about the role played by the state in ensuring security and protection. Some argued that the Malian Armed Forces (FAMA) had successfully resumed MINUSMA's mandate and were able to maintain order and protect civilians; while others stated that state institutions were weak and incapable of providing effective protection to civilians.

"The withdrawal was too early and in the middle of the crisis, which set back the efforts of this mission by several years." (Man, civil society, Gao, Mali)

In the **Democratic Republic of Congo**, the withdrawal of MONUSCO is perceived as rushed and poorly planned. Despite the existence of coordination frameworks, the disengagement process lacked transparency and inclusivity. Communities and civil society actors were largely uninformed, leading to confusion and heightened mistrust, especially in areas where local activism and resistance were strong.

"The withdrawal of MONUSCO is politicized, as is their mandate. We have always been underinformed about the question of MONUSCO." (Man, Musienene, North Kivu, Democratic Republic of Congo)

While the mission's withdrawal is widely supported, the strategic planning around its departure remains weak, with no comprehensive roadmap to guide the handover of responsibilities.

The Congolese government is expected to assume leadership in the post MONUSCO phase, yet concerns persist about its capacity to provide adequate protection, particularly in high-risk zones where state presence is minimal or contested, such as areas under M23 control. Community protection mechanisms, though recognized as essential, are under-resourced and lack the sustained support needed to take on greater roles.

"The withdrawal of MONUSCO took place without any real alternatives for security and protection of displaced persons and returnees being put in place in coordination with the authorities." (Woman, civil society, South Kivu, Democratic Republic of Congo)

Although some local initiatives and contingency measures have emerged, they are fragmented and disconnected from a national framework. The repeated calls for capacity-building and skill transfer from MONUSCO to local actors underline the need for a phased, inclusive, and well-resourced exit strategy. Without this, the transition risks creating, or further deepening, a protection vacuum.

AN OPPORTUNITY FOR LOCAL OWNERSHIP OF PROTECTION

The withdrawal of peacekeeping operations can generate opportunities for increased local ownership and self-reliance in security and protection matters.

In the **Democratic Republic of Congo**, MONUSCO's withdrawal prompted local authorities and communities to take a more active role in managing security risks. The FARDC, with support from regional forces such as the Burundian army, has attempted to reassert control, and community-based protection mechanisms, including local peace committees, early warning systems, and self-defence patrols have gained prominence. While these initiatives face significant limitations due to the lack of resources and coordination, they reflect a growing recognition of the need for locally driven, context-adapted protection strategies. As a result, some community members reported a reduction in certain types of petty crime and a stronger sense of agency in conflict resolution.

Furthermore, MONUSCO's departure has sparked critical reflection on the mission's limitations and the importance of developing sustainable, nationally led protection frameworks that better address local realities.

"Local ownership of protection can be successful in the long term, but it needs clear institutional support and strong partnerships." (Man, host community, Butembo, South Kivu, Democratic Republic of Congo)

LOCAL AND COMMUNITY INITIATIVES FOR PROTECTION AND PEACE

THE ROLE OF NATIONAL AND LOCAL SECURITY FORCES

Despite the large presence of peacekeeping operations in the four countries for decades, peace and security have not been restored. The lack of trust in the PKOs have led communities to turn more towards national and local security forces. This has been accelerated by the sequence of peacekeeping operations' withdrawals.

"We trust the FACA (national armed forces), because they are the sons of the country, they know the reality on the ground, and they are ready to defend us fiercely. They are ready to die for us. (Man, host community, Paoua, Central African Republic)

There is a strong notion of loyalty from the national armed forces, which are believed to put their hearts and souls into protecting the civilians, unlike foreign agents.

"In an event of attacks, displacements or crimes, the community always turns to the national law enforcement agencies or forces like the police and soldiers for safety and protection." (Young girl, Pibor, South Sudan)

Findings show a fragmented protection situation. While the state is still perceived as the main guarantor of security, its effectiveness is questioned, which explains the growing reliance on local alternatives such as self-defence groups and civil society. This dynamic poses major challenges for security governance, for protection and for the consolidation of the rule of law.

The main challenge to the intervention of the national law enforcement and security forces is the lack of training, the lack of capacity and the cruel lack of resources, which does not give them the means to fulfil their mandates effectively and completely.

"Community leaders and local police are not effective enough to protect civilians in Akobo east and they cannot manage the role UNMISS is doing now." (Man, civil society, Akobo, South Sudan)

For local security, communities also rely on vigilantes and local self-defence groups to ensure their safety. These self-defence groups raise a number of questions. The groups are generally highly regarded by civilians as they are members of their communities who are perceived as courageous and valiant, seeking as best they can to protect their families and communities. However, because these groups are informal, they are not structured, regulated, or equipped, and they do not, for example, receive training in international humanitarian law. Community self-defence groups come in addition to all the non-state armed groups already present and active in the country. They generate significant risks of protection and abuse for civilians, particularly women, and are not subject to any accountability mechanisms.

Additionally, these groups which have little to no resources, are no match for non-state armed groups that have access to more substantial weaponry. They are not able to defend themselves nor protect the communities.

"In some communities, young people train in self-defence, but the armed groups have the means and resources, which these young people do not have. There is a clear imbalance of power there. The armed groups have weapons, and the self-defence teams only have whistles. This puts them in danger, and they cannot protect us." (Man, civil society, Bangui, Central African Republic)

In conclusion, although several actors are involved in protecting communities, the communities who are most vulnerable to threats and attacks express an urgent need for reforms and improvements to ensure sustainable and effective security and protection.

LOCAL PROTECTION AND PEACE INITIATIVES

Communities have established, in some cases with the support of humanitarian actors, a series of local structures, early warning systems, committees and mediation mechanisms. Those structures are made up of groups of volunteers, formed to monitor, prevent, and respond to protection risks, take charge of conflict management and resolution, and maintain social cohesion. They play a crucial role in promoting and protecting human rights and the well-being of community members, especially in contexts of high insecurity. They are particularly appreciated in the absence of adequate responses from national security forces, and as civil society is perceived as being closer to the needs of the population and capable of mobilizing faster responses.

"If there is a case of violence in our community, local associations provide or seek solutions to the problem through advice and other means." (Woman, Bria, Central African Republic)

These initiatives, rooted in traditional and customary values and regularly trained in community issues, are recognised and appreciated by the community. Their actions also help to strengthen community resilience in the face of crises and promote a culture of solidarity. They work with local authorities and protection actors to ensure a rapid and effective response to protection threats, and undertake initiatives at community level, such as raising awareness, mediating in conflicts between internally displaced persons (IDPs) and the host population, or responding to cases of GBV.

Community protection initiatives:	Conflict management and community peace initiatives:
Local protection structures managed by the community (such as those set up by NGOs like Oxfam)	Women leaders and local chiefs leading conflict resolution and prevention at community-level
Citizens' watch and early warning committees, responsible for reporting violence	Local peace and development committees
Community protection strategies based on traditional conflict management mechanisms	Religious leaders, religious platforms
Gender-Based Violence (GBV) Watch	Inter-community dialogues aimed at preventing violence and fostering peaceful coexistence
	Committees of the "wise" women and men,

Committees	including community elders
Committees of young people and women who raise awareness in neighbourhoods about protection and social cohesion	Local population, mediation, and reconciliation committees
Gender champions who report and create awareness about protection	Conflict management committees between farmers and herders
Early warning systems established at the community level to anticipate and respond to risks and dissemination of alerts within communities to limit movement in risky zones.	Community Mediation Control (CMC)
Green numbers (numéros verts) available for the public to report protection incidents.	Involvement of civil society and elders' councils in mediation and peace efforts, as part of the broader community protection structures.
Preventive displacement to safer areas when threats emerge.	

Conflict management committees deal with a variety of situations, including cases of violence or disputes at both household level (domestic violence) and community level (theft of cattle, destruction of fields, inter-community conflicts, conflicts with armed groups, etc.).

Before conflicts arise, groups of young people organise inter-neighbourhood talks to prevent conflicts, raise community awareness of specific issues (tribalism, discrimination, etc.) and reduce the risk of conflicts arising. This conflict prevention and social fabric-building work forms the basis of social cohesion and peace at community level.

Young people and women, key members of local communities yet largely excluded from other public structures, are the founding pillars of these local protection and conflict management initiatives and committees. Their participation in these activities is vital to their success and ensures greater social cohesion through their active involvement in the search for solutions to ensure protection and peace at community level.

Those structures are particularly relevant in situations that concern customary or endogenous conflict dynamics. For instance, the case of age-set conflicts in the region of Pibor in South Sudan represent the majority of conflicts and have to be addressed at local level. As UNMISS and other structures will not intervene in this type of conflict, local efforts are essential and can be highly effective in achieving lasting peace.

Although these local initiatives are essential, rooted in the communities and accepted and recognised by the people, they face a number of challenges. They severely lack resources, as they are only sporadically supported or funded, mostly by humanitarian actors. Additionally, they lack institutional recognition that would strengthen their effectiveness.

"These initiatives are satisfactory but not sufficiently effective. They need to be equipped and supported. For the moment, these initiatives cannot replace MINUSCA, but they can complement it. (Woman, civil society, Bangui, Central African Republic)"

In the current situation, those grassroots initiatives cannot aim to replace the role played by peacekeeping missions, however they can be complementary approaches that have impact at local level and can be supported and scaled up in the future.

“Community protection initiatives could potentially complement UNMISS’s role but not replace it entirely. UNMISS provides essential support in terms of peacekeeping operations, humanitarian assistance, and capacity building within governmental structures.” (Man, host community, Nyirol, South Sudan)

“Local structures are ready to take over, but they cannot succeed without adequate support and resources.” (Man, civil society, Kimbulu, South Kivu, Democratic Republic of Congo)

A ROLE FOR PEACEKEEPERS

It has been demonstrated in other contexts that peacekeeping missions can play a role in strengthening local conflict resolution capacities. Inter-community dialogue activities, supported by PKOs, have a proven impact on reducing violence at community level. This represents a move towards the local level, but also towards conflict prevention rather than resolution, by building the social fabric needed to absorb and navigate conflict. These local activities can complement national peace-building initiatives⁴⁷.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Peacekeeping operations serve and have served an important purpose across the four countries covered by this study. Their presence has significantly reduced the levels of threats and insecurity and has brought stability to certain areas.

However, this research highlights some deeply engrained dysfunctions that need to be urgently rectified. Firstly, the affected populations have in many cases a limited level of knowledge, contact and trust with the peacekeeping contingents, which limits the impact and complicates the missions' intervention. The communities consulted overwhelmingly deplored a systematically insufficient and ineffective reactive response when they call upon the missions for assistance, which has failed to protect civilians in times of crisis. The communities have varying confidence in the national security forces, which are cruelly lacking resources, and lack accountability mechanisms. Faced with this dilemma, civilians are left to fend for themselves and turn to local protection and conflict management mechanisms. These mechanisms, rooted in tradition and respected by communities, represent a complementary approach to re-establish a social fabric and lasting peace at community level.

In Mali and in parts of the Democratic Republic of Congo, the withdrawal of the peacekeeping operations has been sudden and without an exit strategy. Their departure has left a vacuum, and has led to more uncertainty, instability, and insecurity among vulnerable populations.

In the Central African Republic and in South Sudan, the possibility of the missions' withdrawal at this time would be detrimental and would lead to more insecurity and instability. This study demonstrates that both missions play a significant role in protection of civilians, now more than ever before. But if they are willing to remain and ensure a good performance in the protection of civilians, there are deep-rooted dysfunctions that need to be addressed.

TO ENSURE THE PROTECTION OF CIVILIANS, THE SECURITY COUNCIL SHOULD:

1. Provide peacekeeping operations clear and credible mandates and reaffirm the primacy of the mandate to protect civilians.
2. Provide peacekeeping operations the adequate and sufficient means, personnel, and resources to fulfil their mandates to protect civilians. This means:
 - a. Deploy missions capable of implementing the civilian protection mandate in line with the principles of peacekeeping, with adequate teams of military, police, and civilian personnel.
 - b. Make existing procedures more flexible to enable peacekeeping operations to act proactively, quickly, flexibly, and effectively when communities express an urgent need.
 - c. Ensure that civilians have direct contact with the peacekeeping contingents and are able to request their intervention if necessary.
 - d. Work directly and proactively with government departments and communities affected by conflict.
 - e. Adopt an approach sensitive to the conflict and the local contexts.
 - f. Monitor and evaluate the mission's performance on a regular and systematic basis, including on the basis of communities' feedback, and take account of the

lessons learned in a transparent way towards the populations and authorities.

3. Maintain the civil affairs activities in coordination with humanitarian actors, and in agreement with communities and local authorities, but not at the expense of activities focused on the protection of civilians.
4. Commit to reviewing the peacekeeping operations' mandates in light of protection concerns raised by the communities and authorities and ensure meaningful representation of civil society and community voices in discussions on mandate design and renewal.
5. Ensure gender representation in UN peacekeeping missions at various levels and ensure gender sensitivity is included in the mandate design and implementation.
6. In case of withdrawal, commit to prepare an exit strategy and a gradual handover to local and national authorities and communities, as part of an agreed, inclusive, and sustainable process. The Security Council must remain seized of the situation and work with all stakeholders to support the protection of civilians and the prospects for peace through other relevant mechanisms.
7. Support the development of national systems to enable a sustainable and accountable transition from peacekeeping missions to national leadership. This entails strengthening the capacities of government institutions, traditional authorities, and civil society to coordinate protection efforts, monitor human rights, manage early warning systems, and deliver timely responses in the context of mission withdrawal.

IN THE CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC, MINUSCA SHOULD:

1. Inform the population of its mandate through strategic communication and proximity to the affected populations, reflect with the authorities and communities, and agree on a civilian protection mandate that is appropriate, effective, and accepted.
2. Be closer to the communities, open a lasting dialogue with the most vulnerable populations, including young people and women, listen to their experiences and grievances and adapt its intervention to better meet their needs. It is also essential that consultations with local people lead to their recommendations being taken into account in decision-making.
3. Strengthen the human rights departments and gender advisers within MINUSCA to ensure that cases of violations are monitored and handled.
4. Address accusations of sexual abuse and exploitation committed by MINUSCA in a transparent and accountable manner.
5. Support local protection and conflict management initiatives.

IN SOUTH SUDAN, UNMISS SHOULD:

1. Engage in communication strategies to raise awareness and clarify their mandate to the communities.
2. Engage in more consultations with the local authorities and communities, to make sure their interventions are accepted, effective and inclusive, and that they have a stronger and more durable impact.

3. Make efforts to ensure that communications pathways between UNMISS and affected communities are always clear and open, so that civilians are able to report incidents in a moment of crisis and feel safe doing so.
4. Provide more and tailored support for women and girls, as they are the most affected during conflicts.
5. Support and strengthen local community structures and civil society organizations that promote social cohesion, facilitate dialogue, and implement conflict resolution and prevention mechanisms. With additional resources and capacity, those grassroots initiatives could be a means to achieve durable, inclusive, and sustainable peace and help bridge the gap in the eventuality of UNMISS' withdrawal.

IN THE POST-MONUSCO WITHDRAWAL CONTEXT IN EASTERN DRC, STAKEHOLDERS SHOULD:

1. Strengthen Local Protection Mechanisms: Communities emphasize the need to invest in and reinforce existing local protection structures, such as community-based mediation groups and conflict resolution initiatives, to fill the gap left by MONUSCO's departure.
2. Support Local NGOs: There is a clear call for sustained financial and logistical support to local organizations that are on the frontline of protection, particularly those responding to sexual and gender-based violence and reintegration of former child soldiers.
3. Improve Communication and Transparency: Communities urge for more direct, inclusive, and transparent communication from humanitarian and protection actors. This includes explaining roles, mandates, and actions more clearly to build trust and ensure that interventions align with local needs.
4. Prioritize the Protection of Women and Girls: In the wake of increased violence, there is an urgent need to prioritize actions that address the specific risks faced by women and girls, including by enhancing access to GBV services and safe spaces.
5. Enhance the Capacity and Accountability of State Security Forces: While communities call for a greater role for the Congolese state, they also stress the importance of ensuring that FARDC and other security actors operate in a neutral, professional, and rights-respecting manner, including through joint training and monitoring efforts.

IN THE POST-MINUSMA WITHDRAWAL CONTEXT IN MALI, STAKEHOLDERS SHOULD:

1. Place the protection of civilians at the core of the State's and the national security strategies, with particular vigilance for the most vulnerable populations, including women and children.
2. Commit to having sufficient capacity and training to effectively take over the role played by MINUSMA, specifically to ensure the protection of civilians, including the most vulnerable populations.
3. Ensure the National Armed Forces are subjected to accountability mechanisms. The

impact of military operations on civilians needs to be systematically monitored and be available to the public.

4. Ensure that the State and the national armed forces prevent, mitigate, and respond to harm caused to civilians during military operations carried out by all actors in Mali.
5. Support and reinforce community-based protection and conflict resolution and mediation initiatives, which play a key role in maintaining social cohesion at local level. Those initiatives cannot replace the role previously played by MINUSMA, but they are credible complementary approaches for durable peace at community level.

Notes

¹ CAR: Bangui, Batangafo, Bria and Paoua

DRC: Béni, Kimbulu, Misiunene, Bijombo, Kigoma and Lulenge

South Sudan: Akobo, Pibor, Juba, Rumbek, Nyirol, Lainkein

Mali: Ségou, Mopti and Gao

²434 people in Central African Republic (205 women and 229 men)

210 people in South Sudan (116 women and 94 men)

455 people in Mali (230 women and 225 men)

502 people in Democratic Republic of Congo (214 women and 288 men)

³ UNMISS website: <https://unmiss.unmissions.org/mandate>

⁴ MINUSMA website: <https://minusma.unmissions.org/>

⁵ MINUSCA, website: <https://peacekeeping.un.org/fr/mission/minusca>

⁶ MINUSCA mandate, website: <https://minusca.unmissions.org/mandat>

⁷ MONUSCO website: <https://monusco.unmissions.org/en/mandate>

⁸ Peacekeeping Website: <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/monusco-ending-its-mission-south-kivu-after-more-20-years-of-service>

⁹ Twenty Years of Protecting Civilians through UN Peacekeeping Operations: Successes, Challenges, and New Frontiers, International Peace Institute <https://www.ipinst.org/2019/05/twenty-years-of-poc-successes-challenges#2>

¹⁰ The UN Intervention Brigade in DRC, International Peace Institute, 2013

¹¹ Gabay, C. (2014) *The MONUSCO contradiction, Foreign Policy in Focus (FPF)*, 23 July. Available at: https://fpif.org/the_monusco_contradiction (Accessed: 11 April 2025).

¹² One Year Later: Lessons from MINUSMA's withdrawal from Mali and the crisis of UN Peacekeeping, The Security Distiller, 2024, <https://thesecuritydistillery.org/all-articles/one-year-later-lessons-from-minusmas-withdrawal-from-mali-and-the-crisis-of-un-peacekeeping>

¹³ To Align Peacekeeping Mandates and Resources, Improve the Link Between the Security Council and Fifth Committee, International Peace Institute Global Observatory, 2019, <https://theglobalobservatory.org/2019/12/align-peacekeeping-mandates-resources-improve-link-security-council-fifth-committee/>

¹⁴ UNMISS website: <https://unmiss.unmissions.org/background>

¹⁵ Women in peacekeeping, United Nations Peacekeeping Website: <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/women-peacekeeping>

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Twenty Years of Protecting Civilians through UN Peacekeeping Operations: Successes, Challenges, and New Frontiers, International Peace Institute <https://www.ipinst.org/2019/05/twenty-years-of-poc-successes-challenges#2>

¹⁸ Principles of Peacekeeping, website: <https://peacekeeping.un.org/fr/principles-of-peacekeeping>

¹⁹ The changing face of peacekeeping: What's gone wrong with the UN? The New Humanitarian, July 2024 <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/analysis/2024/07/09/changing-face-peacekeeping-whats-gone-wrong-un>

²⁰ "to take active steps to anticipate, deter and effectively respond to serious and credible threats to the civilian population through a comprehensive and integrated approach and, in this regard: to ensure effective and dynamic protection of civilians under threat of physical violence through a comprehensive and integrated approach, including by anticipating, deterring, and stopping all threats of violence against the populations, in consultation with local communities, and by supporting and undertaking local mediation efforts to prevent escalation of violence, in line with the basic principles of peacekeeping, and outbreaks of violence between ethnic or religious rival groups". Accessed on: <https://minusca.unmissions.org/en/mandate>

- ²¹ "The White Army" is the common name used to define armed civilian youth who mobilized in 2013 to defend the Nuer community in the Greater Upper Nile Region. The White Army were not trained or uniformed and are comprised of various Nuer community defense groups.
- ²² Bernd Beber et al, "The Promise and Peril of Peacekeeping Economies," *International Studies Quarterly* 63, no. 2 (2019).
- ²³ Emerging Lessons from MINUSMA's Experience in Mali, International Peace Institute, July 2024
- ²⁴ "to enhance its interaction with civilians, to strengthen its early warning mechanism, to increase its efforts to monitor and document violations of international humanitarian law and violations and abuses of human rights and to strengthen local community engagement and empowerment;" MINUSCA mandate: <https://minusca.unmissions.org/en/mandate>
- ²⁵ An external survey established that the sources of information for peacekeeping mission personnel are firstly national colleagues within the mission, secondly government representatives and thirdly civil society actors. Source: Understanding And Integrating Local Perceptions in Multi-Dimensional Peacekeeping, 2013
- ²⁶ Advocacy note for members of the steering committee for the process of setting up the Truth, Justice, Reparation and Reconciliation Commission. I LONDO AWE Campaign, October 2019
- ²⁷ United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325, 2000
- ²⁸ UN Department of Peace Operations, "Action for Peacekeeping: Overview for November 2021 - April 2022," 30 July 2022, https://peacekeeping.un.org/sites/default/files/a4p_report_-_30_jul_1747_ed.pdf, 3
- ²⁹ Host-Country Consent in UN Peacekeeping, September 2023
- ³⁰ Local Perceptions of UN Peace-Keeping: A look at the data, International Peace Institute, September 2023. Link: <https://www.ipinst.org/2023/09/local-perceptions-of-un-peacekeeping-a-look-at-the-data>
- ³¹ The future of UN peace operations: Principled adaptation through phases of contraction, moderation, and renewal, Routledge, 2021, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/epdf/10.1080/13523260.2021.1894021?needAccess=true>
- ³² Local Perceptions of UN Peace-Keeping: A look at the data, International Peace Institute, Sept 2023
- ³³ UNMISS website: <https://unmiss.unmissions.org/background>
- ³⁴ ACLED dashboard: <https://acleddata.com/trendfinder/#dash>
- ³⁵ Evaluation of the Implementation and Results of Protection of Civilians Mandates in United Nations Peacekeeping Operations, United Nations General Assembly, March 2014
- ³⁶ The Geneva Conventions, Customary IHL, and the 2005 UN World Summit Outcome Document all affirm that states hold the primary responsibility to protect civilians during armed conflict. This responsibility remains with the state, even when peacekeeping missions are present. This is surely not an excuse for PKOs when they fall short of their mandate to protect civilians in the areas under their control.
- ³⁷ Host-Country Consent in UN Peacekeeping, September 2023
- ³⁸ While the UN can investigate allegations of sexual abuse and rape, peacekeeper accountability is up to the country that sends the troops. As a result, prosecutions have been rare even after media coverage and outrage. UN Peacekeeping has a Sexual Abuse Problem, Human Rights Watch, 2020 <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/01/11/un-peacekeeping-has-sexual-abuse-problem>
- ³⁹ DRC: MONUC – Sexual Exploitation and Abuse – end of Assignment report, 2006, <https://reliefweb.int/report/democratic-republic-congo/drc-monuc-sexual-exploitation-and-abuse-end-assignment-report>
- ⁴⁰ Sherman, J. and Trithart, A. (2021). Strategic Communications in UN Peace Operations
- ⁴¹ The other main reason for the withdrawal of a peacekeeping mission is if the parties to the conflict oppose or abandon the path of peacemaking and political resolution. Host-Country Consent in UN Peacekeeping, September 2023
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