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Performing the Protection of Civilians Mandate: Experiences of African Military Peacekeepers in the Democratic Republic of Congo and the Federal Republic of Somalia

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Abstract

The Protection of Civilians (PoC) became a central norm in international peacekeeping and often rationalizes the use of force in peace interventions. The successes, failures and ambiguities of the PoC mandate implementation were critically explored in academia and policymaking. Few studies, however, have attended to the views and experiences of uniformed peacekeepers, thus to those actors supposed to implement the PoC mandate. This report provides initial findings on peacekeepers' experiences. The findings build on 69 narrative interviews with United Nations and African Union military peacekeepers in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Somalia, in which we explored how military peacekeepers described and reflected upon their peacekeeping experiences and what they viewed as successes, shortcomings and challenges. The report tries to stay as close as possible to the narratives of the peacekeepers to provide readers with a glimpse into the ways peacekeepers talked about, rationalized, justified, challenged and reflected upon their deployment. We start by assessing peacekeepers' initial reaction when they received the order for the deployment to a peacekeeping mission. Second, we outline their experiences in performing the PoC mandate focussing on peacekeepers' own understanding of their roles as protectors of civilians and the challenges they described relating to civilians and differentiating them from combatants. Their role understanding is directly linked to the gendered character of peacekeeping which we discuss in a third section. Fourth, we outline how soldiers identified barriers, discussed the need to work with intermediaries and how this impacts the distribution of trust in peacekeeping before we finally show how peacekeepers thought about the request to find 'African solutions for African Problems'.

Policy Recommendations

Based on our findings, we propose the following recommendations for the training of future and returning peacekeepers and policy:

- To foster language skills amongst peacekeepers especially when they are regularly redeploy to the same countries to improve everyday communication with and understanding of civilians. Improved language skills would not only avoid overly relying on a few interpreters or the host county's army for translation, but also create more opportunities for peacekeepers to engage with the host population to counter prejudices and attitudes of othering.

- To prepare peacekeepers for opposition and resistance by the civilian population, including information and discussion of the (often contested) history of peacekeeping in the pre-deployment training curriculum.
- Provide avenues for the development of a self-reflective and critical engagement with the role of peacekeepers that is not solely centred on the idea of protector and peace bearer.
- To encourage TCCs to constructively work on military masculinities and gender perceptions enshrined in military culture, as well as incorporating these into the pre-deployment training curriculum.
- To provide mental health support within TCCs and peacekeeping missions to ensure that mental and physical wellbeing is regarded of equal importance.
- For missions to diversify the operationalisation of their protection mandate and seek solutions to protection of civilians in volatile operational environments (e.g. how to differentiate between civilians and combatants).
- To increase efforts and resources put into trust- and relationship-building within the mission environment to improve relations and confidence between civilians and peacekeepers, peacekeepers and the host country's army, as well as among peacekeepers themselves. Initiatives ought to go beyond current CIMIC measures and public relations campaigns; they require a stronger strategic footing and more effective operational and tactical means in order to counter the mission's politicization by host governments and their political opposition.
- To build on African solidarity in peacekeeping and advance the UN's existing regional cooperation with the AU, as well as European/US' support for African peacekeeping with finances, equipment and training.
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As others have pointed out before, the findings also highlight the need:

- For peace operations to be staffed and equipped appropriately taking into account challenges such as persisting volatility, geographical vastness of the mission environment, poor infrastructure, and influence of neighbouring countries.
- To pursue political solutions diplomatically while peace operations are deployed and ensure political processes complement peacekeeping means.

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Introduction

In the last three decades, peacekeeping has become normalized as a means of intervening in violent conflicts and wars. It is considered 'an essential instrument' and among 'the most effective tools available to the United Nations in the promotion and maintenance of international peace and security' (UN 2022a). An increasing number of peacekeepers, many from troop-contributing countries (TCC) of the global South, have been deployed and their mandates have broadened considerably from monitoring and implementing peace agreements to multi-dimensional peace operations. At the turn of the century, the protection of civilians (PoC) moved into the centre of military interventions and it is now considered one of the prime obligations of UN peacekeeping (SC 2015, 5), even if this obligation is not explicitly expressed (UN 2022b). Therefore, military peacekeepers are often required to straddle combat and pacific responsibilities, combining military, diplomatic and humanitarian roles. They fight violent actors – among them rebels, insurgents, terrorists and criminal gangs – organize patrols in rural and urban environments, provide protection for humanitarian deliveries, and protect governmental and humanitarian installations, while they are simultaneously requested to develop relations with civilians affected by violence, mediate conflicts and often also provide humanitarian goods. A vast body of literature has critically explored these shifts in mandates (HIPPO 2015; Boutellis and Fink 2016; de Coning et al. 2016; de Coning et al. 2017; Karlsrud 2017; Bode and Karlsrud 2018), while a slowly growing scholarship has investigated how mandates are operationalized and the effects they have on the lives of those who are to be protected in host countries (Pouligny 2006; Aoi et al. 2007). So far, scant attention has been given to the views of peacekeepers themselves, and how they experience the operationalisation of their protection mandates.

Our research project 'Peacekeepers as Soldiers and Humanitarians', funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) and Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), set out to address this gap by focusing on interventions in Africa by militaries from Africa. The focus on African uniformed peacekeepers enabled us to compare experiences with the protection of civilians (PoC) mandate in United Nations and African Union-led peacekeeping operations. We decided to look into two of the larger and longer-lasting peace operations in Africa: the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) and the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM).

The African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) was deployed in Somalia in March 2007, after Ethiopia intervened into Somalia and stopped the advances of the Union of Islamic Courts together with clan militias aligned to the nascent Transitional Federal Government of Somalia. As a regional peacekeeping force, AMISOM is reflective of the attempt to find 'African solutions to African problems.' However, it took several years until AMISOM reached its full strength of over 20,000 forces, and out of the 54 African Union (AU) member states, only five countries have consistently contributed troops to the mission, namely the East African countries of Uganda, Kenya, Djibouti, Ethiopia, and Burundi. While thirteen more African states considered contributing troops to AMISOM, they reportedly decided against it, notwithstanding the lobbying by senior AU officials and the regional orientation of the mission (Williams 2018). Nonetheless, AMISOM has operated in Somalia since 2007 to date to become the AU's largest and most prominent peacekeeping mission (Fisher 2019). Moreover, the mission's mandate has since evolved from the initial six-month interim bridging operation, after which it was supposed to transform to a UN operation. The latter never happened, and AMISOM continued as a fully-fledged AU peacekeeping operation. However, the UN Security Council (UNSC) modified the missions' mandate to include support for state building (training, capacity building) and humanitarian support focusing especially on the protection of civilians.

With effect from 1st April 2022, the UN Security Council authorized the AU Peace and Security Council to reconfigure AMISOM into the African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS).

The United Nations Organization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUC), initially deployed to observe a 1999 Ceasefire Agreement, a mandate that was extended and expanded until the mission was renamed MONUSCO in May 2010 to reflect the mission's new objective of stabilization. MONUC and MONUSCO have been operating under the UN Charter's Chapter VII which allows for the proactive use of force in the fulfilment of their mandate. In 2008, the protection of civilians became the mission's broad if somewhat vague priority (Paddon 2013). Finally, during the height of the advance of the Rwandan-backed Mouvement du 23 Mars (M23) rebel group, the Force Intervention Brigade (FIB) was integrated into MONUSCO in March 2013, a special unit with the explicit mandate to neutralize armed groups (Cammaert and Blyth 2013; Spijkers 2015; Tull 2018). Decisively supporting the Congolese army, the defeat of the M23 arguably constituted MONUSCO's largest success. However, ever since, armed groups have proliferated to some 120 across Eastern Congo (KST 2021). Since late 2021, in a context of deteriorating regional relations, the M23 has experienced a renaissance and seems even harder to dislodge than ten years ago. Partly as a result, the purpose of the peacekeeping mission has repeatedly been drawn into question by government officials, politicians as well as frustrated Congolese civilians (Giray 2022; Knieknie 2022).

Both AMISOM and MONUSCO have had a robust mandate that allows the active use of force against insurgents and rebels, thus providing fruitful grounds for comparison (for details, see Jowell 2018, chap.2). Both interventions are taking place in an intractable environment, in which the UN and AU peacekeepers are trying to implement their mandate. In what follows, the voices of these peacekeepers will shed some light on what this means in practice: how they go about protecting civilians, how they make sense of their challenging circumstances, and how they navigate their duties as both soldiers and humanitarians.

The research project followed four objectives, among them to develop recommendations and to design training modules that may support peacekeepers in fulfilling their mandate. This report, however, mainly focuses on objective one and presents the findings on how military peacekeepers understand their complex tasks, the challenges they experience and how they manage their roles. Another report (forthcoming) will consider the experiences of civilians and assess how they compare with those of militaries.

Study Methodology

The research project initially planned to combine different qualitative methods, including interviews, mapping voice and observations to get a comprehensive understanding of the peacekeeping environment. However, due to travel restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic, we had to rely on virtual means and conducted most narrative interviews with militaries and humanitarians online. Our civil society partners in Somalia and the DRC – namely the South-West Livestock Professional Association (SOWELPA) and the Congolese Cercle National de Réflexion sur la Jeunesse (CNRJ-RDC) – were able to travel at an earlier stage and conducted both narrative interviews and mapping voice with civilians in the areas where peacekeepers operate. However, here, we will mainly draw upon the narrative interviews with military peacekeepers, while the voices of civilians will be analysed in another report (forthcoming). Narrative interviews gave peacekeepers the opportunity to recount their experiences without being interrupted by too many questions, allowing them to develop their own perspectives and provide in-depth accounts of their personal experiences.

Overall, we conducted interviews with 69 military peacekeepers; 30 of whom had been active in the DRC (25 from Malawi, 3 from South Africa, and 2 from Kenya); and 39 in Somalia (25 from Uganda, 13 from Burundi, and 1 from Ethiopia). This represents just over half of the 120 interviews we had originally planned for, and these interviewees were also from fewer troop contributing countries (TCCs) than envisaged. Obtaining permission to interview military personnel proved challenging. The militaries of Uganda, Burundi and Malawi granted us permission to conduct interviews, and thus opened their armed forces to academic enquiry, and Kenya restricted interviews to two former peacekeepers. We also obtained permission to talk to military peacekeepers within AMISOM from the then Force Commander while our official request to interview military personnel was rejected by MONUSCO. MONUSCO officials considered our questions about everyday experiences of uniformed staff to be too sensitive. This tendency of armies and peacekeepers to silo themselves from academic research and journalistic investigation is, in our view, counterproductive to the aim of peacekeeping and the requirement of transparent practice and citizen oversight.

Despite numerical shortfalls and the reduced range of TCCs, we managed to gather a diverse sample of interviewees. The interviewed peacekeepers differ in terms of military rank, main duty during the peacekeeping deployment and experience with peacekeeping. The sample also includes 16 interviews with female peacekeepers across the armed forces (7 from Malawi, 4 from Burundi, 4 from Uganda, and 1 from Kenya).

The interview questions focused on the experiences of peacekeepers. For example, we asked about preparations for deployment, how they spent their days in the DRC or Somalia including leisure time, what they found challenging or rewarding, how they define their main duties, and how they understand their protection role and operationalized it in daily tasks. We also asked for suggestions to improve protection practices and peacekeeping training. The following provides a first overview of our findings remaining as close as possible to the voices of the peacekeepers. All interviews were anonymized, but the annex contains an indication of their national background. Interviews were conducted in different languages which were usually neither the mother tongue of the interviewee nor of the interviewer. To account for language, translation and transcription errors, we copy-edited all direct quotes.

Before delving into the experiences of peacekeepers' deployment in the DRC and Somalia, we briefly outline how soldiers experienced their nomination as peacekeepers.

Becoming a Peacekeeper

The decision to participate in international peacekeeping interventions was neither made by the soldiers nor did the armies have mechanisms for people to volunteer. Instead, interviewees from all TCCs and in both missions outlined that the army leadership selects peacekeepers based on the needs of the mission, which should, as Alias 165 put it, match the 'capability and levels of education' of the selected soldiers. When asked how they felt about this selection, all interviewees accepted the decision and saw it as a part of their job in the armed forces: 'It just came as a duty. When duty calls, you go' (Alias 167), or as Alias 242 described, 'to be peacekeeper is not a motivation but an obligation because if you are appointed there, you go. There is no way to resist' (Alias 242). Some of the soldiers had expected to be deployed in peacekeeping missions and others had hoped for this; many soldiers expressed feelings of pride about being selected. They saw it as an appreciation of their capacities and as a stepping-stone in their career development.

Several interviewees explained that they felt a need to serve their own country and contribute to solving issues in fellow African countries. Alias 168, for example, explained:

> You don't decide, but they pick people they feel they should serve in Somalia. They do assessments and they pick names for people to go and serve in Somalia because everyone would want to go and do some contributions. But the numbers given for Uganda are limited. They pick for each battle group; people are selected to go and serve, and you do your term.

In a similar vein, a soldier from another country recounted:

> It [peacekeeping] is part of our duty. Whenever there is a chance, the authorities select based on a number the UN gives the country. […] For the military, the Defence Headquarters will select. The UN gives the basis of what is required, even the ranks. Then services such as the Kenya Army, Kenya Navy and Kenya Airforce cascade them down to formations, then they do selections. When being enlisted and taking the oath, officers say they will do anything they are commanded to do. This is part of the job (Alias 266)

In addition, former Malawian peacekeepers stressed that 'it's an experience every soldier will want to have, to go out and do peacekeeping or deploy in any other active service' (Alias 36, Alias 38, Alias 55), with others emphasising that they are driven by the desire to protect or serve civilians (Alias 39, Alias 57) and some specifying female civilians (Alias 57).

Several interviewees from the Ugandan People Defence Force (UPDF) linked their country's contribution to peacekeeping in another African country to Uganda's own history of interventions, among them the UPDF's activities in Uganda's unruly northern Karamoja and Acholi regions, but also to Tanzania's 'intervention' in Uganda to end the military dictatorship of Idi Amin in April 1979. While expressed by many, this view was most clearly articulated by Alias 168:

> Yes. Another thing which made us join peacekeeping, one, as I told you, one of internal experience in Karamoja, but secondly, it was that thing of to serve, especially within African side, because for us Uganda, we had Tanzanians who came to help us here. They came to help us. There were no Europeans, it was Tanzanians. When I heard that we are also going to Somalia, there was that proud history that I am also going to be part of this peacekeeping, really. When you are doing it in an African context, same culture, I was feeling a bit happy than if I was to be taken – maybe go outside the continent. I was just motivated by that, that I will be proud if I am part of this solution (Alias 168).

The Ugandan soldiers regularly mentioned Pan-Africanism as a guiding doctrine of the UPDF, and, with respect to peacekeeping, emphasized Uganda's responsibility for providing solutions to African problems. Their contribution to problem-solving in Africa and the public recognition they received for this endeavour provided meaning to the peacekeeper's work and enabled them to face challenges such as being separated from their families for prolonged periods of time. Such an understanding of peacekeeping to contribute to something 'bigger' and the desire to be part of it was clearly expressed by Alias 168:

> Basically, as a military officer and as any combatant of a force, when you see a challenge somewhere, you feel you should do something. Even before you're

> selected to go for any mission, by the fact that you see your colleagues are there and they are having a positive contribution by what they are doing there, you feel you should also be at least somewhere to serve in that capacity. […] You would also feel proud to say, 'I ever served in that mission' and whatever they did, the successes they achieve, you feel you should also share with them. Even before I was picked to go – because you don't decide to go, you're selected to go – even before I was picked to go, I wanted also to be in the books of people who, in one time, contributed to a peaceful Somalia. If they would talk about AMISOM's positive contribution, I would feel that if I am also among them, it makes me proud.

Another soldier from Malawi additionally stressed that consequences of conflicts on the African continent, are felt across whole regions far beyond neighbouring countries, for example in the form of refugee flows. This, so Alias 27, initiates the need for conflict management and explains countries' decisions to contribute troops to UN peacekeeping.

The interviews revealed that despite being nominated to deploy to peace operations, the sentiments attached to this selection are duty, professionalism, skill enhancement, experience, protection and African solidarity which all feed into the self-understanding and self-image of a peacekeeper, the significance of which we will come back to later in the report.

Performing the PoC Mandate

Interviewed peacekeepers in both the UN and AU military intervention were unanimously convinced that they are needed by the government and population of the host country. Overall, they believed that they are doing a good job and that their presence and everyday work are significantly contributing to stability and peacebuilding and are providing a certain degree of protection to the population in the DRC and Somalia respectively. Most interviewees also identified strongly with the PoC mandate and outlined this as the most important part of their presence in Somalia and the DRC. The feeling of making a positive contribution was, therefore, strongly related to the reactions of civilians. A soldier who served in a base outside of Mogadishu in 2015 explained his sentiments:

> What I found more fulfilling, one, was the cheering we would get whenever our convoy passes a certain trading centre or a town where the locals are. The cheering, the waving of the kids, that was a fulfilling moment. I would really feel that our being there is appreciated. Passing a trading centre where people are seated and you see them waving to you, children are waving to you with cheerful faces, that was a very fulfilling moment for me as a peacekeeper. I felt I'm being appreciated (Alias 168).

After being asked about the challenges that she or her colleagues experienced with their protection mandate, Alias 168 re-emphasized the appreciation that AMISOM received from civilians and interpreted this as a sign of success:

> We have not had issues with protection of civilians in Mogadishu and that's why I said [before], wherever they [civilians] would see our convoys passing, they would feel so excited and they will cheer us on, because the moment they would see us, they would feel safe. Because they are feeling safe in us. So, I was confident that the protection part of civilians is good, is excellent, because they had trust in us.

For Alias 168, trust is a crucial ingredient in civil-military relationships. Trust in military peacekeepers or the lack thereof indeed shapes how peacekeeping is experienced by civilians. In situations of uncertainty, trust, as Gambetta (2000) emphasized, implies the probability that an action is performed in predictable and beneficial ways and thus allows for a degree of cooperation. It, therefore, not only significantly influences how relations between organisations, collectives and individuals unfold but also implies a sense of mutuality. We will show in more detail below that peacekeepers' trust in civilians and collaborating security forces is equally important as it has a bearing on how they perform their protection mandate. Our reading also confirms the conceptualization of trust as a 'meta-emotion' (Belli and Broncano 2017) which inserts itself in relations, channels the distribution of expectations and initiates a variety of further emotions. This became especially pronounced when the identification of peacekeepers with the PoC mandate and their belief in doing good was challenged by two central experiences: their inability to differentiate civilians from combatants and (violent) civilian protests against them.

Performing Protection Without Being Able to Distinguish Civilians from Combatants

Many of the interviewed peacekeepers referred to the difficulty of identifying members of non-state armed forces and differentiating them from civilians (in the DRC and Somalia) and from state or state-aligned security forces (Somalia only). This difficulty had far-reaching consequences as it moulded the relationship between peacekeepers and civilians which was increasingly structured by insecurity, mistrust and suspicion.

In Somalia, for example, the high mobility and adaptability of al-Shabaab gave rise to the perception that members of the Islamist organisation can be 'everywhere at any one time' and thus, that any engagement with the Somali population bears a high risk for the peacekeepers. Alias 169, for example, in answering the question of whether he had combat experience, said that people in AMISOM were continuously engaged in physical combat, even when the specific duties of peacekeepers were not declared as such (Alias 169). The possibility of attacks became a constant feature in the life of peacekeepers in Somalia, especially for those based outside of Mogadishu, where:

> Everybody seemed to be armed. You could not take any advantage of any situation. It was a bit challenging; we did not work in a comfortable environment. […] This becomes a challenge to identify who is an enemy and who is not an enemy. […] As a trained soldier, you need to differentiate, identify a military target and a civilian. That one is a bit challenging in Somalia, everybody is armed (Alias 165).

The inability to identify combatants puts soldiers in difficult situations because they cannot easily apply what they learned during the peacekeeping training courses. On the one hand, their mandate asked them to protect civilians; on the other hand, they experienced attacks emanating from civilians, be it combatants camouflaged as civilians, or civilians who openly supported the rebels or terrorists. Alias 166 went on to explain:

> We do a lot of training, that people should distinguish between a civilian and a military person. […] For us here in Uganda, we distinguished by uniform. There, we were told to distinguish between somebody who's armed or putting on civilian clothes, somebody who is armed and somebody who is not armed. […] Now, somebody is not armed with the AK, somebody is armed with just the bomb, a grenade, hiding it. By the time you can distinguish, first of all, he would have killed one of your colleagues. In the market, if somebody throws the grenade to the troops, […] now, there is that natural – […] – that natural response when a soldier has lost

> his colleague, there and then and comes under fire from there. […] Although we do a lot of training such that they act by instinct, they should not. Maybe that one person was just one bad person within these innocent civilians, but this guy came to do this action such that he wants you to cause collateral damage. Those are the training we do, but very, very challenging.

Having to deal with these difficulties, peacekeepers explained how they tried to 'do all the best to distinguish civilians and militaries' and outlined how challenging it was to defend oneself without harming civilians (Alias 245).

The difficulty of distinguishing civilians from insurgents was especially attributed to the densely populated urban environment which, as Alias 66 put it, hosts 'a mixture of sympathizers […and] rebels'. Alias 66 emphasized how rebels are embedding themselves in the urban population and even suggested that it would be better if people in need of protection were encamped. Accordingly, 'the only way you can protect civilians better, they have to be in the IDP camps', something he had experienced in a previous mission in Darfur (Sudan). Another peacekeeper provided an example of an incident in 2011 where the protection of civilians proved difficult:

> In the academy [school] there were many displaced people who came for protection but at the same time Al-Shabab came with them. They shot us and this was very hard. It was also difficult to shoot on people in the academy because there were children, women, and people with disabilities. We were obliged to talk to them by negotiating them to leave. Fortunately, there was a Muslim on our side who went to the academy and challenged the Somalis who were shooting, telling them that they were friends, and they would be helped if they leave. At their exit from the place, we directly entered the academy and started shooting them (Alias 247).

The inability to differentiate civilians and combatants and the moral and operational dilemmas peacekeepers face when dealing with the blurring line between civilians and combatants was most pronounced when peacekeepers were confronted with child soldiers. Several AMISOM interviewees referred to the use of children for attacks, which aggravated a feeling of risk and further generalized a climate of insecurity and suspicion among peacekeepers. Interviewees felt that they had to remain alert when interacting with civilians or while passing them during patrols:

> Yes. As I said, in Merca [town in Somalia], there were some [situations] which were hard. As I said, like market day, you are trying to protect the civilians in the market, but again, al-Shabaab plants those children to throw grenades at the forces. Now, that one was very, very challenging. The most challenging in protection was when al-Shabaab – because al-Shabaab puts on civilian clothes to attack (Alias 166).

Peacekeepers described the dilemma as either using violence against children, whom they considered to be among the most vulnerable and in need of their protection, or risk being attacked. With peacekeeping training including seminars on child protection, peacekeepers especially (and rightly so) learned that children are disproportionally affected by violence and, therefore, in need of particular attention and protection. The question of how to defend themselves against child soldiers left peacekeepers in a dilemma.

The challenge of differentiating combatants and civilians was also experienced in the DRC and peacekeepers' engagement with civilians was, therefore, equally characterized by mistrust. Alias 57 expressed how fear and suspicion accompanied her engagement with civilians in the female outreach programme that MONUSCO launched in the DRC:

> We never knew who is who […]. Because in the ADF, we understand they also have women. We never sometimes know who we were interacting with exactly. Us being the peacekeepers, I can say we never knew them. They could introduce themselves as students, but we couldn't know if they were really students. We just couldn't know who was who. Yes. I can say that was a very big challenge for us because we never knew exactly who they were.

Later she continued to explain that:

> The very same civilians were the ones who came to attack us in our camp. Going out there, we were always prepared that anything can happen, because I can say we couldn't trust them. If they were coming to attack us in our own operating main base, what if we go out there to their place? Anything can happen. I can say, yes, we were afraid that we could be attacked.

When asked if anything ever happened, she outlined:

> No, I can say, each and every time we went to visit the civilians, we were never attacked by them. I can say maybe on our way to visit them or coming back from visiting them, we could be attacked on our way by the very same civilians, so we were just not sure.

The UN acknowledges that peacekeepers are faced with 'increasingly volatile operating environments' (UNCOPS 2022, 2). This volatility, and especially the difficulty of differentiating combatants from civilians, however, significantly impacts on the way the protection of civilian mandate is operationalized in contemporary peacekeeping interventions. The difficulties that peacekeepers face when moving among civilians whom they perceive as potentially hostile became apparent when they described their operating context. Statements such as 'we were just not sure', 'we never know' and 'anything can happen', and the perception that rebels can be 'everywhere at any one time' or that they are 'inside the population' (Alias 241) highlight that peacekeepers operate in a situation of generalized uncertainty and suspicion. This uncertainty gives rise to and generalizes mistrust against civilians. Civilians were, for example, described as 'having a mind of themselves' (Alias 55), being 'brainwashed' (Alias 59), having undergone a 'change [in] their mentality' (Alias 245) and lacking 'the love for peace' (Alias 63). Consequently, while military peacekeepers aimed to gain an understanding of their protection recipients, they often regarded civilians as silent bystanders and collaborators of rebel forces, holding back or refusing to share important information. Civilians were also regularly described as being unable to properly understand the complexities of peacekeeping, but above all, as people that cannot be trusted. In their daily actions, peacekeepers must reconcile their duty to protect with deep-seated feelings of mistrust that structure their engagement with civilians.

Performing Protection When Civilians Turn Against You

Peacekeepers from the Malawian contingent of the Force Intervention Brigade (FIB) in Beni (DRC) struggled when demonstrations were organized against their presence, some of which ended in attempts to storm the bases of peacekeepers. As one interviewee explained:

> Yeah, they come directly to our camp. They are at the main gate throwing stones at us, shouting outside that they don't want MONUSCO troops in DRC. It was not only in our camp, but it was the whole mission area [that] was destabilized (Alias 37).

While the Malawian peacekeepers managed to defend their base against protesters in November 2019, rioters burnt down a UN-run Ebola centre in the immediate vicinity of the Malawian camp, and the peacekeepers 'had to offer refuge' to the civilian United Nations personnel until the riots stopped (Alias 54). Alias 54 recounted that, due to the ongoing demonstrations, the deployment in the DRC required 'fighting on five fronts':

> You are fighting against the COVID-19. You are fighting against the Ebola. You are fighting against the armed rebel groups, and then at the same time, the people of Congo don't want you. They are violently demonstrating against you. It's not easy.

Asked about the reason for the violent protest, interviewees explained that civilians had complained about the failure of MONUSCO to bring peace and increase security in the DRC – a statement that they usually disagreed with, emphasizing instead either the increase of security in the region or that the mission was blamed for the failures of others.

FIB interviewees outlined how these protests took them by surprise. They did not expect 'that the local people can now turn against us' (Alias 37). The peacekeepers felt unprepared for such demonstrations, arguing that they did not receive prior training on how to 'control crowds' and they did not have adequate 'riot control gear' either. Instead, as Alias 37 put it, 'we had to use initiative on the ground, or even [to wait] until the force from other battalions came [to assist]'. The above-mentioned blurred boundaries between combatants and civilians were further deepened by violent protestors. Peacekeepers' encounters with civilian demonstrations significantly distorted their conceptual and spatial understanding of peacekeeping, further obscuring boundaries between protector and protected, as well as between military frontlines and military camps. As Alias 56 explained, 'we were not going to the front, but the demonstrations found us in the base, so we see it directly. All seven days plus, we were there, so it was not easy. It's too tough'. He also outlined the difficulty of reacting to violence conducted by civilians. He described that soldiers are trained and have gathered experience that 'an enemy is firing at you, and you are firing back.' He felt that direct combat is preferable to 'being stoned, being tortured, while you are just silent. It's too painful'. Alias 57 explained in a similar vein:

> These civilians we are talking about here, they had stones, they had the catapults, they had the, we can say the petrol bombs, and all we could do was just to shoot the warning shots. There was nothing we could do apart from controlling the crowds and shooting warning shots. Since they had stones and we had guns, we couldn't have done something else apart from controlling them and shooting the warning shots.

The soldiers felt that they had lost control of the situation, and were condemned to passivity, as they could not rely on their trained repertoire of actions when confronted by civilians. The demonstrations and the use of violence distorted the self-understanding of peacekeepers as protectors of civilians, as well as the belief in their ability to protect them. One soldier who described the demonstrations as 'hell on earth' (Alias 74) explained that 'the most challenging thing was the civilians understanding us, that we are there to protect them […]'. And he continued later, that 'you were trying to protect them, but then they don't want your assistance.' Another peacekeeper who also identified the demonstration as 'the most challenging thing' he experienced during his deployment in the DRC, explained that 'we were there to protect civilians. Now the civilians that we wanted to protect turned against us' (Alias 38). Having to protect themselves from people they were supposed to protect, and the insecurity of how to best conduct self-protection without harming civilians, as well as the rejections they experience from civilians, weighed heavily on the soldiers and led to anger and frustration. As Alias 36 reflected:

> You sacrifice leaving your country to go to a place where there is war, to try to contribute to peace, but you find that your effort is not appreciated. There are times when you are actually accused of doing nothing, accused of maybe collaborating with the belligerents. So that is the challenge where you are sacrificing but the people on the ground are not looking at that. They're not appreciating that. They have a feeling that you are there just to make money.

When asked about their own protection, peacekeepers usually referred to protective technologies and equipment, such as helmets, bulletproof vests and perimeter fences. They also mentioned their military training and the regulations that guide their operations and enable them to stay safe. However, the protests jolted their feelings of safety more than 'ordinary' rebel attacks, for which they felt better prepared, as Alias 55 explained:

> We are not safe, because, as you are having a task to protect someone, but she or he doesn't want to be protected, you cannot just go safe [for] a while. We are lacking confidence itself because they are not ready to welcome our tasks. […] It was not easy.

The rejection of their role as protectors became a determining experience for many interviewees from the Malawian contingent in the DRC. Even after 'things were back to normal' they continued 'to talk about it every day. That's why we're still talking about it till now' (Alias 74). As discussed earlier, most peacekeepers identified strongly with their role as protectors. Violence directed against them by people they were supposed to protect left them in a state of stress and the whole mission, as one peacekeeper expressed, 'in a dilemma' (Alias 38).

However, although public scepticism was an enduring feature during most of the deployment of the interviewed Malawian peacekeepers, they continued to believe in the positive contribution of peacekeeping and in their duty to fulfil their protection mandate. When asked if they should have considered winding down operations once civilians turned against them, most interviewees disagreed. Instead, they provided rationales for the behaviour of civilians, for example, that they are misled by politicians, or unlikely to be able to understand the complexity of the conflict situation and the peacekeeping mission as the following (dialogue with Alias 58) illustrates:

> No, we shouldn't go home. We need to protect these civilians.

> Interviewer: What do you protect them from?
>
> Not to be killed. They have to do their job, they need to be free actually, it's their country, so they need to be free. We don't need them to die. Since we are there, their presence should be seen, they have to be protected. Although we cannot reach all.

In contrast to the peacekeepers, interviewed civilians in the DRC often felt that the presence of peacekeepers put them at greater risk of attacks by armed groups (report forthcoming). Some peacekeepers talked about this fear of civilians. Alias 37, for example, described how villagers refused to host a military camp in their vicinity, because:

> They [the villagers] said that when you will be sending UN peacekeepers, […] you will be the one calling the enemies to come here in this village. So, when you are deployed here, the enemies will come and attack. […] So, that's why they were er saying no, we should not deploy in our area. We don't want UN presence, your presence in our area.

He and his colleagues went into the villages and eventually managed to convince the people that their presence would improve their security:

> So, when we went there, stayed there for some days, those civilians saw our roles, what we are doing. They were impressed and finally allowed us to er have, er made our base there.

In a similar vein, but also attending to the civilians' belief in the lack of political will of the UN, Alias 54 outlined that:

> The people, they are not happy. […] They believe that they get killed themselves whether the peacekeepers are in their country. Some they feel the United Nations is arming the rebel groups to kill them. Some, they feel that the United Nations is in DRC to steal their minerals. That's what they say. It's very tricky.

Some peacekeepers also referred to the lack of political will to bring about peace by the DRC Government and the Congolese security forces (see also below); and some argued that neighbouring and other countries are more interested in resource extraction and fast profit than in promoting peace. Despite the demonstrations, however, the peacekeepers remained convinced that their presence prevented attacks and improved the security of civilians because the UN forces act as a deterrence and actively work to reduce the high 'number of human rights violations in Congo' (Alias 38). The fact that civilians, as Alias 54 put it, 'say openly' that they 'don't want us in their country' did not cause doubt among the peacekeepers in relation to their own understanding of their contribution. Rather, the problem was attributed to the civilians, as 'they don't understand. They don't understand why we are in their country,' and they don't appreciate 'the sacrifice' (Alias 36) and the contribution that peacekeepers make to keep them safe:

> Mostly, the challenges are the civilians themselves, the locals. They want to be protected, but they don't want to be protected. They want protection, but they don't want to be protected, because most of times they are against meeting the MONUSCOs. 'MONUSCOs should go', but they want security. By the end of the day, once we pull back from the DRC, from that mission area, they can experience

> a lot of killings. If they have maybe 20 killings with the MONUSCOs still there, what about if the MONUSCOs are pulled back? A lot of killings can happen in DRC. Mostly, those locals, they are against the MONUSCO (Alias 55).

Later in the interview, Alias 55 continued to express his frustration when he stated that:

> Those locals, they don't want peace. We are protecting them, but they are still fighting us. How can we protect them? […] They are taking us like their enemies, not their friends. We continue protecting them even though they don't want, but we continue protecting them because they are vulnerable, so we have to protect them.

The demonstrations did not leave the peacekeepers untouched, and many of them felt the need to talk about what was happening. However, none of the interviewees raised any doubt about the legitimacy of the mission and the protection role of peacekeepers. Some interviewees acknowledged that civil-military relations could be improved by more and better-organized outreach programmes. Alias 73 for example suggested improving 'civic education to help them to know the good of the peacekeepers' and to learn more about the objectives of peacekeeping. Others explained that they understand the feelings of civilians who experience violence and see friends, relatives and children harmed or even killed by armed forces. Indeed, some peacekeepers would have wished for the opportunity to better fight the rebels with military means, a view that was shared by many civilians (report forthcoming). Overall, however, the peacekeepers tried to legitimize their presence in the DRC despite the negative reactions they faced, and explained and justified their actions while outlining how and why the protestors get it wrong.

Protection, Patrolling and the Quest for Combative Solutions

The interviewed peacekeepers of both the UN and AU missions demonstrated awareness and knowledge of international humanitarian law (IHL). They emphasized their mandate and duty to protect civilians and acknowledged the roles of IHL in restraining their actions. In an informal conversation, an AMISOM peacekeeper explained how IHL helps to prevent the 'natural instincts' of soldiers and keep them from making hasty decisions when being attacked: 'what comes to mind is the basic principles of IHL' and this prevents opening fire and harming civilians even in cases where soldiers 'imagine that the al-Shabaab is a civilian.' The same soldier, however, also thought that not every peacekeeper is equally convinced of the rule of law, which explained, according to him, the incidents in which soldiers have been less restrained and ended up opening fire on innocent civilians. Many such cases, as several other soldiers reported, have been taken up by the military court martials and the soldiers have been subsequently sentenced in their home countries.

Many peacekeepers, further alluded to the ambiguity of protection in practice, which they linked to the twin challenges of rule compliance, and the insurgents' exploitation of their rules of operation to undermine their efforts. An AMISOM peacekeeper, for example, alluded to the challenges of protecting civilians in an urban environment, because rebels are embedding themselves within the population, thus using the same people that peacekeepers are supposed to protect, 'to combat you. He further explained that peacekeepers know and abide by the rules of combat, but rebels and terrorists 'are aware that you know the rules' and try to use them against you (Alias 247). This was further explained by another peacekeeper who noted how 'the UN has guidelines on what should be done, and you find the enemy understands some areas are ideal like schools and churches and they hide there' (Alias 266). The peacekeeper explained that it could be 'a child in front of me and I am not supposed to attack' and

contrasted this scenario with the UN's requirement that they 'protect civilians by all means, including deadly force in order to protect UN equipment and property' (Alias 266) concluding that armed groups take advantage of such complexities of the protection mandate.

Beyond clearing roads and public places from Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) and mines in Somalia, peacekeepers in both AMISOM/ATMIS and MONUSCO mainly referred to patrols when they were asked how they perform their Protection of Civilians mandate. Alias 37 explained the different types of patrol ranging from 'escort patrols, convoy patrols, human, humanitarian aid escorts, and administrative patrols for our own troops.' If a village is attacked, then, so Alias 37, 'we organize a patrol, rush to that place, then make sure that the civilians are protected.' Several peacekeepers perceived the operationalisation of the protection mandate as too reactive and argued that a more active combat role would be better suited to protect civilians. According to one MONUSCO peacekeeper, patrolling cannot 'successfully dominate all the areas which are troublesome' as rebels are operating in wide geographical areas. An AMISOM soldier explained in a similar vein that al-Shabaab is trained to adjust to the peacekeeping tactics, because they are defensive, and are 'waiting for them to come […] just sitting in defence, protecting their borders' while he would prefer 'to move there [al-Shabaab hold areas], to be offensive (Alias 166). He further drew from his experiences in Northern Uganda where the 'work of protection' was done 'by mobile forces to hunt the combatants […], to make sure the enemy does not sleep'. Alias 167 confirmed this view and outlined that instead of combatting an enemy, AMISOM/ATMIS troops live in a camp from which they only get out for patrols. He suggested that 'there has to be an organized way of movement through convoys' that provides troops with both 'freedom' and 'mobility'. The lack of mobility, the passivity and waiting were a topic and reasons for complaint in several interviews and many peacekeepers in both AMISOM/ATMIS and MONUSCO would have preferred a more active combat role. While they appreciated the restraints that IHL imposes upon them, they also discussed the limits it imposes their capacities to combat the insurgencies. Interestingly, in this point, the view of the soldiers matched with those of many civilian interviewees who also felt that the peacekeepers should execute a more active role in combatting rebels and Islamists respectively.

To explain the necessity of using force, peacekeepers also referred to different time horizons of rebels and peacekeepers and compared to the long-term strategies of insurgents with the relatively short time frame of interventions. Accordingly, the resilience of the insurgencies in the DRC and Somalia drains the peacekeepers' energy and undermines their ability to protect civilians. One soldier explained al-Shabaab's long-term plan of overthrowing the Somali government for which they additionally have a constant supply of men and support from the local communities. Similarly, a MONUSCO soldier argued that insurgents in the eastern parts of the DRC draw from local communities that feel disenfranchised by the central state, whose authority they continuously contest. This is to be contrasted with the peacekeepers' time-bound mandate, and their own mandated rotation out of the mission. Another former AMISOM peacekeeper expressly stated in an informal conversation that the Al-Shabaab insurgents, 'have the time, we have the clock', signifying insurgents' longevity and ability to adapt to the war context, as opposed to peacekeepers who come and go. Consequently, as the soldiers suggested, their quest for violent solutions is more feasible in the elimination of the insurgents, rather than the status quo of remaining in the base until insurgents eventually attack.

Based on the difference in these timelines, peacekeepers in both missions stressed the importance of building national institutions. This was aptly captured by a MONUSCO peacekeeper who argued that 'it is

the primary responsibility of host nations to protect civilians. As a peacekeeper, it is not my responsibility to protect civilians forever. I am assisting the host nation to transition as the primary responsibility' (Alias 266). Several peacekeepers emphasized the urgency of building the capacities of national armies to enable them to 'have enough strength to hold the ground', as Alias 167 observed. While the missions and other partners have been building the capacities of the Congolese and Somali national armies over the years, they continue to face operational challenges, against the backdrop of resilient insurgents.

The quest for more active mandates, according to some soldiers, is further to be enabled by better equipment, especially in the collection of intelligence. As of now, the peacekeepers largely rely on human intelligence, albeit amid trust deficits with their local interlocutors, some of whom they suspect to provide wrong interpretations/translations, or leak information to the insurgents. To reverse these trends, the peacekeepers called for technical solutions, among it the provision of better equipment (such as drones) that allows for an independent collection and analysis of information.

The dominance of the quests for violent solutions notwithstanding, some peacekeepers proposed dialogue among the respective state authorities and the insurgents in the DRC and Somalia as one of the plausible pathways to lasting peace. As one peacekeeper explained, 'peacekeeping will not last for long,' and that 'talking to each other' can potentially end the conflicts. While the quest for combative solutions is often criticized as being enshrined in militarized masculinities, the latter example demonstrates the existence of 'disruptions to "war-fighting masculinity"' (Duncanson 2013, 101) and thus that identities in militaries remain diverse or are at least not entirely clear-cut and rigid. We attend to gendered attitudes of peacekeepers in the next section.

Gendered Peacekeeping

Most of the military peacekeepers we interviewed were male. This was hardly surprising given that militaries in Africa and elsewhere are male dominated. Gendered distinctions are thus deeply entrenched in military institutions, and several authors have already pointed to the crucial role of security institution in contributing to 'hegemonic masculinities' (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005), thus not only naturalizing binary distinction between male and female traits and values, but also differentiating masculine values in ways that places a military ethos on top of a male value hierarchy (Hinojosa 2010). The above-described request for more active military action and the 'valorisation of the warfighting ethos' that shimmered through the interviews in other sections, would be in line with interpretations that armies produce and foster hegemonic masculinities (Duncanson 2013, 5). The interviews with uniformed peacekeepers also revealed a gendered interpretation of peacekeeping and the performance of the protection mandate. Protection, as a more generic concept, assumes a gendered dichotomy, in which the strong and powerful, usually men, protect the weak and vulnerable, represented by women and children, a view that is generalizing female powerlessness (Carpenter 2006; Wilcox 2019, 311).

'Masculinism as protection' ascribes the positions of males as protectors, and 'by extension, with masculine leaders and risk takers as protectors of a population' (Young 2003, 3). Women have been entering into the military sector of peacekeeping, a move that is strongly supported by the UNSC Resolution 1325 which aims at mainstreaming gender into peacekeeping. The roles female interviewees in the DRC and Somalia were assigned to, however, were often reflective of gendered dichotomies, with men being deployed into roles considered more dangerous and physically demanding. After all, risk-taking, toughness, courage, endurance and physical strength are considered masculine traits (Duncanson 2013, 19), while women were given

seemingly ‘softer’ responsibilities such as guarding checkpoints, working as gate operators, and especially taking on roles in civic-military cooperation (CIMIC). This difference in the deployment of men and women was evident across the military ranks of female peacekeepers. When women make it into the army, gendered differences are often upheld. Alias 27 for example, confirmed the gendered view when he outlined that ‘the main challenge for women is that most of them cannot be deployed in very remote areas and outposts because of physical demand’, and, so he continued, that women do not have the stamina to deal with the pressures of difficult places and environments.

Such disparities in responsibilities notwithstanding, female peacekeepers seemed less concerned with the reproduction of gendered responsibilities and images. One female peacekeeper considered her recruitment in the military as a ‘blessing’, and she sees herself as performing well in a ‘male-dominated profession’ (Alias 171). Neither she nor others thought that they were disadvantaged or discriminated against because they were deployed to ‘softer’ roles. For the female peacekeepers, being in the military has enabled them to enter ‘masculine’ spaces in ways that civilian roles could not have, and many interpreted their peacekeeping role as a source of prestige in society. For example, asked how she felt about being one of the few women in peacekeeping, one soldier narrated how she likes being in uniform and feels like she is ‘super’ and ‘powerful’, relying on adjectives that are often associated with manhood. She also revealed that she joined this male-dominated job because she ‘wanted to be a strong person’. Some of the more senior female peacekeepers likewise acknowledged their status in this male-dominated space. Alias 168 explained:

> Of course, I take pride in what I do. I’m proud that I’ve reached this level. I’m proud that I’ve been given the privilege to serve in UPDF. I’ve been promoted to the level I am. I’ve been given different appointments. Even the fact that I’m a lady, I’m thankful that I’ve been given all the opportunities to serve at all the levels I’ve served in.

Moreover, both male and female peacekeepers spoke about their roles and experiences in hegemonic masculinist tones valorising physical strength, toughness, and discipline. As one Ugandan peacekeeper remarked about his selection, ‘if you are not prepared for it, it becomes a challenge, but if you are prepared for it, then […] you have that shock absorber that you are prepared enough for the mission’ (Alias 167). According to this soldier and many others, the difficult task of peacekeeping needs a tough posture, in the absence of which, one can be weighed down. Another soldier (Alias 181) narrated how they were constantly expecting attacks and ‘full time you are looking at yourself as dead meat’, but he did not seem to worry much. Thus, for these soldiers, and many others we interviewed, the insecurities they endured, reinforced their sense of agency as protectors of vulnerable civilians. The challenges they face when these gendered images are jolted because female rebels and supporters were attacking military peacekeepers have already been discussed in the sections above.

For some men, the presence of women in peacekeeping made particular sense in the context of male violence against women, as female soldiers can provide protection for women from potential harassment by peacekeepers. As Alias 171 explained, ‘in the theatre [peacekeeping environment] you have women. The women are there, so you can’t have a manhandling women situation. That’s why they take the females there too’. Women were, in this statement, mainly seen as responsible for protecting women, especially, so it seems, from potential violence of peacekeepers themselves.

The deployment of peacekeepers, male or female, places a burden on their families 'at home'. While many soldiers were aware of the emotional pressures that their deployment put on families, some also equated their family's orientation to the masculine ethos of the military emphasizing difference such as Alias 167:

> Military families are not like any other ordinary families. One, our spouses, our children – of course, children may be small – but our spouses, our brothers, sisters, parents expect it. It may drag on. You may not deploy to a distant place for some time, but when it comes, it is not surprising to them that you're leaving. In my case, I think they were much helpful in my absence because yes, you need support back home when you're out there (Alias 167).

Differences in role distribution within their families became apparent when interviewees were asked about the reaction of family members to their deployment. Both male and female peacekeepers explained that families of militaries are prepared for this. However, while male peacekeepers seemed less concerned about the welfare of their children as they knew that their wives are up to the task, female peacekeepers often put wider arrangements in place. See for example Alias 240:

> OK. I organized a family meeting to inform my relatives that I was leaving for a one-year mission, so that if anything went wrong in the family, they should help me and the children too, supporting my husband, because, as you know, men are not accustomed to be close the children all the time.

Some male soldiers, however, also identified unintended effects of their deployment as peacekeepers, and acknowledged how their long absence had an impact on gendered roles at the household level. Being apart for prolonged periods, male soldiers have to negotiate household responsibilities with their spouses who, in their absence, take over new responsibilities. One peacekeeper explained how the handling of finances changed in his absence:

> This is a personal experience I got. When I joined the army, for us men, we are the ones who have the ATM. I was the one controlling. I was the head of the family controlling the finances, but going for one year, it meant that I had to delegate most of the family responsibilities to my wife. […] When you come back, remember you have delegated things which you are used to as a man, […] Like me, I own the ATM. When I came back, when I wanted to take it back, the madam also got financial freedom. Now, she wanted to maintain the status quo. I wanted to regain – it was impossible. […] That one year changed a lot of leadership things in the family.

There were also a few reports of family breakdowns, with some soldiers getting divorced while away on a mission.

We additionally asked the peacekeepers about their fears, and the possibilities of dying in combat. Most of the responses we received depicted the peacekeepers' strong will, even in the face of death. This attitude was considered by many to be necessary for performing the protection mandate and was part of the military ethos. As one peacekeeper observed, 'it is better to be killed a soldier than to be killed a civilian'(Alias 243), while another observed how 'If you are military you don't fear to die' (Alias 247). Comments of male and female peacekeepers about the risk of death did not show a marked difference. For example, when two female peacekeepers, Alias 240 and Alias 242, were asked about the risks involved in

peacekeeping stated that 'when you chose to be a soldier you have to sacrifice yourself' (Alias 240) and 'I have been transformed as military. Anytime bad things may happen and that is my job (Alias 242). On the same note, another soldier remarked that 'bad things happen', but then emphasized how their training prepares them for any eventualities, and that this is a normal operational code. Notwithstanding the inherently masculine logic, military peacekeepers were conscious of their vulnerabilities in the battlefield. For example, a Ugandan AMISOM peacekeeper attributed their safe return home from Somalia to 'God's blessings'.

Collaboration, Intermediation and Trust

We have indicated above that trust shapes how peacekeepers attribute meaning to the context in which they operate. As meta-emotion, trust is representative of a broad range of further emotions that are inserted in and shape social interactions and relations (Belli and Broncano 2017, 431). Trust is, therefore, also an important element of narratives of legitimation, which we understand as a social practice of attributing meaning to existing relations, institutions and social orders (Bakonyi 2022, 123). As outlined above, all peacekeepers were convinced about the positive impact of their presence and activities. However, they were less certain about their external environment, and about people and organizations with whom they had to collaborate. The need for working with and through intermediaries was regularly mentioned when peacekeepers alluded to protection challenges. These intermediaries had several functions and were, for example, required for overcoming language barriers, as guides for moving in foreign terrain, and for intelligence gathering.

Peacekeepers in both MONUSCO and AMISOM alluded to their difficulties in making sense of the context and regularly mentioned language as a barrier towards understanding the host country and its people. This barrier was especially experienced by peacekeepers with outward-facing roles who regularly encountered civilians, including government officials. As Alias 72 explained, 'of course, language is a problem. They [people in the DRC] speak Swahili, and here, in Malawi, we use English and Chichewa. We rely on interpreters, ours and DRC civilians'. Alias 171 who worked for the UPDF as a Civil Military Relations Officer in Somalia outlined the distortions implied in translations because 'an interpreter may fail to interpret what you want. That was a big challenge for me'. In a similar vein, Alias 74, who policed the gate of a military camp in Beni and, therefore, regularly encountered people external to peacekeeping operations, described language barriers as the biggest challenge he faced during his time in the DRC. Not being able to understand the language could easily lead to dangerous situations because one might be inclined, as he explained, to provide entry to:

> Rebels claiming that they are civilians. You have to make sure, that's why we will always have civilians who are local language assistants. They're also there to help us to identify those people. That's why we work with them in our camp. Twenty-four hours, there's a civilian language assistant who is always there to help us.

The supportive role of these interpreters was also highlighted by a UPDF soldier in AMISOM, who explained that interpreters played a crucial role in assessing the context and evaluating potentially risky situations. These examples, however, also illustrate that language barriers extend beyond verbal communication and refer to a much broader cultural understanding.

To perform their protection mandate, Alias 37 reflected upon how the Malawian contingent tried to build up a communication infrastructure. For this, they employed both language assistance and 'community

liaison assistants', civilians that were 'connecting' the peacekeepers 'with the chiefs in the villages'. These chiefs or other civilians were supposed to 'alert these community liaison officers or language assistants who were with us in the base' in case they 'noticed something or they are being attacked'. Peacekeepers relied on such chains of information about attacks. As soon as the reports arrived, 'we have to go and protect them' (Alias 37). Such chains of communication are not only frail and susceptible to misinformation and distortion, but they are also slow, leaving peacekeepers in the frustrating position of reacting only after attacks had happened, and reducing their protection work to patrols (see below).

There is a broad literature that engages with the international transmission of knowledge and the role of local experts and 'knowledge brokers' (Engle Merry 2006, 40; also Bierschenk et al. 2002; Münch and Veit 2018). Their expertise is established in the context of a double information imbalance in which the broker has knowledge of the local social constellations and usually also knows the relevant authorities. Moreover, brokers also have adequate 'international knowledge' to navigate the peacekeeping arena. Working with local interpreters and guides, however, requires that peacekeepers rely on the assessment of others, in situations where assessment failures can have fatal consequences, and often within a context of limited trust vis-à-vis the translator and collaborator. Peacekeepers in both the UN and AU interventions acknowledged the hard work of these translators. In the Somali context, interviewees also emphasized the high risk for interpreters who can become targets of attacks simply 'because people knew they could talk to me' (Alias 166). Alias 166 also described how he tried to 'make sure that few people know that they're coming to give me information' to reduce the risk for the informants. At the same time, however, interviewees also revealed their lack of trust in these knowledge brokers. Trust shapes if, how and which type of knowledge is shared (Belli and Broncano 2017), and among other things explains the distorting effects of brokerage and translation (for language in peacekeeping, see Veit 2011, 198).

The lack of trust was frequently mentioned when peacekeepers had to rely on information from the host countries' security forces. The need for close cooperation with host security forces was stressed by most interviewees because it eases communication with civilians (Alias 55), they know the local terrain, or because the peacekeepers were also supposed to help build up and train national security forces (Alias 241). However, several interviewees expressed their fear that these security forces sympathize with or even provide information to the rebels. Alias 36, for example, outlined how trust diminishes after,

> You see a lot of them [host military] being arrested because of assisting the same element they are fighting. When you hear, when you find out, you find out that some of the officers, some of the soldiers, are actually assisting the ADF with the information on the movement of the troops (Alias 36).

Many peacekeepers explained their frustration about arriving too late to be able to protect villages and would have hoped to perform a more active combat function.

Language and communication barriers have been a regular topic in the assessment of peacekeeping for some time. A NATO (2006) paper on 'Lessons Learnt in Peacekeeping Operations' as well as the more recent UN-General Secretary's 'Action for Peacekeeping' Initiative (2019), for example, identify language skills as essential for effective peacekeeping (A4P point 13). Most appeals and approaches for overcoming these barriers, however, focus on improving the organisations' strategic communication with external audiences (Williams 2018). Strategic communication aims to shape public opinion on the purpose, conduct and progress of peacekeeping in both troop-contributing and troop-hosting countries, what is often

referred to as 'winning hearts and minds'. Peacekeeping missions nowadays employ teams to improve CIMIC. Alias 165, who worked as a CIMIC officer, explained the three pillars of CIMIC as 'liaison and information management, community support, and mission support', and then further outlined that in,

> Liaison and information management, you collect the information vital for the operation, and then you feed the combatant team. Then the mission support, there are some messages you deliver to the people to understand the intent of the mission, why are we in Somalia? That winning hearts and minds of the civilians. Then community support, we have a number of activities. We do give medical services to the community. We do repairs, maybe borehole, road constructions, using our expertise in operations (Alias 165).

Alias 171, who also worked as a CIMIC officer in Somalia, described the challenges of strategic communication in 'a foreign land' where 'people don't know what you're doing' and where peacekeepers have to counter the 'negative information' provided by the media. In this context, Alias 171 highlighted again that 'you need to make them [the people] understand what you're doing, why you are there' in order to 'making people appreciate what you're doing. People have to appreciate what you're doing, the good you're doing'. She then explained how her team provided medical and food aid as a means to convince people of the positive effects of peacekeeping.

While peacekeeping tries to improve its strategic communication by deploying communication and outreach personnel, scanter attention has been paid to the communication barriers that peacekeepers face in their daily interactions within the UN or AU structure. Soldiers regularly mentioned language barriers within these structures and beyond, as a Kenyan peacekeeper deployed to the DRC explained:

> The major problem with peacekeeping mission is the diversity. Staff come from all over the world. The whole UN says English is the common language. But there is a language barrier. I had a Force Commander who was Brazilian. Talking to him was difficult. The official language in the DRC is French, but we were communicating with local law enforcement. I had problems when operating at Force headquarters in Kinshasa – one side speaks French and the other Swahili. […] Language barrier with the Brazilian did not bring disagreements, but lots of communication were coming from sectors that he needed to understand. He will ask so many questions and I had to repeat one thing so many times. Talk to any Kenyan officers and they will tell you most headquarters would like to have Kenyans as staff officers in charge of operations because of knowledge of English. For the Brazilian, I would write notes on paper then he translates in English on Google translator. India and Pakistan speak English, but their accents throw you off a bit.

Some of these translation problems could have been better handled in the AU mission in Somalia. One UPDF soldier remembered how his battalion was deployed to support the defence of a military base attacked by al-Shabaab in a sector headed by another TCC. He outlined the following advantage: that 'apart from Ethiopia', most TCC from East Africa, among them 'Burundi, Kenya, Tanzania' were able to communicate in Swahili which significantly eased cooperation during the attack (Alias 166). However, the barriers were again up when the intervention forces needed to communicate with the national security forces of the host countries. Alias 37 referred to these challenges of cooperation in the DRC:

> Most of the DRC troops, they don't know how to speak er English. They mainly speak French and er Swahili. So for us, in Malawi, we don't speak Swahili. Our only means of communication was English so for them it was hard. So, that was the main challenge when we were working together with them.

Beyond language, however, the communication equipment was at times insufficient. This was emphasized by a Malawian peacekeeper who explained that he faced a 'big challenge of communication' when he was deployed to an area outside his own base, where he 'even failed to communicate to my battle group commander on daily basis'. While this issue was eventually solved and adequate technologies were provided that enabled him 'to command the troops', Alias 37 still described the 'communication breakdown' as one of the biggest challenges that he faced while being deployed in the DRC (Alias 37).

African peacekeepers do a better job in Africa

Peacekeeping in Africa and by Africans is often considered an important step towards reaching 'African solutions to African problems', with the AMISOM intervention in Somalia 'being considered the laboratory for this endeavour' (Yohannes and Gebresenbet 2021, 57). Being unsure, like Yohannes and Gebresenbet, about what the 'African' in such African solutions really is, we asked the African peacekeepers first if they think that Africans are better suited to keep peace in Africa, and second, why they think this is, or is not, the case. Of the 48 interviewed peacekeepers who answered this question, 32 answered affirmatively and were convinced that Africans are better suited for peacekeeping interventions in Africa. Of the remaining 16 interviewees, 6 felt that Africans are not better suited for keeping peace in Africa, while the remaining 10 outlined that the problem is more complex and cannot be reduced to answering with yes or no.

Most often, interviewees explained their preference for African peacekeepers in Africa by focusing on common cultural traits. For example, they outlined that African peacekeepers are better suited to serve in Africa because they come from the same or almost the same culture, or from cultures that match better (Alias 27; 36; 65; 166; 172; 173; 241; 243; 247), they know each other as 'fellow Africans' (Alias 179), they share the same norms and values (Alias 55; 178) and a common identity (Alias 173, 244, 247), they are 'the same people' (Alias 245) or have the same skin colour (Alias 245; 165; 247) and they are 'blood-related' (Alias 178; 63). These features, according to many interviewees, give rise to a feeling of brotherhood (Alias 243) that makes one 'give all your best to protect your friends' (Alias 245), even taking the ultimate sacrifice 'to die just for another […]. You can die for your brother, but for a foreigner, it will take to you some time. Yes, you can die for him, but there is some difference' (Alias 244; also Alias 174).

Others argued that Africans are better equipped to bring peace in Africa because they have a deeper understanding of the context and 'know problems as Africans' (Alias 173, similar Alias 177; 180) and, therefore, understand 'the environment, […] the problems and challenges […] in an African setting, they are not so different from one country to another' (Alias 168). Three interviewees explained: it is easier to build trust among Africans, as people in the host country 'feel free to speak to their fellow African. They can talk about their stress. They can talk about sensitive issues with us' (Alias 60); [they] are happier because we are all Africans (Alias 64); are closer to Africans (Alias 65); that it just 'feels better' for both sides (Alias 37); and that people in the DRC just 'love the Malawians more maybe, I'm sorry to say this, than the Indians', likely because of their different skin colour (Alias 62).

Another argument shared with the interviewers was the fact that 'most African countries have been facing wars' (Alias 246) themselves and are 'battle-hardened' (Alias 170) or 'fitter' (Alias 67) but also have

experience in bringing peace. Furthermore, it was mentioned that African soldiers 'can resist […] any kind of environment. Like harsh climates' (Alias 170) and are able to 'withstand certain harsh conditions [and…] places where non-Africans cannot live for long' (Alias 176).

Interviewees from the UPDF also regularly underpinned their arguments with the idea of Pan-Africanism (169, 173, 175), which shapes an ethos of 'brotherhood and solidarity' (Alias 175) and requires Africans to 'contribute to Africa', to the 'ultimate goal […] to see Africa being at peace'. This goal helps to execute 'with wholehearted commitment'. Alias 169 emphasized the ethos of Pan-African missions and the difference this ethos creates:

> Because I for one, I know Africa, but when a non-African comes in to do the same job, he can't help the way I help, because first of all, he doesn't know the culture and he cannot have a similar thinking that I have. For him, he'll be hired. He's a hired person but me, I'm doing my motherland job. I'm helping my brother (Alias 169).

Such views emphasized African agency, often directly or indirectly alluding to experiences of colonialism, using the slogan as a means to push the decolonizing agenda further (detailed in Fisher and Wilén 2022, chap. 3). Alias 178 explained how the idea of Pan-Africanism generally, and his preference for African peacekeeping, are directly linked to experiences of colonialism:

> A reaction to colonialism. When we were colonized, we saw the Whites when they came, what they did to us. The Leopolds in Congo, those in South Africa, so we already knew that these guys cannot protect us. They are not here for us, they're here for their own interest. The only way is to protect ourselves, we're best at protecting ourselves than these guys. They can't do much for us. (Alias 178)

One soldier described how racism can be a problem if non-Africans try to keep peace in Africa (Alias 71), while others explained that they preferred African peacekeeping as a means of reducing dependency on Europe and placed specific emphasis on the need to promote financial independence by establishing the country's own means to finance peacekeeping and the wider African security architecture (Alias 263). In a similar vein, several interviewees highlighted that African peacekeepers demonstrate, on a daily basis, that Africans are able to do the job as well as, if not better than, soldiers from other countries (Alias 263).

However, the dependence on external finance and equipment was also used as an argument by those who refused to give a clear yes or no answer. In this respect, Alias 258, while also explaining that European or Asian peacekeepers often do not get the African context right, nonetheless emphasized the 'potential for a very good symbiosis between European and African peacekeepers'. This symbiosis mainly required Europeans to support African peacekeeping with finances, equipment and training (Alias 258; similar Alias 66; Alias 262), while Alias 258 also felt that Africans do the better peacekeeping job, not least because they are less idealistic and less inclined to 'be too noble'. In a similar vein, another soldier thought it better if peacekeeping 'is mixed', but also believed that 'the main effort should be done with Africans' (Alias 262; Alias 264).

The few people who did not think that Africans are better suited for keeping peace in Africa mostly referred to their position as militaries and soldiers, for which, as Alias 56 or Alias 66 for example explained, they are trained to do the job independently of both their country of origin and the host country:

> Whenever someone is a soldier, he is always a soldier everywhere. He can perform his duties whether in Israel, whether in Malawi, where, wherever, in Africa or outside Africa. Whether in Australia or outside Australia, we're performing the same law (Alias 56).

One other explained that they would like to do peacekeeping with the UN or in Europe and, therefore, prefer that peacekeeping is done by countries from different continents (Alias 58).

Conclusion

We followed the narratives of African militaries who outlined how they experience the operationalization of the Protection of Civilians (PoC) mandate, comparing a UN and AU peacekeeping mission. While the narrated experiences were context specific, similarities far outweighed differences. The peacekeepers we interviewed strongly identified with the PoC mandate, and, therefore, often referred to civilians when they reflected about successes and challenges of their deployment.

This has implications for the way they see themselves as protectors, as peace bearers and define their relationships with fellow Africans. The significance of this self-image and self-perception is revealed when peacekeepers are confronted with civilian opposition as they try to hold on to this image and do not question the legitimacy of their protection role. Indeed, peacekeepers' experiences provided insights into how they navigate a complex environment of mistrust and the extent to which the lack of trust affects the operationalisation of protection. Peacekeepers link mistrust to communication challenges based on language barriers and their need to work with interpreters. Most, however, emphasized the blurred lines between civilians and combatants. This raises the question how Protection of Civilians can succeed when neither provider nor recipient trust each other? Despite CIMIC's emphasis on relationship-building, mistrust was also expressed by those peacekeepers involved in civil-military cooperation or in female engagement teams. Furthermore, despite expressed feelings of solidarity and common understanding based on 'African' cultural traits and tradition, these feelings do not affect or counter the lack of trust. Consequently, in operationalising their protection mandate, peacekeepers walk a thin line between deep-seated feelings of mistrust and their duty to protect.

At the same time, we found that peacekeepers agreed on a need for more force in order to protect effectively, criticising the often reactive nature of protection performances, which underlines the tension between the evolution of peacekeeping environments and the increased expectations not just of recipients but also providers of protection. Furthermore, the report revealed that peacekeepers are aware of the protection dilemmas that exist even when using more force, raising the ambiguities in protection practice with armed groups' awareness and exploitation of peacekeepers' rules of engagement.

In short, the themes that emerge when exploring peacekeepers' experiences in operationalising protection are: trust, dilemmas and ambiguities faced in practice, communication, gender, and the use of force. These themes are interlinked and impact each other. As a result, they are best addressed simultaneously at the political, strategic and tactical level of peace operations for both the UN and AU, as well as for TCCs and institutions involved in peacekeeping training.

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ANNEX: Interviews

April 2021, Zoom Interviews with former Malawian Contingent in DRC with Alias 27, 36, 37, 38, 54, 55, 56, 57, 58, 59, 60, 62, 63, 64, 65, 66, 67, 71, 72, 73, and 73.

October 2021, in-person interviews in Kampala with Alias 165, 166, 167, 168, 169, 170, 171, 172, 173, 174, 175, 176, 177, 178 179, 180 and 181.

June 2021, in-person interview in Nairobi Alias 266

July 2021, Zoom interview with Alias 262, Amisom peacekeeper in Somalia (TCC withhold to ensure anonymisation)

June 2022 in-person interview with AMISOM peacekeeper in Somalia, Alias 263 and 264 (TCCs withhold to ensure anonymisation)

July 2022 Zoom interview with peacekeepers from South Africa, Alias 258, Alias 259, Alias 260

September 2022, in-person interviews in Bujumbura with Alias 241, 242, 243, 244, 245, 246, and 247.

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