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Policy Brief

Protection through Peace Building: The Future of UNMISS' Protection of Civilians Mandate in South Sudan

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ACRONYMS

CLAs	community liaison assistants
I4P	infrastructures for peace
IGAD	Intergovernmental Authority on Development
UN	United Nations
UNMISS	UN Mission in South Sudan
UNPOLUN	Police
PoC	protection of civilians
R-ARCSS	Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan
SSR	security sector reform
SSNPS	South Sudan National Police Service

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Ever since tens of thousands of terrified civilians sought and received shelter at United Nations (UN) bases as civil war in South Sudan erupted in late 2013, protecting civilians has been the primary focus of the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS). Six years later, with a shaky peace deal and a new transitional government in place and the future of the country's protection of civilians (PoC) sites a matter of intense debate, this brief reconsiders the protection dimension of the UNMISS mandate. Amid a shifting context for PoC in South Sudan – with UNMISS facing growing pressure to protect civilians beyond the narrow confines of PoC sites – the brief makes the case for the adoption of a protection through peace-building model, with a particular emphasis on supporting local peace-building efforts. With a nation-wide ceasefire largely holding, many of the key physical threats – from cattle raiding to common criminality – now faced by civilians in South Sudan are primarily local in nature, while a series of local-level rapprochements among key subnational actors offers some empirical support for the violence-dampening effects of local-level peace building. While it cannot hope to protect all the vulnerable all the time, UNMISS could do more to support localized peace-building strategies that build on existing rapprochements, that facilitate local agency for peace, and that begin to put in place the building blocks of inclusive local-level security governance.

INTRODUCTION

Whether regarded as a fragile ceasefire or critical turning point, the Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS) has opened a window of opportunity for South Sudan to disrupt its recent cycle of violence and reboot the long and arduous process of constituting itself as a stable, functional state. The much-delayed formation of a unity government in February 2020 has been rightly celebrated as a major advance, even if the wider peace process remains very much an uncertain exercise in elite pact making, with key issues – such as the creation of a consolidated national army – still far from resolved. Fragile as it remains, however, the process has undeniably contributed to a widespread reduction of violence across South Sudan, a series of local-level rapprochements, and an acceleration of the voluntary (if still hesitant) return of some of the country's four million displaced persons. If it holds, the R-ARCSS will permit a genuine peace-building process to begin in South Sudan, one both enabling and requiring a shift in posture on the part of both UNMISS and the broader international community.

The R-ARCSS, signed in September 2018 and brokered by East Africa's Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), is an updated version of an earlier, unsuccessful effort to resolve South Sudan's civil war. Like its predecessor, which collapsed in violence in mid-2016, the R-ARCSS is anchored in a power-sharing pact between the conflict's two central protagonists, President Salva Kiir and opposition leader Riek Machar. While the unity government was to have been inaugurated in May 2019, the deadline was deferred twice because of slow progress on the agreement's more contentious provisions, including cantonment of armed forces, transitional security arrangements in the capital, Juba, and the reorganization of subnational territorial boundaries (International Crisis Group [ICG], 2019a). While the shaky Kiir-Machar truce has thus far held, creating a welcome respite from violence, making the unity government work will be a crucial test of whether both are fully committed to the path of non-violence.

In the context of this current interregnum, this brief focuses on the implications of South Sudan's uncertain future from the perspective of the United Nations' PoC mandate. PoC, especially in the specific context of protection of civilian sites, has been at the very core of the UNMISS mandate since 2013 and has long absorbed the lion's share of mission resources. However fragile it may still be, the revitalized agreement has begun to change the protection calculus in South Sudan, both in terms of the challenges of expanding protection efforts beyond PoC sites and the opportunities for thinking differently about protection mechanisms and strategies. As this brief will argue, regardless of the ultimate fate of the R-ARCSS, there are in fact sound reasons for UNMISS to begin shifting more explicitly towards a protection through (local) peace-building model, as a complement to the competing narratives of protection either through presence or through projection.

Finding ways to more systematically merge protection and peace-building agendas, with a particular emphasis on the local, would enable the mission to better utilize its comparative advantages and to leverage local-level dynamics in the long-term interests of a wider, more durable peace.

The Shifting Context of Civilian Protection in South Sudan

For the past six years, protecting civilians in South Sudan has primarily meant providing both perimeter and internal security for a fixed number of PoC sites established and secured by UNMISS to accommodate civilians fleeing successive cycles of violence. While UNMISS could, and can still, credibly claim to be fulfilling its protection mandate by sheltering hundreds of thousands of civilians in these sites, the concentration of uniformed resources (both police and military) on the PoC site whose residents represent a relatively small proportion of the country's displaced population and an even smaller percentage of the country's vulnerable – has limited the mission's capacity to expand protection efforts. United Nations' figures from October 2019 pinpoint the number of civilians seeking shelter in PoC sites at 194,954, with more than half (nearly 116,000) housed within the Bentiu PoC site alone.¹ This figure represents about five percent of all conflict-displaced South Sudanese. Conversely, more than half of all UNMISS resources are focused on PoC sites; some 70 percent of UN Police (UNPOL) are currently deployed, for example, within the sites, with the consequence that UNPOL resources in other regions of the country – such as Western Equatoria where, as of mid-2019, there were a total of 13 UNPOL responsible for an area of responsibility roughly the size of the state of Indiana – are stretched extremely thin.²

While the question of whether UNMISS resources “are best focused so intensively on the residents of PoC sites alone” (Day et al., 2018:62) is not new, this dilemma becomes increasingly acute as the population of PoC sites declines and voluntary returns – assuming present trends continue – gather steam. To be sure, the PoC sites are likely to persist for years to come, as residents weigh a complex security/services calculus in deciding whether to return, relocate, stay put, or hedge their bets (maintaining footholds both inside and outside PoC sites), particularly given ongoing uncertainty around the durability of the current peace process. At the same time, however, pressure is mounting on UNMISS to fulfill its promise to expand the scope – and improve the effectiveness – of protection efforts beyond PoC sites (UN Security Council, 2018).

Of course, even if the mission is able to progressively shift protection assets away from the PoC sites (and discussions on this point have already proven controversial), given current staffing levels it will never realistically be able to more than scratch the surface of physical protection needs across a diverse, unstable, and often inaccessible country.

There can never be a peacekeeper behind every tree, and despite the ritualized insistence that the Government of South Sudan bears primary responsibility for the protection of its own citizens, state security forces remain woefully unprepared to shoulder this responsibility and, in many cases, continue to themselves constitute key sources of insecurity. Responsive, hotspot protection strategies have their place, but also their limitations; especially in the absence of sustained follow-up, short-term protection efforts may have similarly short-term protection impacts, and shifting resources to new hotspots may leave security vacuums in old ones that set the stage for renewed violence.³ Moreover, if mission resources are already stretched thin in the effort to protect certain categories of vulnerable groups – among them women, children, and the disabled – in the contained context of PoC sites, offering even minimal levels of protection to such groups “outside the wire” will require difficult choices concerning both who to protect and how to protect them. Ultimately, then, in a broader context of a deepening era of austerity within UN peacekeeping, where the mission will be fortunate to be able to maintain current staffing and resource levels, delivering on the PoC mandate both within and outside the sites may require a significant shift not only of resources, but also of strategy.

More positively, the slowly unfolding R-ARCSS process – even if has been likened to “*Waiting for Godot*”⁴ – has provided a window of relative calm at the national level to begin thinking about protection within the wider context of peace building, building from the obvious starting point that the most effective PoC strategy in South Sudan must necessarily be grounded in keeping a wobbly peace process on track. While it is clear that both donors and South Sudanese – including PoC site residents – are taking a wait-and-see attitude towards the process, especially given the violent collapse of its precursor in mid-2016, the current interregnum has afforded both time and space to cultivate the widespread desire for peace that exists among a war-weary population, and to consolidate and expand the numerous local-level rapprochements that have emerged in the wake of the R-ARCSS, which has enabled, if not explicitly mandated, localized agreements. Some 160 local- and regional-level ententes were reached during the 2018-19 period – many of them facilitated by UNMISS – and have already begun to deliver peace dividends in terms of reducing tensions, facilitating trade and humanitarian access, and enabling joint action, often across factional divides, against local criminality. Such mid-level peacemaking may advance more easily and be solidified more quickly than national-level dynamics and may help to insulate parts of the country from destabilizing political developments emanating from Juba.

It is also the case that there has been a marked shift in recent months in the nature of threats to civilian populations. While a return to full-scale civil war cannot be fully discounted, and while non-signatories to the revitalized agreement – most notably Thomas Cirillo’s National Salvation Front – have continued sporadically to wage war, many of the most serious threats to life and limb for most South Sudanese now have

local origins (UN Security Council, 2019b). Cattle raiding, criminality, and localized intercommunal violence (plus, of course, the intersections among them) now represent the most prevalent sources of insecurity across South Sudan, in combination with the widespread food insecurity that is itself a legacy of years of conflict and displacement. Cattle raiding alone cost the lives of some 2,000 South Sudanese from mid-2018 to mid-2019. While the practice remains linked with elite-level politics (ownership of cattle is increasingly concentrated in elite hands, even if the close alliances between national-level political factions and pastoralist militias have decayed in recent years), its dynamics are also rooted in long-standing patterns of localized intercommunal relations and sub-regional political economies of conflict (Wild, Jok and Patel, 2018). Increasingly high levels of criminality, including sexual violence, are also primarily local-level phenomena, linked to the erosion of socio-cultural norms, the easy availability of weapons (also a key factor in deadly cattle raids), and large populations of unemployed, uneducated, and disaffected young men. In the words of one observer, “there is nothing worse than a hungry, armed man.”⁵

While UNMISS continues to have limited leverage over the shape, direction, and pace of the national-level, IGAD-facilitated peace process, its strong field presence, relatively decentralized operational structure, and unique mix of military, police, and civilian capacities leave it well-positioned as a facilitator of localized peace-building efforts that may offer enhanced protection for the majority of South Sudan’s citizens. In light of widespread conflict fatigue felt by most South Sudanese, reasonable levels of public confidence in the mission, at least according to one recent public survey (Mold, 2019), and in line with the mission’s own commitment to fostering “more peace at any level” (UN Security Council, 2018), there remains considerable scope for scaling up UNMISS’ Tier 1 – dialogue and engagement – protection efforts into a fully-fledged, interlinked series of local peace-building strategies.⁶ While the development of such strategies would not preclude more nimble, robust force postures consistent with recent projection debates, it would also represent a more ambitious, and more proactive, complement to patrol-centric “presence” strategies, which remain limited in terms of their capacities to deeply engage with communities and uncertain in terms of their wider security impacts (Day et al., 2018).

An inclusive protection through peace-building strategy is also fully consistent with a wide range of guidance that has emerged in recent years on how the United Nations can best position itself to help shepherd societies from violent conflict to sustainable peace, while protecting civilians throughout this transition. The United Nations’ own “sustaining peace” agenda, for example, as articulated in the “2015 Advisory Group of Experts Report on the UN Peacebuilding Architecture,” places particular emphasis on the notion of “inclusive national ownership” as a key criterion for success, in the sense that “the national responsibility to drive efforts to sustain peace must...be broadly shared across all key social strata and divides” (UN, 2015a: 8). The 2015 High-Level Independent

Panel on Peace Operations report was even more explicit in its call for “people-centred” peacekeeping, declaring not only that unarmed strategies “must be at the forefront of UN efforts to protect civilians,” but also that engaging with local communities “must increasingly be regarded as core to mission success” (UN, 2015b: xii, 23). The emphasis in both reports on the imperative of inclusivity – also central to Goal 16 of the Sustainable Development Goals – may prove to be particularly significant in South Sudan given the relatively *exclusive*, elite-centric nature of the R-ARCSS process. In other words, bridging protection and peace-building efforts at the local level may not only yield a more proactive, engaged approach to PoC, it would also contribute to both deepening and broadening the base of support for the peace process – including among hitherto marginalized groups such as women and youth. At the same time, efforts to consolidate and build upon local-level rapprochements would reduce the risks that national-level backsliding – not unlikely given deep levels of mutual mistrust and animosity among the key players (ICG, 2019b) – would invariably reignite local-level violence. In Allard Duursma’s (2019) words, “instrumentalization of local conflict by higher-level conflict actors becomes harder if local conflicts and grievances are resolved.”

A common sentiment heard throughout the broader international community in South Sudan is that “there is no Plan B,” and that the R-ARCSS process represents the country’s last, best hope for the foreseeable future to get onto a path toward sustainable peace. Despite the high stakes involved, current regional and international dynamics have conspired to ensure that sustained pressure on the conflict parties from key external actors – including members of both IGAD and the UN Security Council – to implement agreed commitments has been, at best, uneven and inconsistent; the absence of urgency in establishing South Sudan’s transitional government (at least until the recent breakthrough) is at least in part the result of such dynamics. Since these contextual conditions are unlikely to change dramatically in the near future, it is all the more important to take seriously the potential of leveraging bottom-up dynamics within South Sudan’s domestic space not only to consolidate local-level peace dividends, but also to help convince national-level elites that a return to armed conflict is not a viable alternative to making the revitalized agreement work.

Toward a Decentralized Protection through Peace-building Strategy in South Sudan

While resource constraints are an important limiting factor in anything the United Nations does in South Sudan – an unavoidable operational reality in a context where needs are great, geography is difficult, and mandates are sweeping – it is also the case that many of the key elements of a protection through peace-building strategy already exist within UNMISS. The mission has for some time been developing a

country-specific community engagement strategy, and it is in possession of enabling mandate language stressing engagement and liaison with local communities and encouraging the use of unarmed civilian protection strategies as key elements of building a protective environment (UN Security Council, 2019a: 2). It has also embraced, as noted above, a relatively decentralized organizational structure, which provides substantial autonomy to field offices to adopt to local conditions and circumstances; the field offices, in turn, have good links with both local communities and armed actors, and considerable experience convening local-level dialogues and exercising “good offices” within their areas of operation. To the extent, therefore, that it is still appropriate to speak of “early peace building” in South Sudan’s current context, it is certainly the case that UNMISS peacekeepers “are in fact early peacebuilders with real comparative advantages and contributions to make to complex peacebuilding objectives” (Smith, 2016: 7).

Localized protection through peace-building strategies would marry this existing mix of assets, experience, and responsibilities in the service of a longer-term vision aimed at strengthening the ability of the mission’s local partners to more effectively, and more sustainably, exercise agency in support of their own security. A common pitfall of wider PoC narratives (as with an earlier generation of peace-building narratives) is their tendency to focus almost exclusively on the agency, and the primacy, of international actors: both of the currently dominant strands of protection thinking – protection through projection and protection through presence – focus on the provision of protection by uniformed peacekeepers on behalf of (relatively disempowered) local actors. While this may be entirely appropriate in the context of acute crises, where vulnerable communities have limited options, South Sudan’s current moment provides an opportunity to reflect more broadly on protection strategies that enable the agency of “the protected,” rather than implicitly assume its absence. Broadly speaking, there are three key elements, outlined below, that would appear to be central to the articulation of localized protection through peace-building strategies in South Sudan’s current context.

Resilience Analysis and Mapping

Field offices constitute the vital eyes and ears of any contemporary peace operation, and ground-level conflict monitoring, analysis, and reporting – through field-level mechanisms such as field integrated operations centres – remains a core mission function. At the same time, the expectation that information should flow upwards from the field level to inform mission-level strategy, which is in turn relayed back to the field, can have a limiting impact on the development of field-level strategic planning. As Youssef Mahmoud (2019: 96) has noted more generally, across a range of mission contexts the United Nations’ capacity to conduct rigorous analysis of local realities

remains inadequate. Rectifying this in the interests of “people-centred” peace promotion strategies, in his words, “would require among other things a shift ... to identifying the communities’ endogenous capacities for peace and resilience.”

Of course, no community-based protection through peace-building effort can afford to ignore underlying drivers of conflict, security, and vulnerability. Especially as patterns of violence shift in South Sudan’s current climate of “neither war nor peace,” hotspot mapping and local conflict analysis remain as relevant, and essential, as ever. Shifting from short-term firefighting to longer-term peace building, however, will also require a better understanding of the structural – in addition to the proximate – factors underpinning local-level conflict (including linkages with elite-level dynamics, an issue to which UNMISS is already closely attuned) and how mission-community collaboration might begin to address these. A sound understanding of shifting patterns of herder-pastoralist interactions, for example, has enabled UNMISS to facilitate relatively durable local-level agreements that have dampened violence across this divide.⁷ Similarly, making headway against the corrosive impacts of contemporary cattle raiding – or more generalized criminality – in South Sudan requires sustained analysis not only of the localized socio-economic, cultural, and political drivers of these phenomena, but also close attention to relevant centre-periphery dynamics.

A necessary complement to more sustained local-level conflict analysis, however, is a parallel mapping of endogenous capacities for localizing peace. In South Sudan, the national-level R-ARCSS will, at best, create an enabling environment for peacemaking efforts to unfold outside of Juba; it will be ultimately be up to local-level actors to make the most of this space, with the support of international actors. While it is common to hear that the South Sudanese state “barely exists” beyond Juba, governance and leadership structures – including well-developed structures of representation within PoC sites themselves – are in place that could form the basis of localized infrastructures for peace, which are discussed further below. Beyond mapping the relevant actors – from both empowered and marginalized constituencies – with both an interest in, and capacity for, advancing local-level peace processes, understanding local capacities for peace also requires a deep understanding not only of indigenous traditions and practices that support inter-group coexistence and conflict resolution (including traditional justice mechanisms), but also of the kinds of informal coping mechanisms to which local-level actors turn for protection in times of crisis (*ibid.*: 96; Wild, Jok and Patel, 2018: 8). Should the return process permit a gradual shifting of resources away from PoC sites, UNMISS should seriously consider bolstering the capacity of field offices to undertake, on an ongoing basis, rigorous analysis of local conditions and dynamics, in close collaboration with both local and international partners.

Institutionalizing Favourable Local-level Dynamics

Since the signing of the R-ARCSS, one of the most encouraging developments from the perspective of peace building in South Sudan has been the proliferation of local-level rapprochements, which have facilitated aid and trade and, perhaps more importantly, offered hope to many that peace may still be possible after decades of conflict. In Northern Liech state, for example, which hosts the Bentiu PoC site and was the epicentre of some of the worst violence of the civil war, senior government and opposition figures now cohabitate, with at least the tacit endorsement of their respective national leaderships, and have even begun to work together to fight criminality.⁸ Finding ways to build on the momentum generated by these rapprochements – rewarding and incentivizing those with the courage to reach out across conflict lines, strengthening agreements to the point of irreversibility, and using them as the basis for rebuilding community-level networks – should be the centrepiece of any pragmatic local peace-building strategy, rooted in a straightforward policy of “push what moves” (Dorn 2016). In other words, if localized agreements have given the peace process a fragile foothold in different corners of the country, a key objective should be to support, and advance, these rapprochements as well as the underlying trends that have produced them. This would also be consistent with recent shifts towards more open-ended, process-oriented approaches that Cedric de Coning (2018: 304) has labelled “adaptive peacebuilding,” which aim to foster genuine local ownership of peace processes “by strengthening the resilience of local social institutions, and by investing in social cohesion.”

Revisiting existing mechanisms at the interface of mission and community – from local peace committees to community liaison assistants (CLAs) – with an eye towards supporting the re-constitution of resilient local social institutions would not only help reposition field offices to support peace building, it would also improve field-level capacities to conduct both conflict and resilience analysis. While community engagement is already part of the very *raison d'être* of the mission's field presence, many key relationships remain individualized, rather than institutionalized, and are therefore vulnerable to personnel rotations on both sides. Similarly, a significant proportion of “good offices” initiatives – from stakeholders fora to facilitated agreements among local conflict parties – remain one-off or ad hoc. More generally, some community members have expressed concerns that elements of UNMISS view community engagement in transactional terms, seeking community input only when they are looking for specific information rather than taking the time to build relations of trust that are central to effective community engagement (Spink, 2017: 35). All of this suggests, particularly in a context of reduced overall levels of violence, that there are opportunities for UNMISS to further institutionalize its relations with both key local actors and key communities. From strengthening the role of CLAs – many of whom continue to be used primarily as language assistants – to establishing standing (and inclusive) civil society advisory groups, to exploring ways to scale up, support, and connect community

action groups (building on work done by Saferworld in this area, for example),⁹ deepening ties with local stakeholders is crucial to strengthening UNMISS' local-level strategic planning, assessment, and facilitation capacities.

It is in fact this latter role – facilitation – where the mission has potentially the most to offer in support of localized peace processes across South Sudan. It is impossible to overstate the importance of good offices, especially in the current pre-transitional period, where consolidating and advancing local-level gains is very much about connection-making.¹⁰ In the absence of an effective state presence in much of the country, UNMISS is seen by many South Sudanese as the *de facto* local government, and could do more to leverage this strategic positioning to build durable bridges across key constituencies, smooth points of friction, and put in place measures – and systems – to ensure safety and security across communities in transition. Ensuring that returns of displaced persons from PoC sites are sustainable while not exacerbating intercommunal tensions, for example, will require Herculean efforts of coordination involving the humanitarian community, local authorities both within PoC sites and within host communities, armed actors, and Juba-based elites on issues as diverse as housing, land and property, the placement of key social services such as schooling and health care, livelihood support, and, of course, security. On protection matters more specifically, there is a strong case to be made for establishing permanent local-level communication/coordination mechanisms that bring into regular conversation not only the usual protection suspects – UNMISS uniformed elements and armed South Sudanese actors – but also unarmed civilian protection agencies such as Nonviolent Peaceforce,¹¹ evolving networks of community self-protection and community action groups, as well as representatives of “the protected” – and women in particular – who have been typically excluded from protection discussions but have the greatest stake in whether protection strategies succeed or fail.

All of the foregoing constitutes, essentially, an argument in favour of a more proactive role for UNMISS in helping to facilitate the development of localized infrastructures for peace (known as I4P) across South Sudan. Championed most strongly within the UN system by the UN Development Program, I4P are best understood as “a dynamic network of skills, capacities, resources, tools and institutions that help build constructive relationships and enhance sustainable resilience of societies against the risks of relapse into violence” (Giessmann, 2016: 6). Taking into consideration both South Sudan's current moment and the necessarily long-term challenges it faces in moving beyond fragility, it makes sense not only to begin thinking now about how such infrastructures might be nurtured and supported, but also to begin at the community level, in the hopes that such networks may eventually link up with national-level analogues if and as they emerge. In the short- to medium-term, viable I4P could serve not only as mechanisms to consolidate local-level peace efforts, but also could serve to amplify local-level voices – and bottom-up pressures for progress – in national-level debates about peace building

and state building. Over the longer term, self-sustaining I4P could comprise not only one element of an inclusive state-building strategy in South Sudan, but also an element of a broader transition strategy for UNMISS.

Ground-level Security Sector Reform

Of course, from the perspective of PoC no sustainable exit strategy is possible without ensuring that national security forces – beginning with the police – possess both the capacity and the will to protect their own citizens. As Arthur Boutellis (2013: 6) has noted, PoC and security sector reform (SSR) are intimately connected, since without progress on the latter, “peacekeepers will have no one to hand over their physical protection mandate to as they exit.” Since 2014, UNMISS has lacked a mandate to support SSR, and the Secretary-General’s 2016 mandate review suggested that re-engagement with SSR – or disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration – would be premature absent an inclusive political process (UN Security Council, 2016). While slow (or no) progress on crucial components of the R-ARCSS, including cantonment of armed forces, security arrangements in Juba, and the formation of a unified national army, would suggest that circumstances have not dramatically changed, there is also a growing recognition across the mission that if South Sudan’s peace process is to succeed, training and capacity-building within the country’s security sector cannot be deferred indefinitely.

While the ability of UNMISS to engage in national-level SSR processes remains limited, for now, there is greater scope to contribute to bottom-up forms of SSR precisely as a component of localized protection through peace-building strategies. Indeed, no sustained effort along these lines can ignore the role, whether positive or negative, of local-level security providers – and local police in particular – as key components of any emerging infrastructure for peace. Since 2018, field-level UNPOL contingents have been empowered, through the addition of “technical assistance and advice” mandate language, to engage local police counterparts in a form of “SSR light.” This has enabled limited forms of training and capacity building, which will need to be ramped up over time if the South Sudan National Police Service (SSNPS) is to emerge as an actor with both the capability and the credibility to protect civilian populations. While capacity building will be a project where progress is best measured in decades, since many local SSNPS contingents currently lack the most basic of fundamentals – including uniforms, pens, and paper – of equal urgency is the need to begin building trust and confidence across the police-community divide. Here, UNMISS can play a crucial role in facilitating relationship building, bringing security providers and local communities into constructive conversations around local-level security concerns through the kinds of bridge-building exercises described above. Pilot police-community relations committees in places such as Kuajok have already demonstrated the potential of such an approach, the willingness of the SSNPS – which has at least formally embraced community policing as part of its strategic plan – to engage,

and the absence of overt opposition to such initiatives on the part of the Government of South Sudan.¹² Local-level engagement with state security forces (whether police or military) in South Sudan will always need to unfold with as clear an understanding as possible of the complex relationship between local- and national-level security actors and dynamics, and be fully consistent with the UN's Human Rights Due Diligence Policy. Nevertheless, UNMISS now has an opportunity – in the absence of large-scale violence and in collaboration with local counterparts – to begin thinking about the place of community policing strategies as an element of a wider protection through peace-building project. Ultimately, while a nation-wide SSR strategy likely remains off the table for the foreseeable future, incremental gains can still be made on a decentralized basis, even if this comes at some cost in terms of uneven capacity development.

CONCLUSION

More than eight years on from South Sudan's first heady days of independence, and six years on from the outbreak of its civil war, the country's citizens need to begin to feel that the project of building a viable, peaceful South Sudan will not remain an ever-receding mirage. Regardless of the fate of the R-ARCSS and the government of national unity that has emerged from it, elite-level political dynamics – and power struggles – are likely to remain fraught for the foreseeable future (at least through the 2022 electoral cycle, and likely beyond); far from being a driver of development, then, perhaps the best that can be hoped for from such dynamics is that they do not overly restrict the space within which some semblance of “normal life” can return across the country. Should the R-ARCSS hold, local-level peace support efforts can assist local regeneration and the consolidation of a national-level peace; should it fail, efforts at supporting local-level resilience will be all the more urgent to enable communities to weather the inevitable storm. Even assuming a best-case scenario, UNMISS will continue to struggle to bridge the gap between expectations and capacities with regard to protecting civilians. An effort to shift more self-consciously toward a protection through localized peace-building strategy may allow it to reduce (if not entirely eliminate) this gap by building on existing community-level rapprochements, facilitating local agency, and beginning to put in place the building blocks of inclusive local-level security governance.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. As a complement to the mission-wide community engagement strategy, UNMISS field offices should be tasked with **developing protection through peace-building strategies for their areas of operation**. Such strategies should begin with localized resilience mapping exercises, identifying key actors, and crucial relationships that are supportive of local-level peace. In line with the emerging Comprehensive Performance Assessment System, they should also be explicit about how their impact is to be measured and evaluated.
2. Heads of field offices – as part of a protection through peace-building initiative – should be encouraged to leverage the mission’s unique field-level facilitation capacities in support of the longer-term objective of **institutionalizing key community-level networks in the form of localized infrastructures for peace**, drawing on experiences with I4P from other mission contexts.
3. In support of localized peace-building strategies, consideration should be given to **supplementing existing quick-impact funding mechanisms with network-facilitation funding**. Such funding should be geared explicitly towards fostering the establishment and consolidation of localized infrastructures for peace, including through the development, expansion, and networking of existing community action groups, and the provision of ongoing training for local participants.
4. Given that soldiers outnumber civilians within UNMISS by a factor of nearly six to one, **the mission’s military contingents should be carefully integrated within any protection through peace-building strategy**. Community engagement – with an eye towards both relationship-building and resilience mapping – should be a more central feature of “presence” patrolling, and the role of community liaison assistants in facilitating such engagement should be revisited and strengthened.
5. As security conditions allow, priority should be given to **shifting UNPOL resources from PoC sites to regional centres and anticipated return corridors**; as part of this transition, field offices should look to convene standing police-community dialogues to begin to build trust, address issues of mutual concern, and deepen community engagement with their own security provision.

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NOTES

1. At the height of their population in 2016, there were some 224,000 residents across six PoC sites. See UNMISS (2019).
2. Author interviews, South Sudan, July 2018, July 2019.
3. Author interviews, South Sudan, July 2018 and via Skype, November 2018.
4. Author interview, South Sudan, July 2019.
5. Author interview, South Sudan, July 2019.
6. The notion of protection tiers is drawn from the UN Department of Peace Operations “Policy on The Protection of Civilians in United Nations Peacekeeping” (copy on file with the author).
7. Author interview, South Sudan, July 2018.
8. Author interview, South Sudan, July 2019.
9. For more on Saferworld South Sudan’s work on community-level security, which aims to create inclusive grassroots fora through which local communities and local authorities can collaborate on security issues of mutual concern, see: <https://www.saferworld.org.uk/south-sudan/promoting-people-centred-security-and-justice>.
10. Author interview, South Sudan, July 2019.
11. The international non-governmental organization Nonviolent Peaceforce (<https://www.nonviolentpeaceforce.org>) both advocates and practices “unarmed civilian protection” – an umbrella term covering a range of strategies from protective accompaniment to community-based early warning to dialogue facilitation – with country teams in South Sudan (operating both within and outside PoC sites), Iraq, Myanmar, and the Philippines.
12. On the Kuajok pilot project specifically, see “Relationship building in action: Kuajok, South Sudan,”: <https://www.saferworld.org.uk/en-stories-of-change/relationship-building-in-action-kuajok-south-sudan>.

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