

What people think does matter: Understanding and integrating local perceptions into UN peacekeeping

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Summary

This policy brief argues that the international community needs to do more to systematically collect, share and analyze local perceptions, and to ensure that they are heeded when monitoring progress towards key benchmarks, informing decision-making on the ground and at the UN Security Council and UN Secretariat/HQ. This brief also provides some recommendations for policymakers and the international community on how this can be done.

Understanding what people think, at all levels of society, is instrumental to the process of aiding any society towards peace and prosperity. This has recently been recognized and acknowledged by the UN, the World Bank and other central actors.¹ However, findings presented in this brief show that: (i) Capturing and understanding local perceptions on the ground has been done to a great extent, but usually through a piecemeal approach or in an *ad hoc* manner, resulting in limited sharing of knowledge and experiences between peacekeeping operations as well as between components within missions.² (ii) Systematic survey tools and methodologies can be difficult to master and integrate fully. (iii) Differing scientific methodologies, ethical considerations and the need for outside consultants represent challenges that need to be taken into consideration if the aim is to capture and understand local perceptions more systematically. Finally, this policy brief notes how the activities and increased focus on the part of policymakers have sparked a debate on how UN peacekeeping may go about capturing and understanding local perceptions in a more systematic manner.

Introduction³

Understanding what people think and why they act as they do is fundamental to any political leadership. Peacekeeping and peacebuilding operations deal with core issues in the societies where they are deployed, so such operations should be as concerned with capturing and understanding local perceptions as any government. This is crucial if they are to implement their mandate satisfactorily and support the development of sustainable peace while also maintaining situational awareness and the security of their personnel.

In the academic literature on peacebuilding, criticisms of the UN and the international community as post-colonial and arrogant as regards local circumstances have dominated. It is often held that the staff working for these organizations are representatives from the 'Western world,' incapable of looking beyond their own ways of organizing a society. Even though local perceptions have, to varying degrees, been integrated in peacekeeping operations, this has not been established as a regular practice within DPKO, and no guidelines have yet been developed.

However, the issue of local perceptions is now gaining greater attention within the UN and is being dealt

1 As reflected in recent policy documents, such as the World Bank report on *Conflict, Security and Development*, the Civilian Capacity reform process in the United Nations, in the development of post-2015 development goals, and the g7+ *Peacebuilding and Statebuilding Goals*.

2 UN DPKO (2013) *Understanding and Integrating Local Perceptions in Multi-Dimensional UN Peacekeeping*. New York: United Nations, p. 4.

3 This policy brief is based on findings from the research project *Contextualizing Peacebuilding Activities to Local Circumstances* (2011–2012) and the workshop *Understanding and Integrating Local Perceptions in the Work of Multi-Dimensional UN Peacekeeping Operations* (Kampala, 2013).

with on a day-to-day basis by practitioners working in the field. UN peacekeepers encounter and note local perceptions as part of their daily job – civil affairs officers, for instance, are spread extensively across host countries, and meet individuals and groups every day. Together with other staff, they form a vital source of information about the local population, its needs and opinions, that is put to use at the local level. Unfortunately, however, this often gets lost further up in the hierarchy – in-mission, and in UNHQ in New York.

Thus, within the UN there is indeed a will and an understanding of the importance of capturing local perceptions. However, this poses several dilemmas and challenges regarding ethics, methodology, bureaucracy and coherency.

Achievements, challenges and dilemmas

In trying to collect information on local perceptions, various approaches and methods have been used – including interviews, focus groups, opinion surveys, local media, national staff, workshops, public meetings, social media and crowd-sourcing. Although such tools are available and have in fact been applied in peacekeeping operations, what has been lacking is a unified and consistent approach, as well as clarity over the value and potential of local perceptions. Essentially, this has been an inward process characterized by incorporating local perceptions into situation analysis and early warning to inform mission plans and activities, rather than being directly used to support the restoration of weakened societies and state apparatuses, as well as national policymaking processes. There seems to be a disconnect between those who report on local perceptions, on the one hand, and decision- and policy-makers in the missions and in New York, on the other. An understanding of local perceptions is often present in the field, but this needs to be better incorporated into broader mission and policy planning. Moreover, peacekeepers tend to solicit local perceptions on short-term, immediate issues such as security incidents or political developments, whereas the systemic, root issues of conflicts are rarely considered.⁴ This results in an emphasis on conflict *management* rather than conflict *resolution*.

Capturing local perceptions

Qualitative interviews, surveys, mixed methods and triangulation are commonly employed by practitioners and researchers for capturing local perceptions. In-depth interviews are the tool most commonly used by field-based peacekeepers for collecting local perceptions: interviews can yield rich, nuanced data, and open-ended probes help correct misunderstandings and misinterpretations. Interviews and focus groups often supplement surveys that can be made representative, thereby helping to avoid under-representation of mar-

ginalized groups. In-depth interviews can also be used to help formulate the most relevant questions for surveys, so that the results of such surveys are more likely to be taken seriously and acted on. A great advantage of using interviews, surveys, or both, is that they often provide information that can serve as a valuable counterpoint to the host government's own performance indicators, and to counter elite claims of 'speaking for the people.' Monitoring local media, surveys of public perceptions and opinions, public town-hall meetings, Peace Polls, and the Afrobarometer research project are practical examples to such an approach.⁵

Community Liaison Assistants and Community Alert Networks in MONUSCO

In eastern DR Congo, MONUSCO has hired Community Liaison Assistants (CLAs) in three rounds, totaling 202 persons as of February 2013.⁶ These are local persons employed and trained by the UN, who work to facilitate interaction and confidence-building between MONUSCO and local communities, as well as setting up communication networks and providing early warning on protection risks and advice on needs of the local population. These CLAs have been recognized as a critical asset to MONUSCO and proven very effective in identifying threats and needs,⁷ but they also face various challenges, including lack of transportation and functioning equipment, phone credits, and demands exceeding their capacity.⁸ MONUSCO has also set up a system of Community Alert Networks (CANs), where cell phones have been provided to community focal points to enable a direct link between local communities and MONUSCO commanders.

The CLAs and the CANs report to Early Warning Centers, which are hubs situated at the company level of the military contingents to enhance situation awareness and strengthen the ability to protect civilians. CLAs and CANs are examples of innovative developments aimed at improving the ability of MONUSCO to capture, understand and integrate local perceptions into its daily decision-making, and enhance its ability to protect civilians. However, it should also be noted that the CLAs and local community focal points may be exposed to considerable personal risks, a point that needs to be carefully considered in applying these models to other missions.


4 UN DPKO (2013) *Understanding and Integrating Local Perceptions in Multi-Dimensional UN Peacekeeping*. New York: United Nations, p.25

5 Afrobarometer Research Network, see <http://www.afrobarometer.org/>; Colin Irwin, (2012), *The people's peace: 'Pax populi, pax dei'- how peace polls are democratizing the peace making process*. Scotts Valley, CA: CreateSpace.

6 Personal communication with MONUSCO official.

7 J. Reynaert (2011). MONUC/MONUSCO and Civilian Protection in the Kivu. Antwerpen, International Peace Information Service, p. 26.

8 E.A.Weir (2012). DR Congo: Local Communities on the Front Line. Washington, DC: Refugees International, p. 4



When trying to not only to gather perceptions but also to capture trends and measure peacekeeping activities and the work of peacekeepers, it is important to distinguish between research on broad patterns and trends, and research on the effectiveness of specific programs and policies. How can perceptions contribute to indications of achievement over time? One alternative is to get fine-grained, geo-located data on what peacekeepers do – patrols, quick impact projects, etc. However, practice has shown that such data may be incomplete, confidential or both.

Here it should be borne in mind that opinions are not necessarily facts. Informants and respondents are fully entitled to give inaccurate or incorrect information during interviews or surveys; and there may be many reasons for people to provide ‘politically correct’ responses, regarding involvement in violence, voting intentions, or whatever. However, regardless whether the opinions and perceptions are correct, they are still highly important and should be taken into account.

Further, it is important to recall that gathering information in areas of conflict and violence involves various dilemmas and risks. A major concern is the security of staff and informants, especially when dealing with sensitive thematic and questions of a political nature which may create suspicion. Additionally, inadequacies as regards infrastructure, access to areas and information, communication and monitoring with personnel in the field can often prove challenging and costly.

Whose perceptions matter?

It is generally agreed that local perceptions matter: what is less clear is whose perceptions should be gathered and heeded. The online survey of peacekeeping personnel conducted by the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO) in relation to the development of guidelines for understanding and integrating local perceptions in multi-dimensional UN peacekeeping showed that national colleagues were the most commonly cited source of information on local perceptions, on national as well as international issues. The second and third most commonly used sources of information were local government officials and civil society actors.⁹ According to the survey results, main uses of local perceptions in peacekeeping missions included anticipating security threats and identifying developments that could negatively impact the peace process. However, current and former members of armed groups, militia and rebel groups were found to be the least common sources of information on local perceptions. The reasons for this may include limited interaction and access to this population and security risks and taboos associated with speaking to armed groups. Nevertheless, missions need to consider gathering information on the perceptions of such inter-

locutors (paradoxically) deemed as peripheral, so as to better understand their interests and grievances, and inform mission strategies for advancing the peace process.¹⁰ Moreover, the DPKO study showed a relatively low level of consultation with local journalists and the private sector. This lack of interaction with the private sector appears to be a crucial gap as regards understanding the views and perceptions of a very influential section of society,¹¹ a gap that should be dealt with by missions and UNHQ alike. It is important to broaden the sources of information used in seeking to gather local views, by including a wider range of actors outside the mission and its usual partners of collaboration and interaction.

From polls to policy

Various methodological tools can be used in trying to capture local views and perceptions. The challenge is how to use and integrate this information when developing policies and translating results into specific policies and recommendations. Surveys, for example, can prove very useful for framing a problem, but may not necessarily provide sufficient information on which to base decisions and policies – although they may give some indications of what is working and what is not.

A common frustration amongst field-based personnel collecting information on local perceptions is that the information they report is not put to sufficient later use by mission leadership or HQ in New York. One reason for this disconnect may be that the information is not collected or analyzed in ways that are relevant or readily incorporated into policy planning for the decision-makers.

Informing decision-making in Liberia

Various units of the UN mission in Liberia (UNMIL) cooperate to capture and understand local perceptions in Liberia, emphasizing that ‘local’ does not necessarily mean rural. Two-thirds of the population live in Monrovia; and a main priority of the mission is understanding what urban residents think – youth in particular. The mission has put in place various mechanisms to avoid stove-piping, and to ensure that information is shared across the mission and that senior leadership is fully informed. While such mechanisms seem intuitively obvious, they are unfortunately rarely found in UN peacekeeping operations.¹³

9 UN DPKO (2013) *Understanding and Integrating Local Perceptions in Multi-Dimensional UN Peacekeeping*. New York: United Nations, p. 20.

10 UN DPKO (2013) *Understanding and Integrating Local Perceptions in Multi-Dimensional UN Peacekeeping*. New York: United Nations, p. 21

11 *Ibid.*, p. 20.

12 N. N. Schia, N. N. and J. Karlsrud (2013) ‘Where the rubber meets the road’: Everyday friction and local level peacebuilding in South Sudan, Liberia and Haiti’, *International Peacekeeping*, 20(2): pp. 233-248.

13 H. Neumann and N.N. Schia (2012). ‘Contextualizing Peacebuilding Activities to Local Circumstances: Liberian Case-Study Field Report,’ *Security in Practice* 6, 2012. Oslo: Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI).

Recommendations: From local perceptions to practice and policy

- Methodological approach – Outsourcing: Capturing local perceptions through surveys requires methodological expertise. Data accuracy should be ensured by triangulating methodologies and data. The international community and the UN should be sure of the accuracy of data when outsourcing public surveys on local perceptions, as well as when writing guidelines on options and caveats on how and when these can be used in peacekeeping.
- Methodological approach – In-house: To be able to carry out and interpret surveys, staff must be properly qualified and trained. We recommend that rather than introducing complex and expensive new techniques, the DPKO should seek to improve its collection of local perceptions through the use of interviews, focus groups and other easy-to-learn methods.
- Expertise: UN needs a mechanism that can ensure good partnerships. Highly technical research requires expertise. Two different ways of establishing partnerships could be envisaged: 1) in-house capacities who can work with partners and outsource surveys; 2) working with consultants – for instance, UNMIL has worked with academics and the World Bank, among others.
- Integrate: The UN should ‘mainstream’ local perceptions into political analysis and planning at the mission level and in HQ New York, to ensure that local perceptions are actually integrated and incorporated at HQ level.
- Knowledge-sharing: The UN should expand the focus on transfer of knowledge and communication of best practices between HQ New York, mission HQs and the field.
- Nationals and internationals: The ‘real’ experts on local perceptions are UN national staff and the local population. They have access to key information and often a better understanding and overview of the situation and the context. However, it should also be kept in mind that national staff are not uninformed in the fate of their country, and are seldom neutral or impartial.
- Political buy-in: Excessive focus on the field may lead to a disconnect between the UN and political elites. It is crucial to involve the political elites in the bottom-up approach – at the end of the day, they are the ones who will make the decisions.
- Infrastructure and partnership: The UN should establish partnerships with national universities and researchers to strengthen capacity and improve the analysis of data. MONUSCO is currently collaborating with the UNDP on such a project. Further collaboration between the DPKO, the UNDP and the host government (e.g. ministry of interior, ministry of planning and the ministry of justice) should also be developed.
- Transparency: of research, data and findings should be the rule rather than the exception, even if the results happen to diverge from with the ‘official’ story.
- Funding: Funds for capturing local perceptions through surveys and other methods that necessitate financial support should feature in the budget, to ensure regularity of baseline studies and surveys. This should be coordinated with the UN Country Team.

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This policy brief emerged from discussions at the workshop on ‘Understanding and Integrating Local Perceptions in the Work of Multi-Dimensional UN Peacekeeping Operations,’ held in Kampala, Uganda, 26–28 February 2013. Participants included practitioners, policy-makers and academics. The workshop was co-hosted by the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI) and the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO). Funding was provided by the Training for Peace in Africa program (TfP) at NUPI.



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