

Gender perspectives in UN peacekeeping innovations?

The case of MONUSCO in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo

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Summary

The UN Operation in the Democratic Republic of Congo (MONUSCO) has experienced some military victories, as exemplified by the recent defeat of the M23 rebel group. MONUSCO has also instigated some crucial innovative measures aimed at improving its peacekeeping and protection practices. This policy brief examines three such innovations – the Community Liaison Assistants (CLAs), Community Alert Networks (CANs) and Joint Protection Teams (JPTs) in South Kivu province – with a critical discussion of some challenges of gender mainstreaming in these approaches and potential measures.

The findings indicate that several areas need further attention in order to improve gender mainstreaming at the local and mission level. First, it is essential to draw on the experience of the CLAs for internal gender training within the mission at the civilian as well as military level. The CLAs have excellent skills in understanding local communities, and their knowledge is important for improving gender perspectives at the mission level. Secondly, experiences with these community-targeted innovations could be used to improve cooperation between UN sections on gender perspectives, where it seems to be low levels of institutional cooperation.

It is important to address the gendered roles within communities that obstruct or enable the possibilities of security changes, not least the passivity of men who now rarely leave their homes and their stakeholder roles as formal and traditional representatives. One could say that Congolese men are unable to fulfill their masculine roles as breadwinners and heads of household. Moreover, there is a need to address the gap between what gender issues entail and how this affects the regular liaison work and reporting mechanisms of CLAs and JPTs. A focus on gender issues does not mean *working also with women*, but rather working with the entire society and understanding how actors and their institutions are informed and reproduced by gender relations in society, and in turn how these relations facilitate or obstruct the desired outcomes.

Introduction

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) has experienced a long-lasting war and conflict situation in its eastern areas. However, there have also been recent military successes through the aid and support of the UN stabilization mission MONUSCO, defeating the rebel group M23 which in October 2012 occupied Goma, the provincial capital of North Kivu and where the UN had one of its main headquarters in the country. Beyond immediate military victories, MONUSCO has also established several important civilian elements in connection with its mandate of protecting civilians and support to restoring state authority in conflict-ridden areas. This policy brief examines three important innovations in MONUSCO's civilian work in the South Kivu province: the Community Liaison Assistants (CLAs), Community Alert Networks (CANs) and Joint Protection Teams (JPTs), with a special focus on gender sensitivity.

The first generation of CLAs was recruited in 2010. They were initially tasked with assisting the military units in MONUSCO to liaise between the population and the peacekeepers.¹ Most MONUSCO peacekeepers do not speak any of the local or national languages and are thus fully dependent on local interpreters to communicate with the population they are set to protect. The CLAs proved to have skills not only in languages but also in communicating the mandate of MONUSCO to the local population. Moreover, they had vital local knowledge without being seen to be overtly politically biased as they were not personally connected with the surrounding villages. Thus, it was soon recognized that their roles could be expanded.

¹ The CLAs were termed Community Liaison Interpreters until 2011.

Today, there are on average two CLAs per Company Operating Base (COB) or Temporary Operating Base (TOB) where they provide the troops with security information (on new developments and threats) and contact with the local stakeholders. The CLAs seek to establish trust and communication with the local communities in order to develop protection plans specific for their contextual challenges. These are plans developed through the local and province-level stakeholders in dialogue with the CLAs to deal with daily security risks. Moreover, they both facilitate and participate in community meetings called *Urafiki* (friendship meetings) where issues of protection and security in the area are discussed. In other words, the CLAs have become equally important for the local communities and the peacekeepers.

The Community Alert Networks (CANs) are Congolese community focal points, on which CLAs and peacekeepers depend in order to be contacted in case of emergency. CAN focal points are (ideally) individuals that the local community feel a certain trust towards and they are equipped with cell-phones and can reach the relevant COB and the CLAs on a 24-hour basis. These focal points, however, may carry a heavy burden as individuals responsible for early warning. Thus, a new approach is to diffuse the CLAs and COB contact information among the population, so that any person can become a CAN focal point and hence risks for specific individuals are avoided.

The Joint Protection Teams (JPTs) consist of MONUSCO staff from both the military and civilian affairs sections of the mission. They focus on particularly vulnerable communities where protection concerns have been reported. The JPTs also rely on the CLAs for help in getting information on protection and security concerns as well as in establishing contact and facilitating meetings with the local communities. The JPT missions are intended to facilitate dialogue between communities affected by conflict, and to bring together MONUSCO armed forces and civilian staff in order to enable better peacekeeping and protection.

2 The mandate of protecting civilians in the eastern DRC entails certain context-specific challenges to protection and security. Importantly, many or most of the areas that the JPTs and the CLAs visit have hardly any state presence. There is also the problem of roaming armed groups and more permanent groups who collaborate with the local chiefs on taxation, control over land and other items of value in the area. This situation complicates and obfuscates the MONUSCO mandate of protecting civilians and supporting state restoration.

Integrated gender perspectives in MONUSCO's innovations?

Gender strategies seem to be included in the various peacekeeping innovations only to a very limited extent. As regards the CLAs, gender strategies from the UN side appear to relate primarily to matters like increasing the number of female staff to achieve better gender balance among the CLAs, and getting local stakeholder groups to include female representatives. Such groups are usually found outside the main traditional or formal authority structures. In fact, the CLAs do have a gender focal point, but his position towards the other CLAs and his gender mainstreaming role in the public outreach was not all clear to the researcher.

On the other hand, the CLAs can provide many gender perspectives through their communication with and knowledge of the local communities – perspectives that could be used more actively in MONUSCO's planning and program outreach. *At the local level*, for instance, the long-term conflicts and economic downturns in the DRC have led to a sense of passivity among men who now rarely leave their homes. This may be due to the fear of getting killed, or to the fact that it will be hard to find work in line with their traditional masculine ideals, such as an office job or cattle ranching. In effect, one could say from a researcher perspective that Congolese men have over time been “de-masculinized” – unable to fulfill their roles as breadwinners and heads of household. A more popular way of saying this is that there is a clear divide between what is accepted as men and women's work. Women, young people and children usually have to walk long distances through what have become dangerous areas to harvest beans, fetch water and charcoal, and go to the markets to sell goods. The CLAs are, from the researchers perspective, very well aware of these problems, but their insights could be further used to both discuss gender perspectives at security meetings as well as in discussions with local communities.

The second-class status of women is related to the tradition of paying a bride-price to the women's family and the view that women somehow become the possession of their husbands after marriage. It is not the role of MONUSCO to ‘correct’ these perspectives to more gender-equal norms – the point is rather that these are important elements to understand within gender-nuanced perspectives of the security risks facing girls and boys, women and men, and to take them into account when trying to improve the situation. Since women are the ones who walk long distances every day, they are also often highly aware of what is going on around them, perhaps even more so than their husbands. However, even if the men no longer occupy the key traditional and formal positions, the apparent inability of many men to fulfill their traditional area of



responsibility has perhaps not been sufficiently taken into account. This is a gender issue within the local community that affects both security as well as community engagement. The CLAs and the JPTs together with the work of the CANs should take these gender dimensions into account when addressing important community and security challenges.

At the mission level of MONUSCO, it is important to work more systematically within the organization and across sections in employing integrated gender perspectives. The one-hour gender training given during a bimonthly meeting for all CLAs and some of the international MONUSCO staff focused mainly on (1) how gender roles are not biologically given but emerge as stereotypes, and (2) that there were a given number of trained female Congolese police officers. The session did not engage the CLAs in critically considering their daily dealings with the local communities and the COBs, and their own reporting of security issues from a gender perspective. There seemed to be a gap between what gender issues entail and how they affect the regular liaison work and reporting mechanisms of CLAs and JPTs alike.

The gender office is severely understaffed at Bukavu headquarters in South Kivu, consisting of only one local assistant and no senior advisor. When asked about the level of work *within* the mission as opposed to his dealings with local women's organizations, the gender assistant shook his head and indicated that this was a much too difficult field to approach from his position.

At Bukavu headquarters there is, however, a very active team at the Sexual Violence Unit (SVU) highly willing to engage in discussions about challenging gender stereotypes and perceptions within the mission. One staff member held that in MONUSCO gender is understood as working *also* with women but not as working with the *entire society*.² The SVU's work on conflict-related sexual violence focused particularly on improving sensitivity *within* the UN mission and on acting preventively rather than reactively to this type of violence. The unit had several times conducted trainings for the senior leadership of peacekeepers in order to sensitize them to what conflict-related sexual violence means, how to prevent incidents (e.g. by patrolling areas where there are water posts) and how to respond to cases of sexual violence once they have occurred (e.g. ethical reporting and medical assistance in equipped local structures). One of the goals of the team based in Bukavu was to ensure that dealing with conflict-related sexual violence became an integral part of the UN mission's overall work on the protection of civilians.

2 In conversation with Sexual Violence Unit, Bukavu, DRC, 7 October 2013.

However, the work of the SVU should not be confused with the overall gender mainstreaming work and the integration of gender perspectives in the UN mission and in reconstruction efforts in the DRC. Sexual violence represents an important but arguably a limited focus on "gender issues." Gender perspectives should include, for instance, how institutions (army, police, etc.) are informed by gender relations in society and in turn how these relations facilitate or obstruct wanted outcomes.³ Greater awareness of gender relations in the local context as well as within the mission is central for achieving goals such as protecting civilians and restoring state authority.

Speaking to whom? Local–international levels of response, and concluding remarks

A recurrent theme during field visits to DRC has been the problem of having a mission headquarters located far away (in Kinshasa) from the areas affected by conflict. While the headquarters respond to the Security Council and other central UN authorities in New York, the actual mission implementation takes place at provincial level. This entails that the provincial levels need to respond to the requirements of Kinshasa and then in turn New York. A common criticism of international responses such as those led by the UN has been the lack of context-specificity and adaption to local understandings and needs.⁴ This criticism grows partly out of the communication problems on context specificities at the mission level versus requirements at the international levels, in addition to other problems such as standardized interpretations of what 'peace-building' is, and what constitute key authorities and institutions.

One MONUSCO staff member argued the need to "push to the field," meaning that MONUSCO must answer to the Congolese people, and not the Kinshasa office and then further out to New York. The improved liaison work made possible through the CLAs, creating Community Protection Plans specific to the area and with patrols through the JPTs, are indeed important steps for public outreach.

During the researcher's field visit (September–October 2013), it was decided that mission headquarters would be moved from Kinshasa to the eastern provincial capitals of Goma and Bukavu. One possible negative aspect of such a move could be that senior

3 IM.E. Baaz and M. Stern, "Fearless Fighters and Submissive Wives: Negotiating Identity among Women Soldiers in the Congo (DRC)," *Armed Forces & Society*, pp. 1–29, at p. 3.

4 See O.J. Sending (2009) "Why Peacebuilders Fail to Secure Ownership and be Sensitive to Context", Oslo: NUPI, and S. Autesserre (2010) *The Trouble with the Congo: Local Violence and the Failure of International Peacebuilding*, Cambridge University Press.

mission staff would no longer be in immediate proximity to the central government, thus making work on high-level political matters and negotiating terms to improve protection and rebuild state authority more difficult. On the other hand, it will enable the senior leadership to witness more closely the day-to-day difficulties as well as context specificities that might improve responses.

MONUSCO's peacekeeping innovations examined in this policy brief – the CLAs, CANs and JPTs – are important elements in a more local and context-specific approach to communities facing enormous security challenges. In essence, the CLAs provide 'the missing link' between peacekeepers and local communities in the sense that they are Congolese themselves with excellent skills in communication to work with both international staff and the vulnerable population. However, it is essential for the work of CLAs, the CANs and the JPTs to take gender relations into account, both within the UN Mission as well as in the local context where the peacekeepers operate. Two recommendations follow:

- At the South Kivu mission level seen from the researcher's perspective; MONUSCO lacks sufficient senior leadership on pushing for gender perspectives across all UN sections. If the views within an institution are limited to understanding gender perspectives as "also women", the mission mandate – protection of civilians and support to state restoration – will be less successful as it will fail to see how gender relations facilitate and obstruct wanted outcomes.
- At the local level, there is a need to challenge what the masculine and feminine roles are in Congolese societies. Congolese men need to be engaged in what is today considered 'feminine tasks' – fetching water and charcoal, go to markets, harvest etc. – in order to tackle some of the security risks that women and youth face during the day.



About the Author

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