



Center for International and Security Studies at Maryland
School of Public Policy, University of Maryland

Some Moral Considerations for Civilian-Peacekeeper Protection Alliances

By Daniel Levine

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Center for International and Security Studies at Maryland
4113 Van Munching Hall, School of Public Policy
University of Maryland
College Park, MD 20742
(301) 405-7601



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Introduction

Protection of civilians, the use of military force to deter and/or halt violence against civilians, is a major concern for peacekeeping doctrine, planning, and practice.¹ Much of the protection of civilians literature has focused on what peacekeepers can and should do to protect civilians from death and other serious human rights abuses.² What civilians do in their own defense is often absent from these discussions, and as a result some of the moral and ethical implications for peacekeepers of civilians' own activities risk being ignored.³

In this essay, I would like to focus on just one way in which civilians' self-protection activities raise ethical questions for peacekeepers: civilian self-protection is the action of particular civilian *organizations*. These may be formal, like NGOs, or informal, like kin-group networks. But what they have in common is that they make clear that peacekeepers' partners in protection will be particular loci of power within civilian society, not "civilians" as an idealized, undifferentiated mass.

The presence of civilian organizations creates a number of tensions for peacekeepers. Peacekeepers try to remain impartial, but their core task of ending violence involves them in social conflicts. Working with civilian groups provides opportunities for better protection of civilians, but those civilian groups have interests and perspectives that may not be widely shared. Further, alliances risk corrupting civilians by making them tools of external influence as much as it does peacekeepers by rendering them partial. Finally, by working with civilian groups, peacekeepers may be effectively putting the tools of violence in the service of a social conflict, in the name of removing the social conflict from the sphere of violence.

One *might* think that peacekeepers should keep aloof from civilians' own organizations and activities and only strive to "do no harm." Whatever peacekeepers do, it should add to civilians' own strategies, and the main way in which peacekeepers should attend to civilian strategies at all is to be sure to stay out of their way — for example, by not creating safe area boundaries that cut civilians off from their livelihoods or placing food distribution points in ways that incentivize

1 "Protection of civilians" is the phrase generally used to refer specifically to *military* protection from violence, whereas other activities that help civilians remain safe and secure in conflict zones, notably humanitarian assistance, are termed "civilian protection."

2 See, e.g. Sewall, Raymond, and Chin, *Mass Atrocity Response Operations*; Holt, Taylor, and Kelly, *Protecting Civilians*; Weir, *The Last Line of Defense*; Ban Ki-Moon, *Report of the Secretary-General on the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict*, though see a brief mention of local strategies at para. 40; Holt and Berkman, *The Impossible Mandate*; Giffen, *Addressing the Doctrinal Deficit*; Genocide Prevention Task Force, *Preventing Genocide*, esp. chs. 4 and 5, which deal with responses to threats.

3 For important exceptions, see Bellamy and Williams, *Protecting Civilians*; Barrs, *Preparedness Support, How Civilians Survive*.

civilians to displace themselves.⁴ These concerns should perhaps lead peacekeepers to interact with civilian groups in as hands-off a fashion as possible. But, while in the abstract it may be clear what kinds of things are likely to interfere with civilian strategies, determining the likely impact of a peacekeeping strategy on particular civilian work in a conflict is complicated, messy, and requires deep knowledge of the dynamics of the situation. Civilian organizations are in much better positions to understand these dynamics than outside interveners. Especially when using military force, peacekeepers do not make surgical incisions into a society that leave the rest of the situation untouched; their presence and operations have drastic effects on at least the local environment. People are displaced, armed factions are created, destroyed, or splintered, control changes hands, movement becomes more difficult or easier, areas become safe havens or danger zones. If peacekeepers do not in some way work with civilian groups, acting so as only to protect civilians and disrupt nothing else will be difficult or impossible.

Another possibility is that peacekeepers work with civilians engaged in self-protection. This is the right answer, I think, and it is endorsed by the UN.⁵ But it is not uncomplicated. Working through its complications will be the theme of this essay.

I begin by going into more detail about civilian self-protection strategies and how to understand them, with special reference to civilian activities in Liberia. Then I turn to teasing out in more detail the dilemma peacekeepers face between ignoring these civilian activities and becoming allies to a partial vision for the society's change. I will propose that peacekeepers resolve this dilemma by changing the terms of reference and focusing not on *who* they should connect with but *how*, what form those connections should take. "Interact with the populations concerned," as recommended by the UN Secretary-General's report, papers over the important difficulties. I will sketch out a concept I call "protection-with," focusing protection activities on making it safe for different organized groups to come into practical contact, over a concept of protection-from, where the first priority is to separate endangered populations from dangerous ones, which may exacerbate social conflicts (or lead to peacekeepers effectively picking winners) by making them rigid. Protection-with is a concept, not a rule, but one that can structure peacekeepers' thinking at various levels of decision-making.

Before I begin, two notes about scope and sources. First, the issues are complicated enough that I will restrict my focus to one sort of peacekeeper, the armed military peacekeeper. What I have to say may have some implications for other armed elements of some peacekeeping missions, especially formed police units that can use paramilitary levels of force, and perhaps for police with an executive mandate. But I will discuss particularly what armed troops can contribute by engaging with civilian self-protection strategies, and when I use the unmodified "peacekeepers" (to save on repetition), I will be referring to military peacekeepers.

Second, in addition to (I hope) careful reflection on the issues, this piece draws on both published empirical studies and primary research. In June 2011, my colleague Susan Merrill and I

4 For brief discussions of these problems, see Bellamy and Williams, *Protecting Civilians*, pp. 31–32; Sewall, Raymond, and Chin, *Mass Atrocity Response Operations*, pp. 78–80.

5 Ban Ki-Moon, *Report of the Secretary-General on the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict*, para. 37.

traveled to Liberia to meet with civilians — primarily women — who had been involved with self-protection and conflict resolution/transformation efforts during Liberia’s two civil wars. We conducted a series of confidential, semi-structured interviews with Liberians about their experiences during the war and their perspectives on the ECOWAS and UN peacekeeping missions there. Unless a different date or venue is noted, any references to interviews in this paper are from that field research. All interviews were confidential, and so interview partners will be referred to only in generic terms.

We chose Liberia because of the unusual international prominence of the women’s peace movement there. While we are confident that women (and men) everywhere find ways to respond to social violence, Liberia’s women have been better-documented than most, including through films like *Pray the Devil Back to Hell* and *Iron Ladies of Liberia*. Given that women are often framed as the paradigmatic, passive *victims* of violence, we thought it would be especially worthwhile to look closely at a situation in which they displayed clear agency. In addition to its inherent interest for questions of peacekeeper interaction, we hope that showcasing the actions of Liberian women will help undercut the perception that civilians, particularly women, are stripped of their agency in conflict — a perception that can, unfortunately, cause interventions to undermine that agency by assuming that they are simply in need of “saving.”

What Civilians Do During Violence

Before we can meaningfully discuss peacekeeper-civilian interactions, however, we should at least discuss briefly what exactly it is that civilians do, and what military peacekeepers “bring to the table.”

Barrs’ Inventory

Casey Barrs’ *Preparedness Support* and *How Civilians Survive Violence* reports for The Cuny Center are two of the most substantial and systematic discussions of what civilians do in the face of violence, and serve as good place to start an exploration of how peacekeepers should respond.

Barrs roughly divides civilian strategies into three categories.

Avoidance strategies are more or less what they sound like — in the most literal sense, individuals and communities simply take themselves out of the path of violence. Civilians who take their possessions with them (or, presumably, destroy them in place if they cannot be moved) strip looting actors of resources that may prove tempting or help fuel the conflict. As Barrs notes, there are less direct forms of avoidance as well. Communities that can find ways to provide for their own needs may avoid the *influence* of armed actors who control populations through access to food, water, etc.⁶

Accommodation strategies involve working with the armed factions in some way, though this

⁶ Barrs, *Preparedness Support*, pp. 5—6.

emphatically does not mean that civilians in all or even many cases endorse the factions. They may bribe or cut deals with armed actors, find connections with members of the faction who can be deflected from violence against the community, or work out understandings about who is a legitimate target and what the noncombatant community needs to stay out of. Of course, any such deals are rarely equitable or pleasant, and subject to undermining and “work to rule” by both sides, but communities may reasonably prefer them to open (and dangerous) defiance.⁷

Barrs identifies a third category of *affinity* in *Preparedness Support*, which encompasses strategies that rely on the connections and networks that civilians build.⁸ It may be an apples-to-oranges comparison to treat this as a third strategy, however, as his more recently updated inventory acknowledges.⁹ The use of affinity groups and networks is a tactic that cuts across other strategies. Civilians use their affinity networks to facilitate both avoidance and accommodations. For instance, one interview partner explained to us that, previous to the outbreak of war in Sierra Leone, many Liberians were fleeing and living not in refugee camps but with extended family there — and the start of the war there seriously disrupted many Liberians’ plans to escape. In fact, it is hard to see how other strategies could be advanced without *some* use of social connections; the primary strength that civilians can bring to bear in the face of armed groups’ firepower is organization.

In addition, Barrs’ taxonomy relegates any interaction with armed factions to accommodation, including many of the strategies pursued by women in Liberia, such as protesting, or trying to convince factions to join peace talks — Barrs puts “confront with protest and nonviolent action” and “conflict mediation” in this category, for instance.¹⁰ “Accommodation” has the ring of civilians accepting armed actors’ goals as givens, and learning to live with them. While Barrs is clear that accommodation is “not intended to carry a negative connotation,” placing both strategies of resisting and those of acquiescing in armed groups’ demands in the same category flattens important distinctions. It might be better to make room for a third strategy of “confrontation,” though the element of compromise inevitable in any interaction between civilians and armed groups means that there will be significant overlap with accommodation.¹¹

Some civilians may escape this taxonomy and deal with violence by not remaining civilians.¹² Even though “women and children” is sometimes treated as a synonym for “non-combatants,” joining the ranks of the armed is a fairly common choice even for women and children. In Liberia, several women rose to notoriety as combatants, such as Martina Johnson and Black Diamond (and many more women fought without becoming infamous). In other conflicts, women serve armed factions as everything from front-line combatants, to political leadership, to porters

7 Ibid., pp. 4—5.

8 Barrs, *Preparedness Support*, p. 4.

9 Barrs, *How Civilians Survive*, 10n.

10 Ibid., p. 1.

11 I am indebted to a conversations with Guy Hammond and Casey Barrs for clarifying some of the nuances of and potential pitfalls with the taxonomy.

12 Barrs, *Preparedness Support*, p. 3.

and “wives.”¹³ Many women are abducted or otherwise forced into service to an armed group (even though some later come to identify with the group), but others make an active choice to join. In one focus group of female members of armed groups, the most common reason the women from opposition groups gave for joining was that they had suffered violence (often sexual violence) at the hands of government forces.¹⁴ I will largely leave these “ex-civilians” aside, but their existence is worth mentioning. We should not fall into the trap of thinking of “civilians” and “combatants” as completely different types of person, when they are better seen as people caught in quite similar situations, only some of whom have chosen to use violence, and perhaps more importantly, who both *still are* part of the same social situation.

Life Goes On

As part of the context of self-civilian protection strategies, it is important to keep in mind that they are rarely all-consuming. Continuing with “everyday” life is an important part of how civilians survive. Avoidance, accommodation, and confrontation activities are in some sense marginal to self-protection; the core of self-protection is ensuring that lives can be lived. Civil violence tends to be sporadic and come in spasms, and even during extended military campaigns, the violence is not everywhere, all the time. People live their lives in the interstices of violence, and find ways of accommodating to it. Finding ways of living their lives under the shadow of violence is a significant part of the “protection” that civilians provide for themselves.

Life during conflict is one that some individuals can become quite adept at navigating, even if from a safe outside perspective the situation seems oppressive. For instance, Utas has written an account of one woman caught up in the Liberian war who developed such aptitude for “victimcy” strategies that she left a refugee camp (that called for different coping skills) to go back to the war.¹⁵

Utas makes a distinction, following Alcinda Honwana and Michel de Certeau, between “tactic agency” and “strategic agency.” The former is being able to make meaningful short-term decisions in a given social situation, while the latter is “an agency for those who can forecast future states of affairs and have the possibility to make use of other people’s tactical agency.” To this Utas adds a notion of “victimcy,” “the agency of self-staging as a victim of war,” which is the type of agency pursued by his subject as she became, by turns, a “girlfriend” to more powerful soldiers, a refugee, a taxi driver, and other roles.¹⁶ Utas seems to make victimcy a sub-category of tactical agency, and implies that most civilians caught in the war zone are capable only of tactical agency.

As I point out above in suggesting that we should add a category of “confrontation” to Barrs’ list, this perspective seems to undersell the agency exercised by women in Liberia (and likely by

¹³ For an extensive and fascinating study of female members of armed groups, focused on Sierra Leone but with broader implications, see Coulter, *Bush Wives and Girl Soldiers*.

¹⁴ Mazurana, *Women in Armed Opposition*, p. 27.

¹⁵ Utas, “West-African Warscapes”.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 407—408.

male and female civilians in other conflicts). While granting Utas's point that it can be dangerous to treat individuals in a war zone as if they are fully masters and mistresses of their fate, given the extreme pressures they act under, in Liberia civilian agency seemed to involve at least partly effective attempts to shape the situation rather than simply react to it. The creation of peace networks and organizations even meets Utas's criterion of being able to make use of others' tactical agency.

If we see civilians as exercising only victimcy/tactical agency, it might be tempting to think that anything peacekeepers can do to increase the physical safety of their situation can only be to their benefit — they are only reacting in a short-term fashion. But if we recognize that civilians can have long-term strategies, the moral landscape is more complicated. Let me now turn to some of the strategies pursued by women in Liberia in particular.

What Women Did in Liberia

The roots of Liberia's civil wars reach back at least as far as the 19th-century project of returning freed US slaves to their "homeland" in Africa, thereby creating a class of Americo-Liberians who dominated local populations, and the conflicts had more recent origins in Samuel Doe's 1980 coup against the Americo-Liberian regime. The violence began in earnest in 1989 when Charles Taylor invaded from Côte d'Ivoire at the head of the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NFPL). The NFPL split early on into two factions, with the "Independent" NFPL (INFPL) led by Taylor's former lieutenant, Prince Johnson — who would be the one to capture and kill Doe. The factions continued to fragment (though the NFPL and INFPL remained dominant players), and the conflict drew in the Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group (ECOMOG), as well as destabilizing neighboring Sierra Leone. The first conflict drew to a close with 1997 elections, won by Taylor, but the nation remained unstable, and war re-ignited in 1999, ending when Taylor and the main rebel groups signed a peace agreement in 2003.¹⁷

Much of what women in particular (and civilians in general) did during the war fell into Barrs' category of avoidance. Avoidance is, of course, not always a passive matter of hunkering down until violence passes. The wives and market women who criss-crossed Monrovia while many men hid inside were engaged in active strategies of economic and social survival. Avoidance is also not a strictly conservative strategy, at least in impact. One interview partner told us that rural people coming to Monrovia during the war brought with them the practices of the Poro (men's) and Sande (women's) "secret societies," leading them to adapt and change to fit the new urban setting. One of the changes seemingly spurred by this new home for the societies was to encourage change in the traditional views of women held by Sande practitioners; an international who worked with several women's civil society groups told us that there was now internal discussion within the Sande about what skills should be taught to women, and the role of female

¹⁷ For general overviews of the war, see e.g. Ellis, *The Mask of Anarchy*, (covering the first war only); Tellewoyan, *The Years the Locusts Have Eaten*.

genital mutilation (FGM) in some Sande practices.¹⁸

Liberian women actively organized to promote peace, particularly during the second war. These women engaged in a wide variety of what I have called above “confrontation” strategies, including meeting with warlords, protesting, organizing strikes and sit-ins, and attending international peace meetings.¹⁹ On a more intimate scale, we heard stories of women going out to get food while husbands hid at home, confronting families and elders about sexual violence in the community, sharing information about threats, and helping community members (often through religious organizations) recover from the psychological damage of violence. I will discuss some of the specific actions our interview partners were involved with further along.

While much of the women’s peace work was not direct “protection of civilians,” it was not entirely separate from protection strategies, either. First, in the long run, achieving peace would increase civilian safety — in that way, it is as much a protection of civilians strategy as those aimed at defeating perpetrators of attacks on civilians.²⁰ Peacemaking falls into the broader notion of “civilian protection” embraced by many humanitarian concepts, for instance in the IASC’s “egg” model, even if it is not what military peacekeepers understand as falling under the rubric of “protection of civilians.”²¹ But most importantly, one of the lessons that we learned through our interviews was that it was very difficult to cleanly separate civilians’ self-protection activities from “making peace.” The female organizers told us that they discussed issues of immediate concern (“protection of civilians”) when they met with warlords and others, but for them it was in the context of a longer-term process toward peace (“conflict transformation” or “peacemaking”).

The Military Peacekeeper

The “comparative advantage” military peacekeepers bring to a PKO is tied to their soldierly experience, training, and equipment. Humanitarians may be better at food and medical distribution (though not always — it is easy to overlook the massive logistical capabilities that militaries have compared to other actors), diplomats may be better negotiators, civilian police may be better at keeping tabs on a community, but military peacekeepers are *armed* and trained to use coordinated large-scale force.

It is a natural but unwarranted step to assume that, as a result, military peacekeepers are only distinctively useful in situations in which they can fire their weapons.

If the role of military peacekeepers was only to use or threaten violence, their ability to

¹⁸ For one of the most thorough and accessible discussions of “secret societies” and traditional religion in Liberia, see Ellis, *The Mask of Anarchy*, ch.6. The changes within Sande were a fascinating subject that we were, unfortunately, unable to gain much insight into. Few internationals are privy to the inner workings of the societies, and we were warned — reasonably — that even practitioners who may be on the more “progressive” side of internal debates are very sensitive to outside criticism and would likely take offense if we were to press the issue. The issue merits further research.

¹⁹ For overviews of Liberian women’s action, see, e.g. Fuest, “This is the Time”; African Women and Peace Support Group, *Liberian Women Peacemakers*; Fuest, “Liberia’s Women”, as well as the 2008 documentary film *Pray the Devil Back to Hell*.

²⁰ On attacking perpetrators as a variety of protection, see, e.g. Sewall, Raymond, and Chin, *Mass Atrocity Response Operations*, pp. 84–87; Holt and Berkman, *The Impossible Mandate*, 38, on the “warfighting concept”.

²¹ Inter-Agency Standing Committee, *Growing the Sheltering Tree*, pp. 11–12.

support civilian self-protection strategies would be very limited. Accommodation strategies are clearly compromised in a situation where peacekeepers escalate military violence, perhaps *especially* if they make clear that that violence is being used on behalf of the civilians. Avoidance is often difficult in situations of open and active confrontation, though it may be possible for military peacekeepers to “cover the retreat” of civilians using avoidance strategies. Even what I have called “confrontation,” when done by civilians, most often relies on civilians being able to mobilize non-violent sources of power (especially organization) that are disrupted by violence.²² Violent confrontation between peacekeepers and other armed factions may also force the peacekeepers to focus more of their resources on force protection, which can limit their ability to protect civilians at the same time that they contribute to a more dangerous general environment.

The *real* comparative advantage of military peacekeepers is that they can operate in more dangerous situations because of their armaments. One way to take advantage of this is to participate in the danger as a combatant. But this is only one way.

The kernel of the idea that peacekeeping is not a soldier’s job, but only soldiers can do it is that military peacekeepers’ skills and equipment allow them to operate in environments that would not be permissive for others — even though, once there, they may engage in activities for which other personnel are more specifically trained. So, a military peacekeeper may not be a diplomat’s equal in negotiation, but he may be the only one who can negotiate with a warlord, or a gang of youths in an insecure city. As far as civilians go, he may not have the personal connections that allow a civilian to meet with a gang leader, but he may be able to assure everyone’s safety at the meeting. He may not be properly placed in the community to develop a peace group, but he may be able to deter attacks on its leaders.

Military peacekeepers have options when working with civilians besides simply using the connections to more effectively direct the use of force. But, since they *do* bring force with them, any connection with civilian organizations is bound to be sticky.

Getting Involved with Civilians

A PKO arriving in the field will not find organized armed factions set against an undifferentiated mass of civilians. Even at the “grassroots” level, the mission’s focus will most often be on grassroots *leaders*.²³ Peacekeepers will find themselves having to take into account not just what civilians are doing, but particular, active civilian groups. Civilians organize in all manner of ways in conflict zones. Peacekeepers may find “traditional” organizations like hierarchical community structures — it is no easier to talk to “the community” than it is to talk to “civilians” — as well as informal social groups, religious organizations, western-style NGOs, and the still-relevant remnants of the state.

War is a process of social disruption and change, involving both violent and non-violent

²² For a discussion of the opposition between violence and the power of social organization that goes far beyond what I can discuss here, see Arendt, “On Violence”, §II, pp. 134—155.

²³ See the discussion in Lederach, *Building Peace*, pp. 42—43.

actors. Stepping in to stop violence necessarily involves altering the course of that social conflict, and interacting with groups that have interests in directing change one way or another. Even if peacekeepers would like to ignore civilian organizations, savvy civilian organizations will seek them out. Peacekeepers who try to divorce themselves from civilian groups are taking a particular — standoffish — stance towards civilians. The question facing peacekeepers then becomes not how to somehow remain uncommitted but how to enter into such connections responsibly, and guided by what principles.

“Fortunately for Us, The War Came”

Interviews with Liberian women and data from elsewhere highlight how deeply entangled “peace” movements are with social divisions and organizational dynamics. The concern that peacekeepers focused on peace to the exclusion of other issues in society (on which they hope to remain neutral) do not have such single-minded partners is not just an academic one.

Several of the women with whom we spoke claimed that the war had had a positive effect on women’s rights in Liberian society — in particular, that women were accorded more legal rights, that the average Liberian woman (though certainly not all, and more in urban areas) was more aware of her human rights, and that it was now socially possible for many of them to occupy higher-status positions (many of our interview partners were leaders in non-governmental organizations) in a way that would not have been possible in, e.g., 1980s. One alluded to subtler effects, such as seeing men taking care of children while mothers worked, which she claimed was still a bit unusual but would have been unthinkable before. As one said:

Fortunately for us, as Liberian women, the war came. Though we were abused, our rights were violated during the war, it highlighted a lot of things and created awareness. So that’s why I say it’s fortunate, because it’s because of what happened that we began to speak out.

These were not women who saw the war in a rosy light — they had lived through extreme violence, and many of them had been personally subjected to war-time atrocities, particularly sexual violation. The “silver lining” of the war was just that it disrupted social relations so badly that it broke down many invidious social norms (like subjection of women) as well as the good ones (like communal trust).

Our interviews did not support the view that this was a general “sea change” for Liberian women, at least during the wartime period. That is, it was not the case that all women, or even many women, had their views directly changed by the war and so were able to step forth as leaders when before they had been passive. More commonly, female leaders with whom we spoke told us that they, personally, had always been more outspoken than their peers, but social norms had resisted them before the war’s disruption. One said she had “always been an outspoken person,” and another said, “all along, I wanted to be different.” So, the story seems to be more one of individual women being able to rise to the top in a period where norms that held

them back were losing their force, rather than one of general female empowerment. Whatever broader changes in Liberian social consensus are developing — such as support for their female president, or for new and more stringent laws on rape — seem to represent individuals and organized groups pressing for change rather than emerging as representatives of a broad social trend. There seems to be an element of “top down” change involved, and one that could have been interrupted had different groups or individuals risen to prominence through the wars and their aftermath. The relevance of individual, non-typical actors highlights the impact that choices about who international actors will empower can have.

This is consistent with Fuest’s research on the women’s movement, which found divides between an (often internationally) educated elite and the rank-and-file of the movement, and that there was a perception of women’s rights talk as being “something of the city.”²⁴ And, as Lederach notes, a key element of creating peace is to find people who can serve as part of a “vertical” connection between the level of everyday civilians and that of the international intervention — or, in his later formulation, that can form part of a “web” that links individuals from both groups together.²⁵

But these linking individuals cannot be seen as abstract conduits. They are people, with their own commitments, desires, plans, flaws, and virtues. They are typically (relatively) elite members of society, with opportunities, education, and resources not shared by everyone and which shape their values and perceptions. And the organizations they head are likewise concrete and peculiar.

The fact that organized social movements tend to generate elites does not, in itself, make them *bad*. The point is that these are individuals with connections and skills that put them outside the social norm, and views that are not universally held. The result is that working with civilian organizations is not anything so straightforward as doing what “the people” want. If peacekeepers focus exclusively on ending immediate violence, issues of how the period of violence is changing society are unlikely to be at the forefront. But the social disruption of oppressive norms about women in Liberia highlights the fact that any action to end the violence will put peacekeepers in the position of taking some “stand” on the underlying social conflicts — and that there will be better and worse stands to take. Not only armed factions have power and interests. The mere fact that some groups are civilians does not automatically mean that they will act more disinterestedly than their armed neighbors, or that they are without means to affect the situation.

It is also not to imply that minority positions, like feminism in Liberia, are bad — far from it! But peacekeepers who ignore the fact that promoting, say, women’s rights is a move in a social conflict do not necessarily do women’s rights any favors. Liberians who oppose women’s rights have their reasons — they may not be good reasons, or they may be understandable reasons manifesting in a distorted way. If we care about women’s rights, the goal should not be to ignore the conflict or to end it by putting international power on one side but to create ways in which the conflict between the defenders of women’s rights and their opponents can meet in progressive

²⁴ Fuest, “Liberia’s Women”, 131—133, quote on 131.

²⁵ Lederach, *Building Peace*, pp. 117, 120, *The Moral Imagination*, pp. 78—80.

ways, an issue I will return to below.

Peacekeepers' actions never just stop violence, and once peacekeepers arrive they are not fully outsiders. Every action a peacekeeping force takes is part of the evolving situation of disruption, and planning such actions should take into moral account the ways in which action here will change the overall conflict of which peacekeepers — whatever their scruples of impartiality — are now a part. If there is a coherent concept of impartiality to be saved, it cannot be one that conceptually involves remaining above the fray without preventing peacekeepers from doing their job of halting violence. Taking action to stop or prevent some violent incident is civilian protection but also an intervention in those social conflicts.

Part of the issue here is that local organizations may not, and I suspect often do not, separate out an apolitical concept of protection from other goals the way that peacekeepers do. This may be a consequence of life going on in wartime. Civilians who face a constant background threat of violence are likely to respond by trying to find ways to pursue their interests and convictions in the context of that threat, rather than sacrificing all their other commitments to remove the threat.²⁶

One of the Liberian women we interviewed had worked for the Charles Taylor government but joined the peace movement during the second war after seeing herself as non-political. While she cited physical safety as the first thing she thought about when she thought about “protection,” she quickly followed it with what got her involved — concern for the safety and future of her children. When the second war began, she crossed Monrovia at great risk to her physical safety to be reunited with them. She also chose the relatively difficult road of divorce (in what is still, in many ways, a traditionalist society) and leadership in the peace movement and the NGO world after the war.

The “peace communities” in Colombia provide another example. Set up to resist collaboration with both the rebels and government-affiliated paramilitaries, many also espoused leftist politics and a confrontational stance towards armed actors that led one analyst to assess them quite critically: “Objectively, as a project to increase safety (rather than to increase freedom or respect for political beliefs), since the risks faced by the population [of the peace community] are considerably higher than those faced by people in the surrounding area.”²⁷

He also points out that the politicization of the peace communities led many humanitarian agencies to keep their distance. Just as there was no bright line between protection and peacemaking activities for many of the women's groups in Liberia, the Colombian peace communities may not have seen their political and moral views as so distinct from their protection practices as international humanitarians do. Physical safety may have been less valuable to some civilians if it came at the cost of sacrificing freedom or respect — though if that possibility is entertained, we should also ask whether everyone in the peace community saw things the same way, or if their leaders were taking a radical stance on their behalf.

²⁶ In fact, individuals facing existential threats may be especially vulnerable if they do *not* have commitments that transcend their own situation. The classic study of this phenomenon is Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*.

²⁷ Bonwick, *Protection in Colombia*, p. 17.

Civilian-PKO Alliances

In addition to factors that generally embed peacekeepers' actions in a social conflict, peacekeepers may find themselves more directly drawn into the orbit of particular civilian organizations.

Civilians, especially those leading active self-protection or peace movements, and/or living through long conflicts, may not be making “first contact” with internationals. As a result, civilian contacts may be well-versed in international protection concepts, and they will not be approaching the PKO as naïve actors.

The women's peace movement in Liberia was deeply linked to external actors by the time of its most prominent activism in the second civil war (well before the arrival of UNMIL peacekeepers), and began building strong international links early in the career of ECOMOG peacekeepers.²⁸ When we asked what had contributed to women's increased willingness and ability to engage in peace activism, especially during the second war, we received several variations on the response that they had become connected to broader peace networks and sources of information. One woman told us that the involvement of the Liberian Women's Initiative (LWI) in the Abuja peace talks in 1994 brought in international assistance that had not previously been forthcoming; and, that during the wars (between 1990—2003), “several Liberian women had the opportunity of having training on women's rights, human rights and what have you.” One of these women was Leymah Gbowee, who went on to found the Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace.

The urbanization of Liberia's population also seemed to help spread information among Liberians, both locally generated ideas and strategies and information that individuals were bringing back from international connections. One of our interview partners told us that in her family, most women were encouraged to have children early (she told us that she herself was sexually active by 14, with her mother's encouragement — after having been sexually abused at 8 by a family member, a matter over which she was told to remain silent), and it was only after coming to Monrovia that she came into contact with other views of women's roles that let her organize her inchoate discontent with her life into action. “There was a person inside who was hurting,” she said, “but another person inside who wanted to make a difference.” Another simply told us that “women who know” spread information from outside trainings to other women, especially in densely populated urban areas.

Civilians, especially those with previous international contacts and training, may be savvy about seeking out alliances with PKOs. One of our interview partners was a member of an important women's peace group. When asked about her group's relationship with ECOMOG, she told us that it was very close and involved, “a lot of interaction.” In particular, she said that her group provided ECOMOG with a lot of information on the conflict and factions, and ECOMOG

²⁸ Fuest, “Liberia's Women”, pp. 128—130; Tyrrell, “In Support of Their Sisters”, 15—16, leaning heavily on Fuest and Sewell but adding her own interview data; Sewell, “Women Building Peace”, pp. 17—18.

facilitated several of their meetings with warlords. Peacekeepers should *expect* organized locals to use the peacekeeping mission as part of their strategy — one frequent characteristic of internationally linked advocates is that their strategies follow a “boomerang” pattern, where domestic obstacles are moved by going outside the country to enlist the aid of foreign or international agents.²⁹

This raises several issues. First, savvy civilians can be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, the existence of well-organized civilian groups can provide an invaluable lever for peacekeepers trying to protect civilians — the information given to ECOMOG being only one example. And civilian organization is one of the most potent forms of civilian power. With and without international assistance, the women’s groups in Liberia did tremendous work, both on the war and on changing an environment in which the story briefly related above was only one depressing narrative we heard. But on the other hand, civilians who know how PKOs “tick” may also use that information strategically. And even groups not setting out to manipulate peacekeepers will inevitably (and, in many cases quite reasonably) use their connections with peacekeepers to press their view of how things should change.

The point is not to undermine the credibility of civilians, but just to realistically point out that assuming they are too ignorant or naïve to be able to manipulate peacekeepers — to make use of peacekeepers’ tactical agency in service of the locals’ strategic agency — is to deny them due respect.

Additionally, peacekeeper alliance with civilian organizations risks effectively militarizing the civilians. This is a potentially large issue that I will mostly leave aside here. But the basic point is that, just as military involvement with international humanitarian organizations can risk distorting the humanitarian mandate, support by military peacekeepers may be a tempting alliance that can nonetheless transform civilian organizations and their role in the community. If civilian organizations are defined by not pursuing their goals through violence, being able to influence the ways in which peacekeepers use violence muddies their status. It is easy to ignore this if we assume that the force and violence peacekeepers use is definitionally “good” or “impartial,” but how to work with civilians while avoiding being drawn into using violence in an untoward manner is precisely what is at issue here, and we should not assume it away.

Choosing Among Elites

An alliance with the PKO represents a significant shift in the power of an organization relative to other groups in society. So the question for peacekeepers seems to be how to decide with whom it is appropriate to work.

Let us look at a non-Liberian example, the position of Community Liaison Interpreters (CLI) attached to the MONUC mission in the DRC.³⁰ CLIs were Congolese nationals charged with translating for the peacekeepers, but more importantly serving as a bridge between the mission

²⁹ Keck and Sikkink, “Transnational Advocacy Networks”, pp. 93—94.

³⁰ Kahn, *Engaging With Communities*, pp. 13—15.

(particularly its Joint Protection Teams) and civilians. But, as Oxfam’s report on community engagement explains, their successes were mixed. Part of the reason was that they varied in the level of community engagement they were able to build. As the report notes, “CLIs do not reach the entire community... CLIs appear to speak primarily with community leaders rather than the community at large. This fact, coupled with the lack of female CLIs, means that a significant number of voices are still not being heard.”³¹

This criticism still implies that it is possible to speak to “the community at large,” but how would this look? It could mean speaking to each member of the community individually — but even this approach would in some way reflect community structure. For instance, would it be harder to speak to women? Would children be included, and how? Would CLIs speak to “whole communities” defined by boundaries natural on the ground (e.g., kin groups — and would these be “natural” to everyone?) or defined by the area of operations of the peacekeeping mission? Would they have an open door policy (who would feel comfortable coming? everyone equally?)? More likely, the solution would be to set up some form of community forum or consultation — which may be headed by the community leaders, or by (perhaps civilian) peacekeepers. In any event, once we consider the details of what it would mean to speak to “the community at large” we see that all of the concerns about civilian organizations and structures and their particular perspectives re-arise.

Perhaps peacekeepers should recognize that they are always talking to organizations and just favor civilian organizations over ones that use violence. But, as noted above, the connection between conflict and social change/dissensus problematizes this approach. We, those of us in societies rarely riven by serious violence, do not assume that every civilian organization has the unanimous interests of the people at heart, nor that their aims are always entirely sincere, and there is no reason we should romanticize civilian organizations in other countries. We certainly should not treat situations of conflict as if there is only illegitimate violent coercion on the one hand and vibrant democratic discussion on the other. Many groups that do not have access to the tools of *violence* use other tools of power, such as money, social status, or international connection. Yet there seems to be relatively little reflection on the role of injustices perpetrated by non-violent groups in creating and maintaining social conflict.³²

In the first place, making the only division combatant-noncombatant can hide some of the challenges that civilian activities face. One Liberian woman (speaking mostly about the 2000-2003 war) told us that a big challenge for the women’s peace movement there was the fact that many women were supporters of the armed factions. Civilian women were involved with the armed groups in a number of ways. Some, like feeding combatants, would leave them clearly civilians on most understandings — but still undermined the task of building peace and mitigating the violent threat to civilians. Others, like market women who helped keep supplies of ammunition flowing, would fall into a more ambiguous category.³³ For this woman’s group, the

³¹ Ibid., p. 14.

³² For an exception in the moral literature, see McMahan, *Killing in War*, ch. 5.

³³ Coady, *Morality and Political Violence*, p. 112—113, introduces the helpful category of “ancillaries” for people in such positions.

challenge was to get women whose activities were helping sustain the conflict, and who possessed organization and social power to agree that their overriding interest was in peace, and not their kin-group or the short-term benefits offered by alliance with an armed faction. Peacekeepers who assume that all civilian organizations are “good” or that all organizations/individuals who serve a military or paramilitary role are to be kept at arm’s length may not be willing or conceptually able to make choices that are important to their civilian allies.

In the second place, as noted above, military peacekeepers are themselves purveyors of violence. If the peacekeepers begin to act in a way that supports the agenda of one civilian group over another, or over an armed faction, that “civilian” group is in fact now able to pursue its goals through violence, if indirectly.

Third, it may lead to an uncritical attitude toward civilian alliances. Peacekeepers have limited ability to support civilians and need to choose whose information they will act on. “First come, first served” is probably not the best principle of discrimination. And if peacekeepers are given no other guidance than to work with civilian organizations that seem to be good ones from the peacekeepers’ perspective, this may smuggle partiality in through the back door.

Some of the philosophical depth of this problem comes from the fact that it is not at all clear what it means to “speak for the people.” This is not just an epistemic problem for peacekeepers, it is a metaphysical one. If we leave aside approaches that reify “the people” into its own organic entity, we are left trying to deduce group attributes from those of individuals. There are well-known theoretical problems with this.³⁴ Unfortunately, the best response is to conceive of “the will of the people” as something that is only expressed through reasonably well-functioning political institutions.³⁵ In a nutshell, since we cannot convert individual preferences into a group preference, we are thrown back on the concept of group decisions instead. But being able to make group decisions requires an institutionalized group decision-making process that makes sense of the idea that everyone in the group has had input. It is not just that it is difficult for peacekeepers to know “what Liberians want,” it is that there is arguably no such thing as what *Liberians* want in a situation like war-time or immediately post-war Liberia, precisely because of the damage to social institutions that peacekeepers are trying to repair.

In particular, neither identifying and rebuilding antebellum institutions nor holding elections will solve this problem. Elections on their own do not solve the problem because, if the electoral institutions are flawed, their results will not be anything that can be considered “what the people want.” Antebellum institutions are in part discredited by the mere fact of conflict. No insurgency, no matter how brutal, can survive without being able to tap into *some* social conflict that the existing institutions failed to resolve adequately.³⁶

The obvious alternative seems to be for peacekeepers to use their own, inevitably value-laden

³⁴ For a broad overview, see Riker, *Liberalism Against Populism*.

³⁵ For a thoroughly worked-out example, see Richardson, *Democratic Autonomy*, esp. chs. 4, 10, and 13.

³⁶ What about apparently purely predatory movements like the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) in Uganda? While the LRA does not conduct itself like a Maoist popular insurgency, I believe the point still holds. Were there not social conflicts in Uganda (and the other nations in which the LRA operates) that prevent people from coming together and organizing effectively to resist the LRA, and that prevent the government from mounting an effective police response to it, the LRA could not survive. It is telling that the LRA operates in areas where there are already obstacles to the state effectively extending its mandate.

judgment, giving up any pretensions to impartiality. But there is a different way out of what may seem to be a moral Catch-22. Peacekeepers are not theorists stuck considering the situation and noting the lack of social consensus and legitimate institutions. They are actors in the situation, and can use the fact that group preference is tied to institutional structure to helpfully shift the terms of the dilemma.

Choosing With Elites

We are now back to our initial questions: With which civilian factions should peacekeepers be willing to cooperate, and what form should that cooperation take? In what follows, I will argue that while the “who” question seems to be the more natural one, the considerations above make it relatively intractable, and answering the “how” question may blunt its urgency.

Lederach provides a idea that can help the peacekeeper cut through the problem of civilian organizations’s entanglement with social conflicts — “mediative space.”³⁷ The idea of a mediative space is to create the possibility for engagement between diverse perspectives on the conflict — whether through literal space or through facilitating contact and discussion.

The idea of mediative space is also linked to another Lederachian idea, that of the “moral imagination.”³⁸ Moral imagination, in Lederach’s system, is the ability to conceive of new and different relationships between agents than the mutually destructive ones they are locked into in conflict.³⁹ Exercises in moral imagination are not about finding ways for one group or another to “win” the social conflicts into which violent conflicts are tied, but rather to find new social projects in which the stakes are changed. This can be very small-scale and tactical; one of Lederach’s examples is of a Tajik warlord who built a new relationship (friendship) with a peacemaker, who then was able to convince the warlord to come to talks by joining him in vulnerability to attack by government forces.⁴⁰ But it can also take a strategic-level form, as with the creation of truth and reconciliation commissions as an alternative to the default accountability structures of trials. At the larger scale, the concept of moral imagination echoes the Arendtian opposition between power and violence, that “[p]ower and violence are opposites... Violence can destroy power; it is utterly incapable of creating it.”⁴¹ Violence is useful when locked in conflict, when the game is zero-sum, as it can only destroy power (organization toward a goal) — destroying the opponent’s power makes you no better able to achieve your own ends, but removes the opponent as an obstacle. Power is often more, well, powerful, but when joint organization is blocked by conflict, getting to it requires that various parties re-imagine their goals and relationships.

³⁷ Lederach, *The Moral Imagination*, p. 95.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

³⁹ Lederach’s formal definition is “the capacity to imagine something rooted in the challenges of the real world yet capable of giving birth to that which does not yet exist,” but he builds on this very abstract idea mainly in the vein of building new relationships. *ibid.*, ix, emphasis removed.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 16–19.

⁴¹ Arendt, “On Violence”, p. 155.

Bringing things down to earth a bit, the important conceptual shift for the peacekeeper is from an outside agent who must decide what alliances to make and how to guide the violence he possesses with influence from whose interests, to the peacekeeper as a guarantor of a social process through which joint social interests can be worked out. This may require the creation of a mediative space for imagination both for the parties to the conflict, and for the peacekeeper himself.

How do these airy ideas imported from philosophy and conflict resolution apply to the *military* peacekeeper? First, we should not take the “space” part of mediative space too metaphorically. In conflict situations, one barrier to changing conflictual relationships and to civilian self-protection in a more immediate sense can be literal physical space: barriers to communicating with those in other groups, barriers to flight, barriers to access to food and water, lack of violence-free spaces to pursue activities that in more normal times foster cross-communal relationships (e.g., trade). Peacekeepers can sometimes themselves exacerbate this problem, by creating security spaces with sharp boundaries — for instance, by cutting off any contact between civilians in a “safe zone” from armed factions (and other civilians, with whom there may be links of affinity) in a “red zone.”⁴²

Second, we should not, in fact, expect military peacekeepers to play the role of primary mediators and relationship-builders. But remember that what peacekeepers bring to the table is their ability to (ideally) create safety for themselves and others in their immediate vicinity. By accompanying and cooperating with civilians engaged in conflict resolution and self-protection tasks, peacekeepers can make it possible for them to expand their activities.

The way this becomes a mediative space concept is when the peacekeepers cannot provide this safety in a blanket fashion. In some ways, the ideal would be “saturation,” enough peacekeepers to function as a domestic police force and completely prevent violence. But this is prohibitively resource intensive in most peacekeeping situations and would raise serious questions about legitimacy for peacekeepers who could exercise such comprehensive control.

Barring saturation, peacekeepers must deploy their safety strategically. This is where the remarks about physical space come in — to create mediative spaces, peacekeepers cannot simply create *safety from* armed actors. They must create situations in which civilians can experience *safety with* members of other groups, including armed factions.

Safety-from blocks mediative connections. The out-groups are out until they accept the conditions for entry to the protected area — and negotiations about those conditions of entrance are generally carried out at leadership levels, where interests are most locked in and imagination hardest to exercise (the interventions of Liberian women at peace talks being a notable exception to the elite focus of many peace talks). This is potentially counter-productive for peace, and perhaps even for making the activities of civilian organizations wrapped up with self-protection effective. If I am right that peacekeepers working with locals cannot neatly divorce protection of civilians from influencing the social conflict in a more progressive direction, they need to note Lederach’s insight that “those building social change must intentionally seek to link people who

⁴² See, e.g. Higate and Henry, *Insecure Spaces*, esp. chs. 3—4; Sewall, Raymond, and Chin, *Mass Atrocity Response Operations*, pp. 75—80.

are not like-minded and not like-situated in the context.”⁴³ Safety-with involves greater risk, but also allows for new connections to be made between groups.

Let us return to the issue of self-protection, promotion of social/political ideas, and conflict transformation not being able to be neatly separated. Conceiving of physical protection as aimed at safety-with is helpful precisely in that it allows the connections to be *maintained*. If peacekeepers focus only on physical protection without concerning themselves with working with local self-protection actors, they risk breaking all the links. If they focus on working with certain approved groups and protecting their own protection activities, they risk the link between politics and conflict transformation. To recapitulate a bit, the fact that civilians organize to safely accomplish concrete projects means that self-protection is always *for* something (agenda) and for something that has become a matter of concrete conflict (in need of transformation).

This should affect the strategic vision of peacekeepers. Even in the presence of an agreed cease fire or peace treaty, they should not see the peace as “finished” and those who oppose the agreement as “spoilers” to be simply controlled, co-opted, deterred. Rather, they should seek connections with civilian organizations involved with self-protection, and as part of this cooperation, actively seek opportunities to bring stakeholders into contact with each other — women should not have to fight to be heard because they are not the ones who took up weapons to fight physically.

Such a strategic vision also helps to solve the worries about the connection between popular will and undamaged institutions. In a conflict or immediate post-conflict situation, social structures do not exist to give meaning to anything like “popular will.” But actively seeking opportunities for protection-with on behalf of civilian organizations can provide a structure in which local-scale joint projects that represent a local-scale common will and locus of organizational power can emerge.

Finally, seeing the “how” of connection with civilian organizations this way pulls the sting of the “who.” Peacekeepers are not aligning themselves permanently with one side of a social conflict. They are focusing their protection activities on creating safer spaces in which to work those conflicts out concretely. This is not to be read as a matter of providing a global safe space, peacekeepers need to identify *particular* organizations and make them safe with other *particular* organizations. Nor is it primarily about creating spaces for them to negotiate, or talk — that may come, especially later when things are safe enough for civilian mediators. It is primarily about creating space for joint work on issues of concrete protection and life-sustaining activity. The ideal for military peacekeepers should not be just setting up a conference or workshop. A more appropriate ideal would be getting a market re-started in a disputed area.

For instance, we pressed the woman who spoke with us about the need to reach out to women who had been supporting the fighters about what approach she and her comrades used. It was not just a matter of trying to get them to see where interest lay or even of moral suasion. An important part of their success was getting women involved actively in the peace movement itself. This gave them an alternative means of working to help their society, families, and friends,

⁴³ Lederach, *The Moral Imagination*, p. 84.

and that active involvement, she argued, was key to bringing women away from the factions. This makes perfect sense if we keep in mind that even people supporting the worst abuses generally believe that they are doing right. If they were supporting armed factions because they believed it was what was required of them as a member of their community, they needed to be shown a more attractive community with more attractive modes of belonging. It also shows a different face of mediative space. It is not just about creating space for people to come together, it is about fostering joint projects that expand the reach of the organizations that speak for this or that group of civilians. Through their links with whatever civilian organizations they ally with, peacekeepers should seek to foster greater practical involvement with other civilians.

The ideal of creating mediative space through the provision of concrete protection-with is a realistic one, I believe, for military peacekeepers. It is neither too demanding, nor does it take them too far outside their comfort zone to become the primary mediators or peacemakers.

That is not to say that it is easy, or will be realistic in all situations. The accomplishments of Liberian women under very difficult circumstances were impressive, but there may be some situations in which the violence is so immediate and overwhelming that protection-from needs to be the first priority. Fortunately, these situations seem to be rare outside genocides-in-progress and major assaults by industrialized militaries. Peacekeepers also need to be careful and honest about the protection they can provide within the limits of their mandate, any restrictive instructions from their national governments, and their equipment and training. Spaces that are on the border of zones of control are often the most dangerous for civilians, and peacekeepers should not encourage civilians to enter them unless they can be fairly certain of being able to provide effective protection.⁴⁴

On a more philosophical level, this approach does require peacekeepers to embrace the fact that they are now part of the conflict situation, in a way that may offend against some concepts of impartiality — they must actively try to shape the political environment, not just the security environment. All I can say to this is that, regardless of their intentions, they are shaping the political environment no matter what they do (safe zones are as separating as mediating spaces are joining). Any concept of impartiality that cannot accept that is unworkable.⁴⁵

It also does not require moral relativism on the part of peacekeepers. We can acknowledge the fact that improving the situation for women in Liberia was the right thing to do (and not just by appealing to legalistic sources, like UN resolutions on women's rights). Peacekeepers who create or protect a mediative space between a women's rights group and opponents are not sitting back and saying that however the conflict comes out is fine. The conflict is not an abstract moral one, it is one in which there is a way in which the women's groups and others must work together on something. It may be best to flip perspective and realize that the situation is one in which less progressive groups need to work with the women and take their concerns into account.

⁴⁴ On the danger of border zones, see Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*, esp. ch 7 and §8.5.

⁴⁵ I propose a concept of impartiality that embraces embeddedness in Levine, "Peacekeeper Impartiality".

Conclusion

Peacekeepers who do not recognize the presence of organized, directed civilian groups already engaged in self-protection strategies risk disrupting those strategies — possibly endangering civilians further, especially in areas where peacekeepers’ ability to project safety on their own is limited — and depriving themselves of connections that are resources for protection. But peacekeepers who ally with civilian groups need to recognize that the connection goes both ways, and they are now part of savvy civilian strategies to affect the socio-political situation. The activities of Liberian women show both the ways in which civilians can be quite active on their own behalf and also savvy about their own socio-political goals and their relationship to peacekeepers.

The way out of this dilemma is through — peacekeepers who embrace the fact that they affect the socio-political situation by their presence can work with civilians to extend their own work, while also focusing on making it safe for that work to involve fruitful contact with other groups, with other agendas. A shift from a focus on protection-from to protection-with may seem subtle, but opens up far more possibilities for imaginative connections between peacekeepers and populations they are trying to help.

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