

Community Perceptions as a Priority in Protection and Peacekeeping

By Alison Giffen

Perceptions influence judgment, decision-making and action. They inform an individual's decision to flee from or submit to violence, to denounce a perpetrator despite risk of retaliation, or to take justice into their own hands. The perceptions of conflict-affected communities are among the most important factors that peacekeeping operations and other external protection actors should consider when planning and conducting interventions to protect civilians from deliberate violence.

This is the second in a series of briefs resulting from Engaging Community Voices in Protection Strategies, a three-year initiative of the Stimson Center's Civilians in Conflict project. The initiative seeks to protect civilians under threat by ensuring that conflict-affected communities are engaged safely and effectively

in external protection strategies. The initiative's outcomes are the result of research conducted with civil society partners and conflict-affected communities in the eastern region of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) in April 2012 and in South Sudan in May 2013, along with intensive desk research.

These briefs address knowledge gaps that undermine strategies to protect civilians. **The first brief** focuses on how to support community self-protection strategies. This brief focuses on why and how perceptions of conflict-affected communities are critical to the success of external protection strategies.

TAKEAWAYS FOR POLICYMAKERS AND PRACTITIONERS

The following recommendations depend on UN member states' providing adequate, predictable and sustained funding for UN protection of civilians personnel and initiatives at headquarters and in the field. This investment is critical to enable the safe and effective engagement of the communities that peacekeepers are mandated to protect.

- UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO) and Department of Field Support (DFS) should develop basic principles and standards for the collection, management and sharing of sensitive protection data gathered from conflict-affected communities. Each mission should adapt these principles and develop guidance (standard operating procedures) on protection information management specific to its context.
- A number of UN personnel in the field and their counterparts in UN headquarters undertake a range of innovative efforts to tackle the issues and knowledge gaps discussed in this issue brief. These should be captured and reviewed to identify lessons learned.
- UN DPKO and DFS should develop general guidance to help peacekeeping operations understand how to leverage and integrate community perceptions effectively within existing internal planning processes, coordination mechanisms and decision-making chains.¹
- UN peacekeeping operations, when planning protection interventions, should consider and plan to prevent or mitigate the potential negative impact of their activities. Perceptions of conflict-affected communities are key to assessing the impact of interventions.
- UN DPKO and DFS should commission case study research on how community perceptions of peacekeepers and other security and protection actors have influenced the success of peacekeeping operation activities that seek to protect civilians.
- UN DPKO and DFS should recruit personnel with technical and subject-matter expertise who can safely and effectively gather, analyze and integrate protection-related data including perception data into peacekeeping planning and evaluation.

These recommendations are focused on the protection of civilians in UN peacekeeping but may have relevance for other bilateral and multilateral efforts to prevent and mitigate violence against civilians, including its most serious form — mass atrocities.

¹ UN DPKO and DFS have drafted a forthcoming report on understanding and integrating local perceptions in multidimensional UN peacekeeping that may catalyze the development of guidance. While the report deals with a broad range of issues related to perceptions, it includes a section on perceptions and the protection of civilians.

Introduction

“It is war that lives here with us.” — a woman in Beni territory

There is growing awareness that perceptions held by local populations are critical to conflict prevention and peace building, including in the context of UN peacekeeping.² However, there is very little understanding of or guidance on what kinds of perceptions are important for the planning, implementation and evaluation of protection interventions and how that information could be analyzed and operationalized. This brief explores these issues and provides recommendations on steps that policymakers and practitioners could take to address this knowledge gap. Specifically, the brief discusses:

- Why conflict-affected communities’ perceptions should be considered a priority in data collection;
- How conflict-affected communities’ perceptions can inform strategies to reduce risks of violence against civilians; and
- Which obstacles to and limitations of understanding conflict-affected communities’ perceptions could be overcome and deserve further attention.

Prioritizing Community Perceptions in Protection

“It can be extraordinarily difficult ... to gather accurate information about the number and identity of people who are killed and injured. Even in the best of circumstances it is difficult to establish accurate, reliable numbers about complex social phenomena. Violent conflicts often pose conditions that are rife with technical challenges and political controversies between antagonists who want the ‘facts’ to support their political, legal or social claims.” (Seybolt, Aronson and Fischhoff 2013, 3).

In this Issue Brief, the term “perceptions” is defined as individuals’ and communities’ feelings, expectations, understandings and interpretations of events, contexts and dynamics. Because perceptions are subjective information, they are often dismissed or given a low priority in analysis and planning in favor of data that are deemed objective, such as the number of injuries reported or the number of threats issued by a potential perpetrator. External actors may be more inclined to place a greater emphasis on collecting and analyzing “objective” data because they seem (often incorrectly) more accurate, relevant or valid. Peacekeeping operation personnel have echoed this bias toward the need for “hard” or “objective” data.

² For example, the UN DPKO and DFS have drafted a forthcoming report on understanding and integrating local perceptions in multidimensional UN peacekeeping. Since 2005, UN peacekeeping operations have undertaken or commissioned perception surveys in at least six contexts: the Democratic Republic of Congo, Haiti, Lebanon, Liberia, Sierra Leone and Somalia. See Khalil (2012) and Mallett (2012) for additional information on the use of perception surveys in conflict contexts.

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These distinctions between objective and subjective data are misleading. Factors that are considered objective almost always have a subjective element to them. For example, “objective” data collected by external actors often rely on self-reported accounts of injuries. Individuals and communities experience violence in different ways, which influences what they report and how they report it. “Self-reported answers are highly subjective and will likely introduce biases. In situations as intense as conflict, respondents may construct a narrative after the fact that gives disproportionate weight to extraordinary and memorable experiences” (Brück, Justino, Verwimp and Tedesco 2013, 17).

Objective data drawn from a community are also influenced by who is gathering the information. The number of injuries counted may depend on who is doing the counting, who is included in the count and what the counters consider an injury; the number of threats issued by a potential perpetrator may depend on who is deemed a perpetrator and what is considered a threat. This is often because of the different principles, mandates, objectives and professional standards governing diverse actors and organizations working toward complementary goals.

In fact, community perceptions may be the most important variable in determining the outcome of a peacekeeping intervention to protect because it is the communities’ perceptions of the facts, not any “objective” statement of the facts, that influence the communities’ behavior. Accordingly, peacekeeping operations should collect data from a variety of sources, using different methodologies to allow for triangulation of data, bearing in mind that there will be a subjective element to virtually all data they collect. These data should include the perceptions of conflict-affected communities. Methodologies for gathering this information will be explored in a forthcoming report of Stimson’s Civilians in Conflict project.

How community perceptions can help peacekeeping operations achieve protection objectives

“Perceptions influence the way we understand and resolve conflicts. As Talentino states, ‘perceptions shape both the menu of choices available and the likely selection from that menu.’ Local and international peacebuilding actors often do not share the same perspective of the meaning of conflict and peace. On the contrary, different perspectives meet and interact and ‘international and domestic actors enter into a bargaining relationship whereby each actor attempts to promote its own values, norms and practices’ ” (Hellmüller 2013, 219).

The perceptions of communities under threat of physical violence are critical to effective assessment, analysis and planning of interventions because they contribute to a more accurate understanding of the local drivers of violence against civilians and potential responses. Absent the perspectives of a broad cross-section of conflict-affected communities, including the most vulnerable members of those communities, the spectrum of possible external responses to violence against civilians risks being disconnected from conflict dynamics.

For example, conflict-affected community perceptions can contribute to a better understanding of the interrelated nature of local factors to subnational, national and regional conflicts. Such knowledge is critical to preventing and mitigating violence as local-level grievances can be manipulated and exploited by actors to fuel larger-scale violence against civilians. Even in the absence of external manipulation, local violence can quickly escalate into much broader protection crises.

A number of studies assert that peacekeeping operations have failed to address the link between local conflict and strategic priorities. These studies suggest that peacekeeping operations have focused primarily on macro-level conflict analysis and solutions informed by external perspectives (Hellmüller 2013; Autesserre 2010) to the detriment of strategic goals. Preventing and mitigating violence against civilians is a strategic objective of a peacekeeping operation and critical to an operation's ability to achieve its other peacebuilding goals (Holt, Taylor and Kelly 2009, 23).

Peacekeeping operations engage with local leaders and undertake micro- or local-level analysis through their civil affairs section or other civilian and military components. However, this engagement is not systematic and there are a number of challenges to ensuring the right information is gathered and incorporated into planning from the local level to the highest levels of UN decision-making.

For example, the ability of peacekeeping personnel to engage effectively with communities is often constrained by a diverse range of security, human resource and logistical obstacles. When personnel are able to engage with communities, they may not know what protection indicators or information to look for that can enable operational planning and decision-making related to protection.

As important, peacekeeping operations often lack sufficient capabilities to communicate protection information and analysis safely, effectively and efficiently across the various components of a multidimensional peacekeeping operation and up the decision-making chain. The mechanisms established at mission headquarters to inform decision-making (e.g., the Joint Mission Analysis Cell) may not be tasked with including these indicators in their priority information requirements. Operational planners may not understand how to integrate these local-level indicators and analysis into planning at every level. Higher-level decision-makers may not recognize the relevance of local-level analysis of protection indicators to their strategic goals and vision.

The following sections explore how local perceptions could inform and improve peacekeeping operation strategies to protect.



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The Role of Perceptions in Protection Planning

To begin to understand how perceptions can be integrated into protection planning, it is important to outline the objective of protecting civilians, which is to reduce the risk of violence to the civilian population. The risk to vulnerable civilians comprises three components: the threat to civilians, the vulnerability of civilians and the potential negative impact or harm that an external intervention could have on the vulnerable population.³

As such, external interventions can and should aim to protect civilians in three ways:

- Terminate or minimize the threat;
- Decrease the vulnerability of the targeted population; and
- Track, analyze (to inform prevention and mitigation tactics) and respond appropriately to any harm that the external intervention to protect may cause in the short- and medium-term.⁴

³ UN DPKO/DFS guidance and training uses the following conceptual formula to express risk: protection of civilians risk = threat (intentions and capabilities of the perpetrator) x vulnerability (of the targets). This formula does not include the potential negative impacts of the intervention.

⁴ For more information on the importance of tracking and responding to civilian harm, see Center for Civilians in Conflict (2013). Although the Center for Civilians in Conflict focuses primarily on warring parties in a conflict, the principles of tracking and responding to negative consequences of actions is relevant and important to third-party political, military and civilian actors intervening to protect civilians.

DEFINING VIOLENCE AGAINST CIVILIANS

In this brief, violence against civilians refers to deliberate, targeted physical violence. This includes a spectrum from low-level violence that has the potential to escalate to situations of systematic or widespread abuses. This broad approach acknowledges that campaigns of targeted violence may harm only a few civilians in any one incident, but cumulatively may exact a large toll on a community and sow widespread terror. The more extreme end of the spectrum includes large-scale forced displacement, widespread sexual violence and mass killing.⁵ This range of deliberate violence has also been referred to as “strategic violence” because it is often employed to further “political, economic, religious or military ends.”⁶

⁵ Adapted from Kelly (2011), 8.

⁶ Strategic violence is described as: “Violence targeted at specific individuals or communities to further the strategic aims of the perpetrators. This can include (but is not limited to) the targeting of ethnic, racial, sexual, religious or political groups, specific communities or people from particular geographic regions. It is designed to further political, economic, religious or military ends.” (UN DPKO ITS/DPET 2011, 10).

“The FDLR pillage to survive. They have emptied their food supplies and the livestock in the areas where they live, now they pillage almost everywhere. For the rapes, it is just to destroy our society, our families, especially the men.”

— A farmer and chief in Kabare territory

Strategies to accomplish each of these objectives will be affected by communities’ perceptions of the threats they face, their vulnerabilities and the security context in which they operate (including perceptions of the peacekeeping operation and other protection actors). As such, planners should attempt to understand and integrate those perceptions into planning.

How Perceptions Can Inform Strategies to Reduce Threats

“The FDLR pillage to survive. They have emptied their food supplies and the livestock in the areas where they live, now they pillage almost everywhere. For the rapes, it is just to destroy our society, our families, especially the men. The torture is committed to get money. In general, torture is committed to force the people to accept that they must give money even if they don’t have any. Even one who does not have anything agrees to give what he has under the effects of torture.” —A farmer and chief in Kabare territory

A threat includes the potential for violence and/or violence that is already occurring. Effective planning to reduce a threat requires the analysis of a number of factors. First the perpetrator of the threat must be identified. As discussed in *Civilians in Conflict Issue Brief 1*, the categorization of people as protectors, perpetrators, victims, witnesses or enablers depends on the threat and the context. “A perpetrator may be vulnerable to another perpetrator. Victims may try to avoid provoking perpetrators by providing them with material support. Communities exchanging reprisal attacks as part of a long-standing dispute may be both victims and perpetrators” (Gorur 2013, 4).

THE CONFLICT IN THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO

Despite the signing of peace agreements in the Democratic Republic of the Congo in 2002, communities in the eastern provinces of the country continue to face a wide variety of threats. The DRC has experienced decades of conflict between and among Congolese government forces, local armed groups with varying levels of organization and state and non-state armed actors from other countries. Eastern DRC is now dominated by a large number of rebel groups, some indigenous to the DRC and some originating from neighboring countries, with a variety of political, financial and ethnic goals and allegiances.

The conflict is perhaps best understood as a series of linked and interactive conflicts at the local, subnational, national and regional levels. Local-level conflicts feed into subnational and national conflicts as Congolese armed groups grow in size to control larger territories, form alliances against common enemies or make political or military challenges to the Congolese government. When armed groups are affiliated in some way with other countries in the region, they may feed into regional conflicts. Actors at the regional and national levels may manipulate subnational and local conflicts to further their agendas.

At the local level, threats may be perpetrated by civilian individuals or communities (such as conflicts between host populations and returnees over land, or illegal taxes imposed by a traditional village chief). In addition, there are a number of armed actors perpetrating violence against civilians. These include, but are not limited to:

STATE SECURITY ACTORS

- Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (FARDC)
- Congolese National Police (PNC)
- National Intelligence Agency (ANR)

NON-STATE ARMED ACTORS

- Allied Democratic Forces-National Army for the Liberation of Uganda (ADF NALU)
- Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR)
- Lord's Resistance Army (LRA)
- Mai Mai militias (organized militias, e.g., Mai Mai Kata Katanga, that range from local groups to larger conglomerations)
- Raia Mutomboki
- 23 March Movement (M23)
- Other diverse and evolving militias and local defense groups.⁷

⁷ For additional information on armed actors in the DRC, see Agence France-Presse (2013).

Second, protection planners need a deep understanding of the motivations, objectives, capacities and tactics of the perpetrator. Interventions that may deter one perpetrator from committing violence against civilians may not work on others.⁸ Some perpetrators may exact violence against civilians for economic gains, to subsist or to create social cohesion within their ranks; others may employ it to control populations for political and military gains; and still others may use violence because they view a specific group of people or armed actors as a threat to their existence. Perpetrators may have multiple motivations and these motivations are often dynamic and likely will vary within a group.

As such, each intervention should be tailored to each threat and perpetrator in a specific context and revised as the situation evolves.⁹ Communities under threat can often provide first-hand information on motivations, objectives, capacities and tactics. Moreover, it may be difficult for peacekeeping operations to elicit this information directly from other actors. For example, peacekeeping operation personnel are often unable to engage directly with perpetrators to gather this information because perpetrators seek to hide the abuses they commit, the perpetrators are non-state armed actors viewed as “illegal” and therefore engagement can create political tension with the host state government¹⁰ and/or because security concerns and protocols constrain peacekeeper access.

The information that community members provide about who is perpetrating the threat and the perpetrators’ motivations, objectives, capacities and tactics of perpetrators are perceptions. For example, some community members who experience an abuse perpetrated by men wearing the uniform of state security forces may report that the men were members of the government forces while others may report that they were non-state armed actors who defected or appropriated uniforms from the state armed forces. Similarly, certain members of the community may be subject to abuses that they may report as the primary tactic of a perpetrator, while others who are not targeted in the same way may report different tactics. Perceptions of motivations also vary.

A concrete example from the DRC research illustrates how perceptions of perpetrators can differ. In one community in Irumu territory, four focus groups and one interviewee identified land conflicts as one of the most important threats facing the community. According to research participants, the land conflicts occurred after members of the community belonging to the Lendu ethnic group fled the village and displaced persons from the Hema ethnic group arrived in the village and claimed land there. Once the Lendu returned, they disputed Hema claims over the land. One focus group identified the Lendu returnees as the perpetrator, two focus groups and the interviewee identified the displaced Hema as the perpetrator, and one focus group identified both the Lendu and the Hema as perpetrators of the land conflicts.

⁸ In this brief the concept of deterrence is defined as follows, “Deterrence is based on a threat to punish an actor if it behaves in certain ways – ‘to stop open aggression before it starts.’ For deterrence to work, the commitment to follow through on the threat must be credible in the eyes of the targeted actor, and the threatened costs must exceed the target’s expected payoffs.” (Kelly and Giffen 2011, 27).

⁹ For a more detailed discussion of motivations and the logic behind strategic violence, see Kelly (2011, 19).

¹⁰ See Giffen (2010) for a discussion of the challenges of balancing tensions and trade-offs between protection of civilians and state- or peacebuilding mandates.

Protection planners need a deep understanding of the motivations, objectives, capacities and tactics of the perpetrator.

The FARDC was reported as increasing insecurity and committing rapes in a location to undermine the ADF NALU.

Each perception reported can offer valuable information that can and should be triangulated with other data to piece together a comprehensive understanding of the threat. The views of diverse members of a community should be sought. For example, victims of rape may perceive that perpetrators are using sexual violence as a way to destroy the social fabric of the community. This information should be triangulated with other sources of information, ideally the perpetrators. Given constraints on engaging perpetrators directly, ex-combatants within the community may be able to shed light on whether a group is using violence, such as gang rape, for other purposes, such as to initiate combatants into an armed group, create cohesion and/or stigmatize the combatants so that they are less likely to defect or demobilize with the intention of rejoining communities as civilians.¹¹ There may be multiple motivations for the use of sexual violence, but the peacekeeping operation needs to understand these to develop appropriate responses.

Participants in the DRC research named a number of perpetrators of violence associated with threats. Perpetrators included the following (listed in alphabetical order, not according to frequency of responses): ADF NALU, FARDC, FDLR, LRA, different Mai Mai groups, PNC, Raia Mutomboki and other militias and local defense groups. The research participants reported specific motivations and provided insight on the capacity of these perpetrators.

A number of motivations relayed by participants were related to resources and survival. In nine of the 15 villages included in the research, the FARDC was reported to use some combination of compulsory tolls, armed robbery, extortion and pillage because they were not receiving salaries and/or needed the resources to survive. Other non-state perpetrators were said to impose illegal taxes, commit armed robbery and pillage for subsistence and survival.

Perpetrators were also identified as using certain forms of violence to destroy communities. In two villages, the FDLR was cited as pillaging and/or raping to destroy the population. In another location, violence was used to settle scores or used in ethnic-based conflicts.

Other non-state armed actors perpetrate violence as a tactic in their insurgency against state actors. Participants in one community reported that the ADF NALU limited access to fields because they were suspicious of civilians spying on them on behalf of the FARDC. The FDLR was identified as killing community members in revenge for suspected support of the FARDC. The FARDC was reported as increasing insecurity and committing rapes in a location to undermine the ADF NALU. The FARDC was also said to impose tolls on people suspected of Mai Mai connections.

Conflict contexts are often characterized by multiple threats, and are carried out by different means, by diverse perpetrators with different motivations. Peacekeeping operations need to analyze these factors in order to determine what could deter a

¹¹ For additional detail on motivations of armed actors to use violence to develop internal cohesion, see Cohen (2013).

perpetrator from employing violence or compel them to stop, whether the peacekeeping operation has the appropriate capabilities to accomplish this and whether and how to apply those capabilities.

How Perceptions Can Inform Strategies to Mitigate Vulnerability

Similar to the identification of threats, local perceptions are critical to analyzing vulnerabilities. Vulnerable populations in conflict are often defined in terms of legally recognized protected groups such as women and children or others who may have fewer resources or less resilience to flee or recover from violence such as the elderly and the disabled. It is important to consider how violence is affecting these groups in the course of assessments, planning, conducting operations and evaluation. However, it is as important — if not more important — for protection planners to understand and consider who is most targeted for specific threats and why.

To try to capture these different aspects of vulnerability, participants in the DRC research were asked to identify which groups were most targeted for specific threats as well as who else suffered as a result of that targeting. Responses indicated different reasons why groups may be vulnerable to specific threats: because they are deliberately targeted by the perpetrators (e.g., boys who are targeted for forced conscription), because they are more exposed to the threat (e.g., women farmers going to tend their crops in distant fields), or because they suffer greater consequences due to cultural dynamics or their socioeconomic status (e.g., widows who lack a support network or means of livelihood).

A more comprehensive understanding of community vulnerabilities can enable planners to determine how best to minimize those vulnerabilities. For example, a community might report that it is experiencing looting from armed actors based some distance away. Wealthy merchants in the town are targeted most but the entire community is affected by the violence. A displaced population lives clustered on the outskirts of the village and has a tense relationship with the host population. The host community has developed an early warning system, blowing whistles to warn of any impending raid. However, the sound of the whistles does not reach the area where the displaced population lives, and as a result the displaced population is particularly vulnerable to the violence.

In this scenario, a peacekeeping operation could mitigate the displaced population's vulnerability by encouraging community security meetings that include and build trust between the host community and the displaced persons and involve the displaced population in the collective self-protection measures. Peacekeepers could also provide equipment to improve the community's early warning system to reach the displaced population.

“The men walk more in the village and they are the ones who are the most likely to be caught.”

— A woman in Kabare territory who identified men as the primary targets for forced labor.

A challenge that peacekeeping staff often cite as a hindrance to assessing vulnerability is that communities may identify their primary vulnerability as a lack of jobs or access to clean water or medical care. While this information is important for understanding vulnerabilities and working with UN agency and other humanitarian and development partners, a peacekeeping operation is not the appropriate actor to address and mitigate these vulnerabilities directly in the majority of cases. As discussed above, asking conflict-affected communities about who is most targeted for specific threats, who else suffers most as a result of the threats and why, may help elicit information that is more appropriate for a peacekeeping operation's political, civilian and military planning to prevent such targeted physical violence.

THE UNITED NATIONS STABILIZATION MISSION IN THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO

In 1999, the United Nations authorized a peacekeeping operation in the DRC (the United Nations Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, or MONUC) with a mandate to protect civilians under imminent threat of physical violence. In 2010, the UN Security Council renamed this peacekeeping operation the United Nations Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) and augmented its mandate to include explicit support for the Congolese armed forces and stabilization efforts, in addition to its mandate to protect civilians (UNSC Res 1925 2010).

In the most recent phase of the armed conflict, the rebel group M23 emerged to take control of large areas of North Kivu. The group committed serious abuses against civilians including killings, rapes and the recruitment of child soldiers. Because M23 has received support including arms, intelligence and political advice from the Rwandan government, as well as supplementary support by the Ugandan government, its rise has threatened the stability not just of the DRC but of the Great Lakes region (UN Group of Experts 2012).

In November 2012, M23 sparked a major crisis when it temporarily took control of the city of Goma, capital of North Kivu. A regional conference held after the takeover led to the deployment of a United Nations "intervention brigade," an element of MONUSCO with the unprecedented mandate to "neutralize" rebel groups (UNSC Res 2098, 2013, 12(b)). The introduction of this intervention brigade could have serious implications for conflict dynamics in eastern DRC and for MONUSCO's ability to protect civilians.

How Perceptions Can Inform Assessments of the Potential Negative Consequences of Protection Interventions

There are obvious risks that peacekeeping operations should consider when planning a protection intervention. A common concern of human rights and humanitarian organizations is that peacekeeping military activities could result in immediate civilian harm or displacement. Another concern is that activities undertaken by civilian components could cause harm inadvertently. For example, in areas of eastern DRC, ethnic tensions have been a major driver of conflict and violence. In the course of developing the methodology for the DRC research, civil society partners relayed that community engagement that appeared to gather information about security and violence against civilians from one ethnic group but not another could exacerbate tensions in the community.

Other primary and secondary effects of an intervention may be less understood and depend, in part, on a community's perceptions of the peacekeeping operation. One of the factors that peacekeeping operations should consider when assessing the risk of negative impact is how a peacekeeping operation's presence and activities will interact with community self-protection strategies.¹²

As discussed in *Civilians in Conflict Issue Brief 1*, conflict-affected communities are not passive bystanders. They may have developed self-protection strategies before a peacekeeping operation entered the area. These strategies include submission, cooperation, forming local defense groups, accompaniment, conflict resolution, flight, advocacy and more (Gorur 2013, 4). How a community perceives a peacekeeping operation could influence their self-protection strategies with positive or negative consequences.

For example, in a hypothetical village, the civilian and military components of a peacekeeping base might decide to try to break the cycle of violent rebel groups extorting money from a community and the community from submitting to their demands. The military component decides to undertake daytime patrols to try to deter the rebel groups from interacting with the population. The civilian component of the base reaches out to community leaders to coordinate patrols (e.g., traveling to farms at the same time as patrols). The civilian staff makes the case that this will help prevent exposure to and reprisals from the armed rebels.

However, in this scenario, community members have very negative opinions of and don't trust the uniformed peacekeepers because a previous company conducted patrols irregularly. In addition, civilian staff and translators weren't deployed alongside the previous company. As a result, the military component didn't understand when the community preferred patrols and wasn't able to convey when patrols weren't possible because of logistical issues or resource constraints. The community refuses to travel

¹² Peacekeeping operations should attempt to ascertain how their intervention will affect self-protection strategies so that a plan is in place from the beginning to prevent and mitigate harm. One way to do this is by creating a mechanism to track, analyze and respond appropriately to the potential negative consequences of peacekeeping actions. This would be difficult to accomplish without understanding civilian perceptions of the peacekeeping operation.

“Insecurity will persist; security will be less good if MONUSCO leaves.”

“On 17 May 2011, houses were burned down after their departure.”

—Male research participants in the Lubero territory

with the new patrols and continues to submit to the rebels. At the same time, the rebels employ increasingly violent tactics to extort money and discourage community members from coordinating with the peacekeepers.

Some of the participants in the DRC research communicated very negative perceptions of peacekeepers in their area. Even if the perceptions are based on rumor, misinformation or even fabrications, they indicate negative feelings in relation to MONUSCO that could affect their behavior in relation to MONUSCO interventions and, as a result, the success of MONUSCO’s interventions.

Positive perceptions and expectations of peacekeeping operations can also create risks to communities under threat.¹³ Some participants were aware that MONUSCO had a role in protection and wanted them to do more. Some also felt that the situation would worsen if MONUSCO left. These types of expectations could put communities at risk if they are relying on MONUSCO to play a role in prevention and protection that MONUSCO cannot fulfill. An oft-cited example, and one mentioned by a research participant, is that civilians expect that they can flee to MONUSCO bases for protection in a crisis. This expectation can exist even if community members have generally negative perceptions of the peacekeeping operation’s presence. Another example is that MONUSCO has helped establish early warning mechanisms in communities. If bases can’t accommodate community members or if early warning mechanisms result in many false alerts, the community’s reliance on MONUSCO —instead of employing other self-protection strategies — could increase the risk that they will suffer from physical violence.

Understanding these perceptions can help peacekeepers anticipate negative consequences and plan to prevent or mitigate them. For example, in the first hypothetical example of negative perceptions, more trust-building between the community and the peacekeeping presence may be needed to encourage coordination before the patrols begin. In the latter example of positive expectations, the peacekeeping presence may need to increase communication with community leaders and jointly develop alternative flight strategies. Some personnel serving in MONUSCO have acknowledged these risks and tried to develop contingency and/or mitigation plans to offset unintended consequences of their presence and activities.

Obviously, the purpose of a peacekeeping operation is to plan interventions that have a positive impact rather than to focus solely on preventing and mitigating the risks of its activities to communities. See *Civilians in Conflict Issue Brief 1* for a discussion of how peacekeepers can complement and augment community self-protection strategies. Understanding community perceptions of the peacekeeping operation and other protection actors also will help peacekeepers to plan successful interventions.

¹³ A handful of research participants mentioned MONUSCO’s contributions to communities including monitoring detainee conditions in prisons, providing logistical support for the PNC, building vocational schools and helping to organize night patrols. When asked about MONUSCO’s role, one participant specifically mentioned MONUSCO’s disarmament, rehabilitation, reintegration and repatriation activities. However, there were very few positive perceptions of MONUSCO relayed to or recorded by the research team. This may be because the communities did not perceive MONUSCO as helpful, because the wording or tone of the questions unintentionally prompted negative responses and/or because communities were choosing to provide negative opinions and examples for some other reason.

RESEARCH PARTICIPANT PERCEPTIONS OF MONUSCO THAT COULD AFFECT THE SUCCESS OF PROTECTION INTERVENTIONS

(Note: The names of the villages have been withheld to protect the research participants. However, each village is given a different letter to illustrate the diversity of views from various locations.)

Perceived abandonment of the community by MONUSCO

- Village A: During an attack in 2005, the population fled to MONUC for protection but MONUC abandoned them and left the area.

Perceived support by MONUSCO of perpetrators

- Village A: MONUSCO fuels war by supporting both the FARDC and militia; MONUSCO wanted to aid escaped Patriotic Resistance Front in Ituri (FRPI) prisoners by giving them food and helping them return to the bush.
- Village B: MONUSCO and the FDLR have similar equipment (tents, cans, juices, military uniforms, ammunition cartridges); MONUSCO drops food supplies and ammunition from their helicopters over FDLR sites.
- Village C: MONUSCO supplies/aids/advises the ADF NALU.
- Village D: MONUSCO halted the repatriation of FDLR soldiers; MONUSCO has relationships with the FDLR.
- Village E: MONUSCO supplies weapons to the FDLR; MONUSCO strengthens and protects the FDLR; if MONUSCO disarmed the FDLR and left, the FDLR would go back to agriculture.
- Village F: MONUSCO supplies the FDLR; MONUSCO provides supplies to the FARDC.
- Village G: MONUSCO gives the FDLR ammunition in exchange for gold

Perceived hostility from MONUSCO

- Village B: MONUSCO assumes the community wants food when they approach and so chases community members away.

Perceived perpetration of violence by MONUSCO

- Village B: MONUSCO killed one participant's 13-year-old son simply for looking at them; MONUSCO sends the FDLR to pillage.
- Village D: MONUSCO pays civilians to kill other civilians.

Perceived barriers to communication with MONUSCO

- Village H: MONUSCO patrols by vehicle and not on foot; there is a language barrier.
- Village I: There is a language barrier.

Perceived problems caused by MONUSCO

- Village J: MONUSCO encourages the theft of goats by buying stolen goats; MONUSCO encourages children to leave school by giving them food.
- Village K: MONUSCO monopolizes water sources; some girls have unauthorized relationships "such as prostitution" with MONUSCO personnel.

Perceptions and Prioritizing Threats and Vulnerabilities

One of the major challenges that peacekeeping operations face is how to prioritize resources and assets across their many mandated security and peacebuilding activities (Giffen 2010, 26-30). In addition, they must determine which protection threats to address and when, given the number and diversity of threats across often large, sometimes inaccessible, geographic areas. As explored above, a peacekeeping operation should consider the threats, vulnerabilities and risks of intervention in each context and whether the peacekeeping operation has the capability to access and address them effectively.

One prioritization mechanism of MONUSCO and humanitarian actors in DRC has been highlighted as a good practice (UN DPKO/DFS 2010, 14). In recent years, humanitarians in DRC have put together various iterations of a “Must-Should-Could” matrix that prioritizes protection needs and concerns.¹⁴ This information has either been developed in collaboration with MONUC/MONUSCO or has been shared with MONUSCO at the local, subnational and national levels so that it can be factored into MONUSCO decisions to deploy military and civilian protection assets (Global Protection Cluster 2011, 6).

These matrices have evolved over time and fallen in and out of use in different locations. Some matrices have included primarily “objective” data such as the number of displaced individuals or households, incidence of sexual violence, etc. Perceptions of local communities also may have been included but, at least in the early iterations of the matrix, this was not done in a consistent manner. As a result, peacekeeping protection practitioners have struggled with how to integrate perceptions in a way that can support decisions related to prioritizing resources, especially as local-level needs are transmitted up the chain of command where decisions about resources are usually made.

At the local level, peacekeeping operations could benefit from developing methodologies to incorporate community perceptions of priority threats and vulnerabilities systematically into their prioritization processes to determine local-level planning. The resulting analysis could then be fed up the chain to subnational and national decision-makers, creating a way for local perceptions and priorities to be included in decisions at higher levels.

¹⁴ The development of the matrix was led by the Protection Cluster in DRC (a forum for humanitarian organizations seeking to coordinate protection programming) with sometimes significant involvement or leadership of MONUSCO personnel. MONUSCO's (previously MONUC's) involvement in the cluster has changed over time. For example, prior to 2008, MONUC co-chaired the cluster but subsequently participated only as an observer. In some areas, the cluster's input into the matrix is developed between humanitarian actors and then shared with MONUSCO's internal protection working groups for consideration and action (Global Protection Cluster 2011, 1).

PRIORITY THREATS IDENTIFIED BY RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

Research participants in the DRC were asked to identify the three most important threats that their community faced. The following threats were the most commonly identified as being among the most important. (Note that questions were open-ended and categories were not strictly defined, e.g., participants may have used “robbery” and “pillage” to refer to similar acts.)

- Sexual violence
- Robbery and pillage
- Killing
- Land conflicts
- Arbitrary arrest or illegal detention
- Extortion in various forms including illegal and/or exorbitant taxes, fines and compulsory tolls

“When it is heard that you denounce, the day the FDLR come, you become the first victim.”

— Male research participant in the Kabare territory

Obstacles to and Limitations in Understanding and Operationalizing Perceptions in Protection

Peacekeeping operations should continue efforts to engage with conflict-affected communities safely and effectively to understand their perspectives. In doing so, it is also important to acknowledge that a number of factors will continue to hamper a peacekeeping operation’s understanding of and ability to operationalize community perceptions. These include access restrictions, risk to communities and interlocutors engaging with communities, and knowledge gaps in understanding what drives perceptions, how perceptions change in relation to time and place and how perceptions interact with behavior.

Access Restrictions

Studies show that peacekeeping operations are deployed into the most complex, difficult environments including those where the most egregious and deliberate violence against civilians is occurring (Hultman 2013; Melander 2009) and are therefore likely to face a number of challenges to accessing conflict-affected communities. Obstacles to accessing vulnerable populations have been well documented and won’t be repeated here.¹⁵

Access restrictions can undermine the validity or applicability of community perceptions research. Peacekeepers are often not able to reach insecure areas or engage targeted individuals safely.¹⁶ Yet, conflict-affected contexts are often characterized by a number of unique localized actors and conflicts that may or may not be interconnected with regional or national ones. As such, generalizing data beyond accessible locations can undermine the utility and accuracy of the findings, making it difficult to reflect perceptions beyond the accessible local level to a larger subnational or national level.¹⁷

Risk to Communities

Engaging vulnerable populations may create risk for both the researchers and members of the community. As touched on in previous sections, peacekeeping operations’ engagement with conflict-affected communities can pose serious risks to the communities if it results in reprisals by perpetrators within or outside the communities. This risk should always be assessed prior to engagement and strategies of engagement should prevent or mitigate the negative consequences of engagement.

¹⁵ Access restrictions include but are not limited to insecurity and UN security procedures, a lack of infrastructure, difficult terrain, inadequate resources, assets and logistical procedures and restrictions imposed by host governments and parties to conflicts.

¹⁶ Lesson learned from data collection undertaken during this project. Researchers had limited ability to select participants based on their ethnicity because it could increase their vulnerability and could raise tensions in the villages visited. Khalil (2012) proposes methodologies to overcome these challenges.

¹⁷ Excerpted from Sharma (2012). Also see Dijkzeul and Wakenge (2010).

In some contexts characterized by conflict, direct engagement by the military components of a peacekeeping operation isn't appropriate because it poses particular risks to the community. These risks may be diminished through the deployment of civilian staff trained in protection. Pre-deployment and in-mission protection training is improving but remains insufficient. In other cases, there may be ways to engage with international, national or local civil society organizations that can relay community perceptions. Peacekeeping operations may not have guidance or training on assessing risks to interlocutors conveying such information. Finally, many peacekeeping operations lack context-specific protocols and guidance as well as secure methods to collect, manage and share sensitive community perception and protection data.¹⁸ Risks of engagement with communities can be mitigated and, ideally, eliminated if UN peacekeeping operations are given the incentive and support to address these capacity gaps.

It can often be difficult for external protection actors to understand what drives individual and community perceptions and, therefore, how to interpret and analyze information that is being relayed to them.

Understanding What Drives Perceptions

It can often be difficult for external protection actors to understand what drives individual and community perceptions and, therefore, how to interpret and analyze information that is being relayed to them. Personal experience, trust, emotions, myths, values, ideology and other factors can all shape perceptions (Burns 2007; Leiserowitz 2006; Olken 2009).¹⁹ An individual's or community's view of and involvement in the conflict will also affect their attitudes. Community members rarely have a bird's-eye view of the conflict; rather, they are likely to see some aspects of a conflict and not others depending on how proximate they are to specific threats and how they see their involvement in the conflict. Community members may be passively or actively supporting perpetrators of violence; may be politically, ethnically or ideologically aligned with perpetrators; and/or may be victims of the violence.²⁰

Moreover, some actors intentionally may try to influence community perceptions of the conflict. Parties to a conflict may disseminate propaganda about the motivations, intentions and tactics of another party. For example, spreading rumors that a group seeking to overthrow a government is engaging in ethnic cleansing or that certain groups are employing gruesome tactics can be a way to dehumanize and erode any possible support for that actor.

¹⁸ The Professional Standards for Protection Work Carried Out by Humanitarian and Human Rights Actors in Armed Conflict and Other Situations of Violence (2013) is a helpful foundation for developing and adapting principles and guidance.

¹⁹ Note that the research referenced in this section was focused on perceptions of terrorism, climate change and corruption, not armed conflict or the types of targeted violence against civilians that is the focus of this paper. Moreover, the terrorism and climate change studies were conducted on populations in the United States and the corruption study in Indonesia. These factors may limit the applicability of the findings to this report.

²⁰ Excerpted from Sharma (2012).

There is insufficient research related to how perceptions influence behavior.

Perceptions of external actors collecting information can also affect what information is reported. Community research is generally an uncommon practice in conflict-affected areas unless the research is somehow connected to an external actor. As such, communities rightly associate community research with external agendas and stakeholders, which they may not consider neutral, impartial or benign. This may result in individuals providing specific answers to questions because they believe that is what the researcher wants to hear. This may be based on the perception that providing certain information will result in assistance or fear that other information may result in retribution, or simply because of indifference.²¹

All of these factors can contribute to discrepancies between perceptions of security gathered through community-based research and data collected through other means. For example, conflict-affected individuals and communities may report that insecurity is increasing even when the numbers of violent deaths and other injuries are decreasing. This could be due, for example, to a demographic group within the community feeling that they increasingly are being targeted compared to the overall community. Others may be very tolerant of violence in areas long affected by conflict and therefore not report an actual increase in incidents.

Some research methodologies may help external protection actors overcome some of these challenges and help them to understand why individuals may be reporting information that differs from others' accounts. Research methodology options will be discussed in a forthcoming Civilians in Conflict report.


How Perceptions Influence Behavior

Beyond understanding the variables affecting community perceptions, there is insufficient research related to how perceptions influence behavior. Emerging research on disaster response explores how perceptions of risk relate to action. "A recurring finding has been that peoples' protective response is directly related to their perceptions of risk immediately prior to taking action and that emergency warnings play a pivotal role in these perceptions" (Burns 2007, 2). Moreover, the research suggests that "peoples' perceptions of risk, risk-related response and resilience to disasters differ across subpopulations" (Burns 2007, 2). Related social science research finds that emotions can "play an important role in how people process risk information and respond to potential threats" (Burns 2007, 2).

Another challenge is that perceptions and behaviors are dynamic and reinforcing. Research on threats of terrorism in the United States revealed that "[p]ublic reaction may indeed be influenced by initial perceptions of risk but these perceptions will in turn be affected by how a community has prepared for and is currently responding to such a crisis" (Burns 2007, 8). In other words, perceptions and behaviors influence

²¹ Excerpted from Sharma (2012).

each other and evolve in the midst of a crisis. A protection crisis is characterized by a number of actors and so a community's perceptions and behaviors are also being altered by the actions of others. For example, as explored in previous sections, an intervention by a peacekeeping operation will likely alter the perceptions and behavior of the vulnerable community, and not necessarily in predictable ways. Knowledge gaps about what drives perceptions and how perceptions influence behavior will continue to hamper the incorporation of community perceptions into the design of protection strategies. Nevertheless, engaging with communities to understand their perceptions of security challenges can yield information that is critical to the development, implementation and monitoring and evaluation of effective protection strategies.



“Peoples’ perceptions of risk, risk-related response and resilience to disasters differ across subpopulations.”

—W.J.Burns, 2007

Conclusion

The majority of UN peacekeeping operations are deployed into complex conflicts characterized by extreme forms of violence and with a mandate to protect civilians under imminent threat of physical violence (Hultman 2013; Melander 2009). Nine peacekeeping operations currently include such a mandate and over 90 percent of peacekeepers serve under those mandates (UN DPKO/DFS 2012, v). Although the UN has taken very promising steps over the past five years to improve guidance, training and strategies to protect civilians, it has not yet identified successfully how peacekeeping operations can systematically, safely and effectively engage the conflict-affected populations that peacekeepers are mandated to protect.

This Issue Brief explores what is known and not known about the perceptions of conflict-affected communities and how those perceptions affect their decisions in the midst of devastating conflict. It also identifies a number of constraints that peacekeeping operations currently face in engaging conflict-affected communities and the risks that can accompany such engagement. However, the knowledge gaps, challenges and risks discussed here are not intended to discourage the inclusion of conflict-affected communities in protection strategies. On the contrary, Stimson's research seeks to highlight opportunities for peacekeepers to improve protection by involving communities in successful UN protection assessments, analysis, planning, implementation and evaluation.

The takeaways for policymakers and practitioners on page 2 offer a few recommendations that could help the United Nations move closer to effective engagement of conflict-affected communities and their perceptions in protection efforts. Additional research by academics and innovative efforts by practitioners also can help bridge the knowledge gaps discussed in this brief. A forthcoming report of Stimson's Civilians in Conflict project will explore in greater detail how UN peacekeepers can engage these communities safely and effectively to prevent the violence that has become a predominant feature of their daily lives.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This brief draws upon desk research on community perceptions in risk analysis, policy formulation and community security as well as the impact of peacekeeping operations and third party interventions on violence against civilians. The brief is also based on original research conducted in April 2012 by Stimson in partnership with an international nongovernmental organization and local civil society groups in the eastern region of the DRC. The research involved focus groups and key informant interviews in 15 conflict-affected communities in the provinces of North Kivu, South Kivu and Orientale.²²

The research locations and participants were selected by the civil society partners based on a number of criteria. All communities selected for the research were relatively small (none was a major city). Some had a UN peacekeeper presence (a nearby base or regular patrols), while others had none.

In each community, four focus groups were selected based on which groups the partners believed to be most vulnerable to the most important threats in that community. The partners also conducted one focus group in each community with members of the socio-economic elite. These focus groups were complemented by three interviews in each community with local authorities, such as the village chief or the head of the local police force.

The partners asked community participants about their perceptions of security, including the most important threats they faced; who was perpetrating them, how and why; who was most vulnerable to those threats and why; what self-protection measures they employ and their perceptions of the security actors present in their community.²³ Because the sampling was not representative, the resulting data cannot be generalized to the community as a whole.

²² Training with the local civil society partners included sessions on ethics and standards related to human subject research and the collection and management of sensitive protection data. For example, local civil society partners and trainers developed research protocols, which required all participants to be asked for and to give consent individually and to be at least 18 years of age. The protocols also required focus groups and interviews to be conducted in safe and private locations and data to be recorded in a way that they would not put respondents at risk if intercepted by others.

²³ A forthcoming report of Stimson's Civilians in Conflict project will discuss why these questions were selected and the strengths and weaknesses of various approaches and methodologies to elicit this information in a safe and effective manner.

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Civilians in Conflict, a project of Stimson's Future of Peace Operations Program, envisions a world in which the international community, nation-states and local communities effectively eliminate violence against civilians in conflict-affected societies. As a contribution to this ambitious vision, the project works to expand and improve international efforts to develop effective prevention and response mechanisms. The Civilians in Conflict project looks at a number of areas that continue to perplex policy-makers and practitioners and undermine strategies to protect including: engaging communities in protection strategies; using force to protect civilians; working with humanitarian actors; building civilian capacity; combining political, other civilian and military resources to protect effectively; and tailoring strategies to protect civilians to specific contexts. Civilians in Conflict is led by Alison Giffen, a senior associate and the co-director of Stimson's Future of Peace Operations Program. For more information on Civilians in Conflict, please see www.stimson.org/research-pages/civilians-in-conflict.

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