Action for Protection: What Peacekeepers Do to Protect Civilians

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Introduction

According to UN statistics, more than 95 percent of all peacekeepers currently deployed worldwide work in a mission that is tasked to protect civilians. This is now one of the core functions of UN peacekeeping and the expectations of what peacekeepers should achieve are often high. Recent quantitative work has examined whether peacekeepers are at all effective in protecting civilians, and the conditions under which they are better able to do so. Higher capacity in terms of larger troop and police contributions, as well as more diverse troop contributions with a broader competence, reduce the number of civilians killed.² These characteristics are enabling factors that provide the limitations for the missions and determine what it potentially can do. However, they do not tell us what peacekeepers actually do with these capabilities on the ground.

A protection of civilians (PoC) mandate can lead to different operational activities on the ground. As shown by Holt and Taylor in their comprehensive assessment of four missions with PoC-mandates, there are considerable variations in terms of what missions do to protect

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civilians. For example, some missions have particular PoC-units that organize PoC activities among military and civilian units and assess the needs for protection. Other missions do not have an explicit PoC strategy. Missions also vary to the extent they prioritize protection of civilians. As highlighted by Diehl and Druckman, some peacekeeping missions have a great number of tasks that they are supposed to carry out. While some missions see PoC as their main task, others see it as something they do in addition to other tasks if capacity allows it. These mandates are extremely challenging; not only because it is a very difficult task, but also because they push the boundaries of the three pillars of peacekeeping – consent, impartiality, and the use of force. If we are interested in understanding how peacekeeping works – or does not work – to protect civilians, we need to improve our data on what peacekeepers do once deployed.

**Recording what Peacekeepers Do**

While data on peacekeeping has for long been quite limited, there are several recent and ongoing efforts of collecting new systematic data. A few of those data collection efforts aim to recording what peacekeepers do. The PKOLED records peacekeeping events based on Reports of the Secretary-General (henceforth SG reports). Based on these data, Dorussen and Gizelis analyze the impact of peacekeeping policies – in particular whether they aim at strengthening the central government. Likewise, Smidt codes peacebuilding activities by the peacekeeping missions around elections using SG reports. In addition to these datasets that focus mainly on peacekeeping policy or activities, Lindberg Bromley codes violent

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3 Holt and Taylor, *Protecting Civilians*.
4 Diehl and Druckman, *Evaluating Peace Operations*.
6 Dorussen and Gizelis, ‘Into the Lion’s Den’.
7 Smidt. ‘What Do Peacekeepers Do’
interactions directly involving peacekeepers, thus providing a systematic depiction of the use of force in peace operations.\(^8\) Those data are collected primarily using news sources.

Adding to these data initiatives, I am interested in identifying what peacekeepers do with regards to protection of civilians. Within my project on peacekeeping and civilian protection, we have gone through 273 Reports of the Secretary-General of all UN missions with a PoC-mandate (2000-2013) and identified a number of activities that peacekeepers carry out to the end of civilian protection.\(^9\) These activities can be categorized into three main types, as suggested by Hunt and Bellamy, namely direct protection, indirect protection, and capacity-building.\(^10\) Here I will briefly discuss the types of activities that peacekeepers engage in and that are reported in these SG reports.

Some reported peacekeeping activities relate directly to protection of civilians. These include patrols in areas where there is a discernible risk of violence against the civilian population and the provision of shelter for civilians that are escaping ongoing killing campaigns by armed actors. Another important action that can signal credible commitment to civilian protection is the redeployment of troops within the country to areas where there risk of civilian atrocities is intensified, as well as military operations to stabilize an area. While these activities all refer to military action in some way, they reflect different mechanisms through which peacekeeping can influence the behavior of armed actors and improve security for the civilian population.

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\(^8\) Lindberg Bromley, ‘Introducing the UCDP Peacemakers at Risk’.
\(^9\) A special thanks to Sayra van den Berg for her valuable research assistance.
\(^10\) Hunt and Bellamy, ‘Mainstreaming the Responsibility to Protect’.
Other activities may serve to improve protection more indirectly, such as human rights monitoring and reporting, which can inform the military and the police in their preventive work as well as naming and shaming of perpetrators. Disarmament of armed actors can reduce the immediate threat to civilians as well as reduce the number of guns available to armed actors. Some missions provide military escorts to humanitarian assistance, which may enable other actors to work towards protection and addressing the needs of the civilian population. Peacekeepers also engage in different forms of community outreach activities, which may indirectly serve protection.

There are also more long-term strategies towards building security, such as providing training and advice to military and police forces as well as supporting the rule of law. Such activities are intended to rebuild the capacity of domestic institutions and enable the withdrawal of UN forces.

The fact that these types of activities are carried out by peacekeepers is not new information. However, knowing that something occurs does not mean that we know how when and where it occurs. By systematically collecting information about when different types of activities are carried out, and how missions vary in their portfolio of protection activities, we are able to address new questions about peacekeeping mechanisms and refine our theories of how peacekeeping works. For example, it is possible to evaluate the implications of more robust tactics for effective management of violence in the short term as well as for mission success in the long term. It would also enable an analysis of what factors determine the types of activities that missions engage in; how important are developments in the conflict compared to the mission leadership?11

11 Bove and Ruggeri, ’What Do we Know’
The Known Unknowns: Challenges of Data Collection

Systematically coding PKO activities from SG reports certainly carry some challenges. Apart from the general challenges of coding high-quality data, there are some shortcomings in terms of what is reported in the SG reports. First of all, not all actions are reported. The reports are selective in their description of what the missions have done in the period covered by the report. They are also biased, since these are descriptions of what the missions themselves think are the most important things they have done and achieved. On the positive side, the reports are likely to include information on the most common and the most formative activities carried out. Hence, we should be able to capture the most important trends over time and across missions. At the same time we are less able to get at the variations in behavior on the tactical level, and it may be these subtle variations in behavior on the ground that really matter for how peacekeepers are perceived among the local population and the warring actors. These nuances are better explored through other types of data collection.

Second, the reports provide limited information about the scope of activities and the intensity of various actions. For example, while a report may say that the mission carried out patrols in a particular area, it would rarely provide specific information about how many troops participated in the patrol, or how many hours the patrols lasted. Likewise, a report may describe that the mission has engaged in disarmament, but not specify how many weapons were destroyed. This is problematic if the scope or intensity of these activities is what really matters. However, data collected from the reports can provide us with a first comparison of what missions do, before moving into the more detailed comparisons that would require additional data collection.

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12 For a good analysis of problems of coding peacekeeping events data, see Ruggeri, Gizelis and Dorussen, ‘Events Data’.
Since most forms of data collection have different shortcomings, the way forward is to combine different types of data. Therefore it is encouraging to see the advancement in the field of peacekeeping studies towards more and better data – and with that, the ability to address new important questions about when and how peacekeeping works.

References


Dorussen, Han and Andrea Ruggeri. ‘Peacekeeping Events: Determining the Place and Space of Peacekeeping.’ *International Peacekeeping*, in this issue.


