

Sustainable Security

Addressing the underlying drivers of global insecurity

More than Taxi-drivers? Pitfalls and Prospects of Local Peacekeeping

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The United Nations Integrated Mission in Timor Leste (UNMIT) represents an interesting case when discussing the impact of local peacekeeping on the overall success, or failure, of peacekeeping operations. Although not without its share of problems, this mission is a good example of the promise of local or 'bottom-up' peacekeeping.

Timorese policemen used to refer to peacekeepers as 'really useful cabbies' whose 4x4s could get you anywhere, which provides a stark contrast with the official United Nations (UN) version that peacekeepers had been building the capacity of the local police. The United Nations Integrated Mission in Timor Leste (UNMIT) is particularly interesting when discussing the impact of local peacekeeping on the overall success, or failure, of peacekeeping operations. This large mission in a relatively small and, following the departure of Indonesian troops, relatively peaceful country followed an [integrative approach to peacekeeping](#) (http://www.un.org/en/events/pastevents/brahimi_report.shtml). The UN also strongly supported [community policing](#) (<http://asiafoundation.org/video/community-policing-in-timor-leste/>) in Timor Leste, which is a good example of the promise of local or 'bottom-up' peacekeeping. Generally seen as successful, the peacekeeping operation ended in December 2012. Although not without its share of problems, Timor Leste has remained relatively stable and secure.

Local Peacekeeping

Local peacekeeping refers to the activities of peacekeepers throughout the whole area of operations and thus corrects for a biased focus on a country's capital and the official, internationally recognized government. It emphasizes interactions between local communities and peacekeepers and considers the improvement of local conditions as crucial to stabilizing post-conflict situations. Communities often experience specific conflict dynamics because of

uncertainty about entitlements to land and property, exacerbated by the movements of internally displaced people. A common legacy of the civil conflict is the undermining of traditional authority, leading to generational conflicts, as the experience of Liberia illustrates (<http://www.gsdr.org/docs/open/liberiaca.pdf>).

These parochial, often even partially private conflicts and grievances not only lead to increased insecurity locally, they can also have a wider impact because they are easily exploited to obstruct national peace processes. Recently, Séverine Autesserre highlighted (https://www.ted.com/talks/severine_autesserre_to_solve_mass_violence_look_to_locals?language=en) the failures of the international community, among them UN peacekeepers, to adequately deal with such local conflict dynamics in the DRC, and it has become common to talk about the need for bottom-up peacebuilding.

Bottom-up Peace



Image by UN Photo via [Flickr](#).

(https://www.flickr.com/photos/un_photo/3837227656/in/album-72157626194186743/)

Even though they are obviously related, local peacekeeping is not the same as bottom-up peacebuilding, and the differences matter when evaluating possible contributions of local peacekeeping to the overall success of missions. First of all, even when peacekeepers are deployed throughout a larger area, they may still predominantly engage with national tensions, for example, when they monitor possible military activities of the government and rebels. In such cases, local communities may simply be caught in the crossfire between the government and rebel groups, and the interaction between peacekeepers and locals will remain largely of an economic and social nature (<http://www.nupi.no/en/News/Defining-the-Peacekeeping-Economy>).

Secondly, a very large peacebuilding community tends to operate in post-conflict countries, involving representatives of global organizations such as UNICEF and UNHCR, but also from international NGOs such as the Red Cross, as well as local activists and local NGOs. This community, rather than the peacekeepers, initiates and supports local peace initiatives and has more readily accepted the importance of bottom-up peacebuilding. Even when they are not directly involved, the presence of peacekeepers can still matter. for example, by guaranteeing the general security situation. Unfortunately, the record of peacekeepers to effectively protect humanitarian workers remains mixed as illustrated by recent events in South Sudan

(http://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/18/world/africa/united-nations-south-sudan-peacekeepers.html?_r=0) and the DRC (http://www.caritasdev.cd/v3/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=3382:nord-kivu-les-trois-agents-de-caritas-goma-ont-ete-relaches&catid=25&Itemid=100053). To find out whether local peacekeeping works, we need to know *where* peacekeepers go, *what* they do, *with whom* they interact, and *how locals respond* to them.

Regardless of the recent attention paid to local peacekeeping, it is important to be aware that peacekeeping remains predominantly 'top-down'. In [our research](http://jpr.sagepub.com/content/50/6/691.short) (<http://jpr.sagepub.com/content/50/6/691.short>), we have found that UN peacekeeping missions in Sub-Saharan Africa report mainly on interactions with government representatives. Their collaboration is presented as essential to realizing a key goal of the UN, namely to rebuild central administration. There are not only fewer reports of engagement with rebel groups, but these reports also mention conflict more often. The picture is not uniform: relatively weak rebel groups are more cooperative towards larger UN missions, possibly because the latter are able to offer protection. Even more rare are reports of dealing with independent local authorities; in fact, there are too few to be able to say anything about the quality of the interaction.

A Strategic Approach to Local Peacekeeping

Currently, there is also little evidence to suggest that the UN recognizes the relevance of local peacekeeping as a *strategy*. Instead, peacekeeping operations deal with local violence in response to specific events and mainly at the tactical level to contain such events. Peacekeepers definitely respond to flare ups of violence and they are concerned about protecting civilians. Stories about peacekeepers hanging around hotel pools or spending their time on the beach are largely urban myths. Even though they are commonly positioned near cities, they are deployed to, and more active in, conflict zones. The lack of strategy, however, leads to considerable and systematic delays in their response to violence. Once peacekeepers arrive on the scene, they appear able to largely contain the violence but they may well have missed valuable opportunities to limit damage and save lives.

Operations also lack high-quality information about local conditions hindering the development of an effective local peacekeeping strategy. At the local level, allegiances and antagonisms are often complex and subtle, and may shift quickly. It is not only necessary to gather intelligence about the local context prior, during and even post deployment, but also to coordinate this intelligence with ongoing operations. Stefano Costalli similarly argues that the United Nations Protection Force (UNPROFOR) failed to develop a strategy for Bosnia based on features of the terrain, warring factions and ethnic composition of the population that would have allowed them to intervene in a timely manner. [He also recognizes](https://tigizelis.wordpress.com/2016/06/12/peacekeeping-workshop-02-06-2016-at-the-british-academy-carlton-house-londo) (<https://tigizelis.wordpress.com/2016/06/12/peacekeeping-workshop-02-06-2016-at-the-british-academy-carlton-house-londo>) that creating strategies is particularly difficult for multinational missions.

Pitfalls and Prospects

Local peacekeeping thus requires a number of difficult choices. First of all, not all peacekeepers are equally suited for local peacekeeping. Regional peacekeeping forces will often have a better understanding of local conditions, but local actors may also perceive them, rightly or wrongly, as biased. Secondly, local peacekeeping benefits from long-term commitments, allowing contingents to understand local conditions better and to be able to complete the projects they have initiated. Peacekeeping forces, however, regularly rotate, since they often have to operate in difficult circumstances. The support for community policing in Timor Leste provides several useful lessons. Peacekeepers from New Zealand took prime responsibility for this task throughout the duration of the mission and even following its completion. They were credible because the local population, including local policemen, appreciated their commitment to and understanding of community policing. Interestingly, locals recognized the different approaches to policing taken by police officers from, for example, Portugal, Japan and New Zealand.

Even though it is too early to say that local peacekeeping has become a strategic approach to peacekeeping, the importance of building good relations between peacekeepers and local communities is by now broadly accepted. The United Kingdom is experimenting with training for its peacekeeping mission within local communities in Malakal and Bentiu in South Sudan. This approach, if successful, can be expected to transform into a new policy looking to improve the interaction and integration of the mission within the communities. There are also initiatives within ongoing peacekeeping missions; for example, while deployed as UN police officer, Kristin Konglevoll Fjell set up a women police support network in Liberia, which created a channel for communication between local women police officers and women UN officers.

It is important to realize that whether with or without a strategic approach to local peacekeeping, peacekeepers always have had a local impact. First of all, already a modest deployment of peacekeepers shortens the duration of conflict episodes in a particular locality. There is also evidence that it makes attacks against civilians by armed factions less likely. The 'Blue Helmets' provide a basic level of security in situations where insecurity is the norm rather than the exception. Peace, however, is more than the absence of conflict. Moreover, the endemic insecurity in post-conflict situations creates a dependency on peacekeepers—even while cooperation with, and appreciation of, peacekeepers declines the longer peacekeepers are present in a particular country. The need for a peacebuilding, rather than peacekeeping, strategy seems evident, and the value of local peacekeeping may well be that it recognizes the importance of harnessing the local capacity to build peace.

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Tags: [peacekeeping](#), [Timor-Leste](#), [UNMIT](#)

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