Community Liaison Assistants: a bridge between peacekeepers and local populations

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Community Liaison Assistants may be UN peacekeeping's most effective instrument for community engagement, with the potential to play a critical role in the protection of civilians. However, their effectiveness is curtailed by the lack of a comprehensive vision, hesitant military responses and cumbersome administrative structures.

The protection of civilians has become a central tenet of United Nations (UN) peacekeeping. Most peacekeeping missions are now mandated to support host authorities in various forms but are also required to take unilateral action should the host government be unable or unwilling to protect civilians under threat of physical violence. It has become increasingly clear that, to be able to do this, peacekeepers require greater local understanding and consideration for existing protection mechanisms.

UN Peacekeeping[1] has long struggled to engage with local communities in their own protection. The focus of international interventions has typically been on political processes at the macro level and the implementation of mandated milestones, such as supporting and enabling peace agreements to be signed and elections to be held. Accordingly, most of the civilian staff of UN peacekeeping missions are based in the capitals and regional centres. While support to these processes is important for the creation of an environment conducive to the protection of civilians, the actual protection work of UN peacekeepers happens at the local level. The UN's military contingents, known as 'Blue Helmets', are deployed in many remote locations and often do not speak the local language. Rapid rotations do not not leave them enough time to become knowledgeable about the history and socio-political elements of local conflicts.

This disconnect has considerably reduced the effectiveness of protection efforts. Communities that are sidelined – however unintentionally – by peacekeeping missions tend to perceive this behaviour as arrogant and demeaning and often react with various forms of resistance. In addition, the peacekeeping mission might be so disengaged from them that local populations do not understand their complex mandate and their considerable practical limitations. Instead, they see numerous white landcruisers, armoured vehicles and helicopters, and come to develop unrealistic expectations that can alter their perceptions of security and thus further endanger them.

In return, peacekeepers – who do not fully understand local conflict dynamics – tend not to recognise warning signs and therefore have experienced difficulties intervening in a timely manner. In the most dramatic cases, this has led to the failure of UN peacekeepers to prevent extreme violence against local communities. One such incident was the Kiwanja Massacre in 2008 in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), where 150 civilians were killed less than a mile away from a UN base. The failure of the peacekeepers to take action triggered harsh criticism but also spurred the development of a major innovation.

Towards better community liaison

After careful analysis of the massacre, the Civil Affairs Section of MONUSCO (the UN peacekeeping mission in DRC) convinced the mission leadership that more local knowledge and understanding were needed in order to prevent similar incidents in the future. It was decided that rather than just hiring more interpreters, peacekeepers should be provided with a resource that could take on a more comprehensive role through engaging with local communities. A new instrument was created – the Community Liaison Assistant (CLA).

MONUSCO/Sylvain Liechti

Community Liaison Assistant with MONUSCO.

CLAs are national staff who act as an interface between the peacekeeping mission, local authorities and populations. They are deployed directly with uniformed peacekeepers on the ground, where they help commanders to understand the needs of the local population and to plan adequate responses to threats faced by those communities. They also manage MONUSCO's early warning system by establishing radio networks, widely distributing emergency telephone numbers and providing telephones and credit to key contacts. This system enables communities in remote areas to alert MONUSCO and by extension national security forces to respond to immediate threats. In addition to passing on alerts, CLAs provide all sections of the mission with alerts, background information and analysis from the field through daily, weekly and flash reports.

At the same time, CLAs disseminate messages from the mission to the population and help manage the local population's expectations. Their outreach activities and two-way communication have helped to build confidence in political processes and the involvement of international actors. Finally, CLAs' local expertise and grassroots networks make them ideal facilitators for field visits by peacekeeping personnel and allow them to implement a variety of protection-relevant activities.

Alongside a growing recognition that focusing more attention on communities' own protection strategies is more effective and cost-efficient than interventions that are entirely based on the perceptions and priorities of outsiders, CLAs have been increasingly tasked to work with communities to increase their alertness and responsiveness to threats. CLAs support communities to establish Community Protection Committees where the local population, civil society and traditional authorities can come together to discuss threats, mitigate conflicts and develop solutions.

Besides building the capacities of these committees through providing training and working closely with them, CLAs also help the committees to spell out their protection strategies in Community Protection Plans. Through working on these plans, communities can reflect on protection threats and develop mitigation strategies that can be subsequently shared with the peacekeeping forces in order to inform their interventions.[2] There have been some teething problems with these committees and questions remain as to whether peacekeeping missions are the best qualified for engaging local communities, or if this could be done better through coordinating with other organisations already working in this domain; however, within the existing framework the initiative seems to be fruitful.

Mainstreaming the instrument

Given the effectiveness of the CLAs in DRC, the initiative gained wider recognition and has recently been adopted by three other major peacekeeping missions as a way for them to better engage with communities and involve them in their own protection. With the guidance of the original developers from MONUSCO's Civil Affairs section, UNMISS (South Sudan), MINUSMA (Mali) and MINUSCA (Central African Republic) have all recruited CLAs, and there are now 280 CLAs deployed in the field.

The vast majority of these CLAs are employed by MONUSCO. One reason for this is that the 'younger' missions are still in the process of scaling up to at least two CLAs per peacekeeping base, which entails complex and sometimes unsuccessful negotiations about budget allocations. Another reason is that because of varying operational contexts, missions have adapted the instrument and applied different visions for the CLAs. UNMISS, for instance, decided to not deploy CLAs with Blue Helmets on peacekeeping bases but have them work as normal civilian staff with the heads of regional offices. A recent evaluation found that this has diluted CLA's defining feature and thereby compromised their ability to function as civil-military coordinators in the field.[3] However, with the outbreak of major hostilities in 2013 and their resumption in July 2016, UNMISS has been in crisis mode and therefore unable to optimise its use of CLAs. Likewise, the logistical and security conditions in Mali have limited the requirement for CLAs.

Despite these differences, comparison across contexts indicates that some challenges are inherent to the instrument. By the very nature of their deployment, CLAs live under difficult and potentially dangerous conditions, with limited office support, restricted mobility, and often only intermittent access to the telephone network and the internet. These challenges make regular reporting, management and rotation difficult. In addition, CLAs have to balance a number of dilemmas connected to their double role as insiders and outsiders. For instance, they are an integral component of the peacekeeping forces but also have to negotiate their own security with other armed actors, including for when the mission withdraws. Furthermore, CLAs have to build close relationships with the community yet avoid bias and breaches of confidentiality. However, while these aspects are indeed challenging, research suggests that the most pressing issues are not directly rooted in the CLAs themselves but rather in how the CLAs are used and empowered.

Ways forward

It has become evident across missions that CLAs are not a strategy in themselves and can only be as good as the administrative structures and resources dedicated to their support. The task of managing a large number of national staff in remote locations is enormous. The relative rigidity of the UN's administrative regulations makes it difficult to deploy CLAs flexibly according to needs in the field. In addition, the various types of information that CLAs provide need to be analysed, referred and reacted to.

Despite these demands (and in the context of having to hire a large number of staff exceptionally quickly), missions did not receive a corresponding increase in their managerial capacity. MONUSCO adapted relatively quickly by dedicating a couple of CLAs and some international UN Volunteers in the regional offices to manage CLAs deployed in the field – a practice that has been replicated by the other missions but may not be the best solution in the long term. International staff should spend more time in the field with CLAs, for instance through rotating in and out of field offices. In addition, UN headquarters has been asked to establish a new staff category for the CLAs in order to allow for more flexible deployment.

Furthermore, the CLAs' effectiveness depends on the willingness of the UN's military contingents to react to threats against civilians. If local populations feel that peacekeepers are not taking enough action, their confidence in the CLAs also diminishes. The lack of decisive action to protect communities by some troop-contributing countries at best renders CLAs ineffective and at worst puts them in danger, as armed groups come to see them as informants without power.

In response, peacekeeping missions are working towards integrating CLA reports and alarms into an integrated reporting system and databases, so that analysis and information sharing are done more systematically and reacting to alerts becomes much less a question of subjective interpretation by national contingents. Instead of a discussion between a given CLA and their respective commander on the local level or between different levels of the military contingent's hierarchy – both have often led to considerable delays in response – CLA reports will feed directly into a centralised mission-wide report and response structure. In this way, CLA alerts would be treated systematically and transparently, increasing the pressure on troop-contributing countries to take action while avoiding personal conflicts between the CLAs and their respective commanders.

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1. www.un.org/en/peacekeeping

2. See also MONUSCO *CLA Best Practice Review 2014* http://bit.ly/MONUSCO-CLA-Review-2014

3. For more details on the mainstreaming of CLAs see forthcoming evaluation by DPKO/DFS Policy and Best Practice section entitled *Survey or Practice: Community Liaison Assistants in United Nations Peacekeeping Operations*.