PROTECTION AFTER UN PEACEKEEPING MISSION DEPARTURES

Considerations for Protection Actors Navigating Capacity Gaps

CENTER FOR
CIVILIANS IN CONFLICT
RECOGNIZE. PREVENT. PROTECT. AMEND.

NRC NORWEGIAN REFUGEE COUNCIL

Global Protection Cluster

ORGANIZATIONAL MISSION AND VISION

Center for Civilians in Conflict (CIVIC) is an international non-governmental organization dedicated to promoting the protection of civilians in conflict. CIVIC envisions a world in which no civilian is harmed in conflict. Our mission is to support communities affected by conflict in their quest for protection and strengthen the resolve and capacity of armed actors to prevent and respond to civilian harm.

CIVIC was established in 2003 by Marla Ruzicka, a young humanitarian who advocated on behalf of civilians affected by the war in Iraq and Afghanistan. Honoring Marla's legacy, CIVIC has kept an unflinching focus on the protection of civilians in conflict. Today, CIVIC has a presence in conflicts and capitals throughout the world, where it collaborates with civilians to bring their protection concerns directly to those in power, engages with armed actors to reduce the harm they cause to civilian populations, and advises governments, the United Nations and multinational bodies on how to make life-saving and lasting policy changes.

CIVIC's strength is its proven approach and record of improving protection outcomes for civilians by working directly with conflict-affected communities and armed actors and by drawing on research for evidence-based policy engagement and advocacy with decision makers, practitioners, and influential actors. At CIVIC, we believe civilians are not "collateral damage" and that civilian harm is not an unavoidable consequence of conflict—civilian harm can and must be prevented.

The Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) is an independent humanitarian organization helping people forced to flee.

Founded in 1946, today NRC works in both new and protracted crises across 40 countries, providing life-saving and long-term assistance to millions of people every year. NRC specializes in six areas: food security, shelter, education, legal assistance, protection from violence, and water, sanitation and hygiene.

NRC works with partners across the world through NORCAP, a global provider of humanitarian, development and peacebuilding expertise. NORCAP collaborates with local, national and international partners on finding sustainable solutions to meet the needs of people at risk.

A determined advocate, NRC promotes and defends displaced people's rights and dignity in local communities, with national governments and in the international arena. NRC also runs the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre in Geneva, a global leader in reporting on and advocating for people displaced within their own country.

The majority of the 15,000 humanitarians who work with NRC are hired locally in the field. Many have been displaced themselves. All projects are supervised by NRC's head office in Oslo.

The Global Protection Cluster (GPC) is a network of nongovernment organizations (NGOs), international organizations and United Nations (UN) agencies, engaged in protection work in humanitarian crises including armed conflict and disasters.

The GPC is mandated by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), led by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), governed by a Strategy Advisory Group, co-chaired by the GPC Coordinator and an operational NGO, and serviced by a multi-partner Operations Cell.

The GPC united members, partners and communities working on the full gamut of protection activities, including in Child Protection (CP), Gender-Based Violence (GBV), Housing, Land and Property (HLP) and Mine Action (MA).

The GPC contributes to and benefits from the broader IASC system, the Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), various human rights treaty bodies and key development and peacebuilding and peacekeeping actors, and through building partnerships with international financial institutions and the private sector.

For more information about our work, please visit our website.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

ACRONYMS

ABA:	American Bar Association
AU:	African Union
CAN:	Community Alert Network
CAR:	Central African Republic
CCA:	Common Country Analysis
CIVIC:	Center for Civilians in Conflict
CLA:	Community Liaison Assistant
CMCoord/UN-CMCoord:	Civil–Military Coordination
CPC:	Conseil de la Protection Civile
DDR:	Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration
DRC:	Democratic Republic of the Congo
DPPA:	Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs
DSS:	Department of Safety and Security
ECOWAS:	Economic Community of West African States
FARDC:	Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo
GNP:	Gross National Product
GPC:	Global Protection Cluster
HCT:	Humanitarian Country Team
HRDDP:	Human Rights Due Diligence Policy
IASC:	Inter-Agency Standing Committee
INGO:	International Non-Governmental Organization
INSO:	International NGO Safety Organization
ISW:	Integrated Security Workforce
MARA:	Monitoring, Analysis, and Reporting Arrangements
MONUSCO:	UN Stabilization Mission in the DRC
MINUSCA:	UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic
MINUSMA:	UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali

MRM:	Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism
NGO:	Non-Governmental Organization
NNGO:	National Non-Governmental Organization
NRC:	Norwegian Refugee Council
OCHA:	Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
OHCHR:	Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights
OROLSI:	Office of Rule of Law and Security Institutions
POC:	Protection of Civilians
RSRTF:	Reconciliation, Stabilization, and Resilience Trust Fund
SADC:	Southern African Development Community
SLT:	Saving Lives Together framework
SRSG:	Special Representative of the Secretary-General
UN:	United Nations
UNAMA:	UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan
UNAMI:	UN Assistance Mission for Iraq
UNAMID:	AU-UN Hybrid Operation in Darfur
UNDP:	UN Development Programme
UNFPA:	UN Population Fund
UNHAS:	UN Humanitarian Air Service
UNHCR:	UN High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF:	UN Children's Fund
UNITAMS:	UN Integrated Transition Assistance Mission in Sudan
UNMAS:	UN Mine Action Service
UNMISS:	UN Mission in South Sudan
UNSOM:	UN Assistance Mission in Somalia
UNTMIS:	UN Transitional Assistance Mission in Somalia
USAID:	United States Agency for International Development

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I. INTRODUCTION

UN peacekeeping is experiencing a crisis of confidence. Though conflict levels have nearly doubled in the past five years,[1] some UN member states, including host countries, appear to be questioning peacekeeping as a tool to manage conflict. The UN Security Council has not authorized a new peacekeeping mission in more than a decade, and missions are being forced to leave countries due to political or budgetary pressures, even as conflict and violence against civilians persist at high levels. This reality has prompted a need for new thinking about how protection is managed in the context of mission departures. Previously, conversations on protection during transitions focused on the need for gradual mission withdrawals based on meeting protection benchmarks, but these ideas now need to be complemented with more pragmatic discussions of what protection looks like when missions leave countries amid ongoing high levels of violence and with little partnership or cooperation from the host government.

The departure[2] of a UN peacekeeping mission generally means significant reductions of assets and capabilities that can affect many types of protection capacities for the actors who remain on the ground. These affected protection capacities include a security umbrella from which other protection actors often benefit directly or indirectly; significant and consistent funding for activities that contribute directly or indirectly to protection; considerable infrastructure, including bases, airstrips, roadworks, medical facilities, and UN mission flights from which other protection actors often benefit directly or indirectly; protection-specific data collection, reporting, and analysis; and national and international attention drawn to protection issues.

This study looks at how humanitarian and human rights protection actors—that is, UN agencies, funds, and programmes, international non-governmental organizations (INGOs), and national non-governmental organizations (NNGOs) whose mandates or objectives include protection[3]—that remain on the ground can manage the protection gaps that may emerge when UN peacekeeping missions depart. It begins by examining ten specific capacities for which protection gaps are likely to arise:

- Physical protection
- Early warning
- Community engagement and community-based protection
- Political engagement and mediation
- Protection strategy and coordination
- Human rights
- Mine action
- Disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration
- Rule of law
- Security, logistics, and access services

March 24, 2018, CAR: A MINUSCA Cameroonian police armored truck patrols in Bangassou.

The study briefly assesses how each of these capacities may be affected by mission departures and suggests ideas for protection actors to consider in navigating gaps that may arise for each. It then presents strategic or cross-cutting considerations for protection in the context of UN mission departures.

The study is informed by a review of literature on mission withdrawals as well as interviews with more than 35 key informants from UN and non-UN entities with expertise in protection or peace operations conducted between March and April 2025. It draws on examples from several UN peacekeeping and special political mission contexts, but particularly from three settings where peacekeeping missions have departed or are in the process of planning departures: the abrupt withdrawal of the UN peacekeeping Mission in Mali (the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali, or MINUSMA) at the directive of the Malian transition government in 2023; the gradual transition of the African Union-United Nations peacekeeping Mission in Sudan (the AU-UN Hybrid Operation in Sudan, or UNAMID) in 2020, followed by the abrupt closure of its successor special political mission (the UN Integrated Transition Assistance Mission in Sudan, or UNITAMS) at the directive of the Sudanese government in 2024; and the gradual withdrawal of the UN peacekeeping Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo (the UN Stabilization Mission in the DRC, or MONUSCO), which is ongoing.[4]

II. IMPLICATIONS FOR PHYSICAL PROTECTION

The departure of uniformed peacekeepers providing physical protection is one of the most obvious changes in protection capacity with a mission's departure. Given that many peacekeeping mission departures now happen in the context of high levels of ongoing violence against civilians, the loss of armed peacekeepers with advanced and specialized training, policies, mandates, and operational capabilities for the protection of civilians often creates a major protection gap. This loss is sometimes described as a "security cliff."[5] State security actors may lack capacity or will to protect, and in several recent peacekeeping transition contexts have been among the most significant perpetrators of violence against civilians. The loss of peacekeeping missions' senior uniformed leadership, such as force commanders and police commissioners, may mean less ready or consistent engagement from state security counterparts on protection issues and less compliance with international human rights law and international humanitarian law. Either or both would exacerbate the risk of increased physical protection threats after a mission's departure.

Parallel or bilateral forces may also be present; however, they may not have mandates to protect civilians and are unlikely to have protection capacities comparable to UN peacekeepers. On the contrary, these actors—including private military and security companies—may in some cases be deployed specifically to target certain civilians while allowing the government to evade responsibility. As a mission departs, militias or self-defense groups may proliferate, and armed actors may vie for control over areas from which peacekeepers have withdrawn. Both dynamics increase protection risks.[6]

There are very limited actions that protection actors can take to navigate the physical protection gap. First, a few organizations, of which the most well-known is Nonviolent Peaceforce, may provide protective presence or accompaniment to deter violence. This type of unarmed protection is only effective in specific conflict conditions, however, and as a deterrent to specific kinds of armed actors. It cannot be used in all areas where armed peacekeepers had been present. Other protection actors may also provide a protective presence if their physical presence is a deterrent to violence by specific kinds of armed actors (for example, those with an interest in gaining international legitimacy or those seeking to earn the trust of local communities who benefit from the protection actors' presence). This can be the case even if it is not part of a deliberate strategy of unarmed civilian protection. In Mali, for example, OCHA made a push to decentralize its footprint after MINUSMA's departure (primarily in order to enable service delivery), but its wider footprint in the country may also have had a protective effect.[7]

> *The loss of armed peacekeepers with advanced and specialized training, policies, mandates, and operational capabilities for the protection of civilians often creates a major protection gap.*

The second way that protection actors may be able to navigate the physical protection gap is if protection actors engage with state security actors or other armed actors—such as parallel or bilateral armed forces—on protection threats posed by their personnel, which may have increased in the wake of the mission's departure. Groups such as Geneva Call, the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, and CIVIC regularly engage armed actors on adherence to international humanitarian law and other protection concerns. However, it can be more challenging to operationalize this engagement in environments with weak command and control. Nonviolent Peaceforce, for example, focuses its engagement on local actors such as checkpoint soldiers and local commanders in environments with weak command and control, while engaging more evenly at different levels across the chain of command in other environments.[8]

A third way that protection actors can potentially approach the physical protection gap is if they take measures to reduce communities' exposure to threats and minimize the likelihood of harm even if efforts to improve the threat environment have been unsuccessful. The Norwegian Refugee Council, for example, takes a three-pronged approach to supporting protection from violence. It involves addressing threats (e.g., through mediation), reducing communities' vulnerabilities to those threats (e.g., by supporting individuals to leave violence-affected areas if necessary), and enhancing coping capacities (e.g., through community-based support).

Ideas that protection actors could explore include:

- **Advocating to donors to support protection-specific capacities for organizations** other than the UN that have deployed or may deploy missions with protection mandates or objectives in contexts where UN peacekeeping missions are departing. These entities could include the African Union as well as subregional organizations such as SADC and ECOWAS, which lag behind the African Union in developing protection policies and processes. Capacities could include protection advisors, civil–military coordination personnel, protection training materials and delivery, and protection policies (e.g., adapting the African Union's protection of civilians policy for subregional organizations).

- **Advocating to peacekeeping missions to support inclusive and integrated assessment** and planning that involves host states, UN Country Teams, humanitarians, and civil society in advance of mission withdrawals from an area. In the DRC, the government opposed the involvement of non-UN actors in planning conversations about FARDC presence after MONUSCO's departure from some areas of the country. It preferred to have these conversations only with MONUSCO and other UN entities.[9] Support for more inclusive planning processes from a peacekeeping mission could help ensure that other protection actors can better anticipate the physical protection gaps that will arise and continue coordinating with state security forces about protection needs after the mission's departure.

- **Engaging in joint analysis with the peacekeeping mission through the Protection Cluster** at the field level to identify the armed actors who may be most likely to be deterred from using violence by the presence of unarmed international or national protection actors. Using that analysis can then inform decision-making about where to concentrate their presence after a mission withdraws.

- **Undertaking holistic risk reduction programming that works in parallel to address threats**, reduce vulnerabilities, and increase the coping capacities of communities in areas affected by conflict. UN and Humanitarian Country Teams, Protection Clusters, and donors could proactively encourage and support these types of protection approaches.

III. IMPLICATIONS FOR EARLY WARNING

Several peacekeeping missions, including the missions in CAR, DRC, Mali, and South Sudan, have developed early warning and early response systems or standard operating procedures.[10] These are mechanisms that enable communities to contact the mission and/or state security actors when protection incidents are imminent or underway. In the DRC, for example, MONUSCO has maintained a large early warning system called Community Alert Networks (CANs) that enables communities to contact the Mission with alerts. The Mission can then assess alerts and deploy a response or pass the information on to state security actors to respond as appropriate.

In Mali, the Mission had no time to try transferring the management of its early warning system to other actors before its departure. But even where missions do try, early warning can represent a significant protection gap after the mission's departure. In some areas from which MONUSCO has withdrawn, such as Tanganyika[11] and South Kivu,[12] MONUSCO transferred management of its early warning systems to a body within the national Ministry of the Interior called the Conseil de la protection civile (CPC). The CPC's capacity to maintain these systems is unclear, however, as the office was not established to focus on the protection of civilians from violent conflict but from other types of threats such as natural disasters.[13] CIVIC assessed that in Tanganyika, "despite assistance from the ABA and its status as a government entity, CPC has extremely limited capacity and uncertain funding prospects."[14]

> *While protection actors could, in theory, take steps to support early warning mechanisms previously supported by a departing mission, they may be unlikely to do so in practice.*

In many settings, early warning networks are managed in part by Community Liaison Assistants (CLAs)—national staff who liaise between missions and local communities to support the exchange of protection information, receive and verify alerts, and sustain engagement with community focal points to keep early warning networks up to date. CLAs often have institutional memory about specific protection actions that peacekeepers tried to undertake, whether they were effective, and why or why not, as well as a detailed understanding of each threat actor. Other protection actors often do not have access to this information.[15] CLAs therefore represent a uniquely valuable protection capacity that can be lost when a mission withdraws. For example, after MONUSCO's withdrawal from South Kivu, InterAction and the Protection Cluster reported that "none of the approximately 30 CLAs were retained within the residual capacity." Other actors had hired a few, but only "sporadically due to lack of funding and awareness levels."[16]

While protection actors could, in theory, take steps to support early warning mechanisms previously supported by a departing mission, they may be unlikely to do so in practice. Depending on the state's willingness and ability to protect communities, early warning systems may not be linked to any response capacity or action from security actors. For example, after MINUSMA's departure, the Malian transition government made a limited attempt (at their own initiative) to provide "green line" telephone numbers for communities to call if they needed help. But, given the state security forces' role in the conflict, other actors are reluctant to engage on any early warning mechanisms that involve them.[17]

There may be differences in how different types of protection actors approach supporting early warning systems. For example, the CPC's early warning support in the DRC has focused heavily on supporting the temporary evacuation of communities in response to protection threats, whereas international humanitarian protection actors would generally see facilitated evacuations as a measure of last resort.[18] These different approaches may also deter some protection actors from collaborating closely with early warning systems after a mission's departure.

Ideas that protection actors could explore include:

- **Advocating to currently deployed missions to start engaging with national authorities** (where appropriate) and/or other actors (like INGOs or NNGOs) to give them roles in maintaining early warning systems with a view to strengthening their sustainability after a mission's departure. This could also include embedding early warning systems within national protection or prevention strategies. Alternatively, in contexts where state security services are unlikely to provide protection if contacted through early warning systems, protection actors could engage missions in discussions about transitioning early warning systems into community-based protection mechanisms (see next section).

- **Engaging currently deployed missions and UN Country Teams in a conversation** about options to link early warning systems to other UN peacebuilding or conflict prevention strategies or programs to enhance their sustainability after those missions depart. Lessons could be drawn from successful examples of conflict prevention initiatives by UN Country Teams in non-mission settings—for example, in Kenya, the Resident Coordinator "supported the launch of the Uwiano Platform for Peace, pulling together various national conflict analysis capacities and early warning networks and coordinating electoral violence prevention efforts among a range of actors."[19]

- **Coordinating with missions before their departure to facilitate the hiring**—where possible and appropriate—of Community Liaison Assistants and other national staff who have experience working with communities on protection and early warning by other international and national protection actors. Hiring CLAs may not be the right decision for all protection actors, however. For example, some actors may have concerns that this would associate them too much with an unpopular mission.

IV. IMPLICATIONS FOR COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND COMMUNITY-BASED PROTECTION

In addition to supporting early warning mechanisms, UN peacekeeping missions develop and support other mechanisms to support communication and engagement with communities. These mechanisms enable missions to exchange information with communities about protection risks and support and to reinforce community-based protection approaches and interventions. Reinforcing community-based protection can include a wide array of activities, including supporting community-led mediation or conflict prevention initiatives, offering training to enable community members to negotiate with armed actors, and sharing resources that allow community leaders to connect members of the community with victim support services.

> *Mission departures can create protection gaps for community-based protection given their large footprint and resources, their convening power, and their ability to maintain a presence in areas that are harder for many other actors to access.*

Other protection actors, such as NGOs, usually maintain their own community networks and may be more advanced than UN peacekeeping missions in supporting community-based protection.[20] Nevertheless, mission departures can create protection gaps for community-based protection given their large footprint and resources, their convening power, and their ability to maintain a presence in areas that are harder for many other actors to access. Missions like MONUSCO may have been working with structures like Local Protection Committees for a long time over the course of their deployments, for example, and they can be important sources of connection with communities directly experiencing the impacts of violence and conflict. They often have the greatest expertise in terms of protection priorities, entry points for engaging with armed actors, and potential actions that can support people's protection. Yet missions may miss opportunities to engage other protection actors, including non-UN actors, in continuing to support community structures that were established or supported by the mission. For example, UNAMID has been criticized for not doing more to ensure continuity of support for the Women's Protection Network in Zamzam camp during its transition.[21] Similarly, MONUSCO did not engage other actors to provide continued support for Local Protection Committees before its withdrawal from South Kivu.

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November 6, 2021, DRC: *Armoured vehicles belonging to Uruguayan army units attached to United Nations peacekeeping operations move through Djugu Territory, Ituri Province.*

Other protection actors may sometimes prefer not to support community structures established by peacekeeping missions. Some protection actors have expressed concern, for example, that mission-supported structures are sometimes insufficiently representative of marginalized communities or demographics compared to those supported by NGOs, or that they may not always prove to be resilient if violence resumes after the mission's departure.[22] Indeed, if left unsupported, these structures may not have the resources they need to sustain themselves after mission departures. In South Kivu, MONUSCO took steps to reinforce local networks in preparation for its withdrawal from the province, but repeated rounds of displacement have now badly damaged those networks, including through basic challenges like loss of connectivity or mobile phone credit.[23]

Mission withdrawals can also create new security dynamics that disrupt other protection actors' community-based protection activities. In CAR, one INGO found that when MINUSCA withdrew from an area, the security vacuum was filled by local self-defense militias and there was an influx of weapons.[24] This undermined the organization's work to support non-violent community-based protection approaches through, for example, strengthening capacities to negotiate for protection or humanitarian access.[25]

Ideas that protection actors could explore include:

- **Working with donors to make funding available to put much greater emphasis** on community-based protection as a resilient approach to protection in current mission contexts, including by exploring which flexible financing options might be best suited to support community-based protection mechanisms. This funding could be designed to enhance risk management for community members and local civil society organizations involved in community-based protection mechanisms.

- **Conducting a stakeholder mapping in advance of or during mission transitions to identify** which community mechanisms exist and their capacities, as well as to enable greater coordination and efficiencies among other protection actors in engaging with these mechanisms after a mission's departure. This mapping effort could potentially be led by the Protection Cluster, ideally in partnership with or with input from the mission. For example, the DRC Protection Cluster centered community-based protection mechanisms in its 2024 strategy and "mapped these mechanisms in South Kivu to improve coordination, avoid duplication, and build a strategy based on existing community structures."[26]

- **Engaging currently deployed missions on options to continue support for community** mechanisms such as Local Protection Committees after their eventual departures. This could include, for example, potentially involving INGOs or NNGOs in the management of these mechanisms.

- **Working with currently deployed peacekeeping missions to assess and enhance** the representativeness of the community structures they support, with a view to enhancing the effectiveness and sustainability of community-based protection after missions depart.

V. IMPLICATIONS FOR POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT AND MEDIATION

The departure of a UN peacekeeping or special political mission also means the loss of a Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG), who can usually engage politically on a consistent basis with national and regional senior leadership on protection. There may not always be another actor in the country that can effectively play this role. For example, UNITAMS chaired the Permanent Ceasefire Committee for Darfur, composed of representatives from the Sudanese government, signatory armed groups, and the neighboring countries of Chad and Sudan. This mechanism was considered an effective tool for monitoring and verifying violations and resolving disputes, but the mechanism dissolved with no well-placed actor to continue to lead it after UNITAMS's abrupt closure.[27]

Even in contexts where there is a UN special envoy or personal envoy, these individuals may have fewer opportunities to engage on protection issues. For example, a small number of UNITAMS personnel joined the office of the Personal Envoy for Sudan and attempted to continue some of their political engagement using their existing networks, but this work was very limited and informal given the office's limited mandate and capacities.[28] Some may also perceive a tension between their need to gain the trust of all parties, their need to be perceived as neutral in order to advance a political process, and their need to engage strongly on protection issues. UN regional envoys could, in theory, continue political engagement with governments on protection issues after mission departures, but they do not always see themselves as having active roles to play in this arena. In these regards, engagement through the Resident Coordinator or Humanitarian Coordinator may reduce the risk of humanitarian protection issues becoming politicized or instrumentalized when compared to engagement through the good offices of special envoys or regional envoys.[29]

> *Non-mission entities may have a particularly difficult time finding entry points with relevant government authorities on protection issues. This is particularly true for non-UN entities.*

Non-mission entities may have a particularly difficult time finding entry points with relevant government authorities on protection issues. This is particularly true for non-UN entities. As one interviewee described, "It's hard to fill the gap left by a mission leader. Often, we are pawned off on a social services department in the government, which has very little influence over anything."[30] Since MINUSMA's departure from Mali, there are very few actors able to engage with the transition government directly to advocate for the state to protect civilians due to government hostility and the sensitivity of the topic.[31]

The loss of UN mission flights and other infrastructure support can also create a significant gap in political engagement and mediation at the sub-national level. In some mission contexts, such as CAR, national authorities are heavily reliant on missions to transport them within the country to engage in political dialogues with armed groups or discuss protection concerns with their constituents.[32] MINUSCA has also played an important role in facilitating the deployment of state officials—such as prefects, who engage constituents on security matters—to their assigned duty stations outside the capital.

Ideas that protection actors could explore include:

- **Engaging the UN Secretariat, particularly DPPA and UN agencies**, on how to elevate protection priorities in engagements by UN special envoys, regional envoys, and other senior leaders. The Protection Support Hub proposed in the Agenda for Protection,[33] if operationalized, could offer opportunities to ensure that protection priorities are consistently included in talking points when senior UN officials meet with national leaders.

- **Exploring options with the UN Secretariat and UN agencies** for expanding and reinforcing Resident Coordinator and Humanitarian Coordinator offices to conduct more political engagement on protection. This could include training and political support from New York for Resident Coordinators and Humanitarian Coordinators to actively engage parties to conflicts on protection concerns. Although the current funding environment is not favorable to the expansion of these offices, protection actors could explore advocating for Peace and Development Advisors to be prioritized in Resident Coordinator offices in peacekeeping transition contexts. They could also potentially explore advocating for a wider range of UN specialized capabilities aimed at mitigating protection gaps after the departure of UN peacekeeping operations or special political missions. These could include, for example, small capacities focused on Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) or rule of law, as discussed further below, as these capacities may be relatively inexpensive if drawn from existing standing capacities.

- **Reframing engagements with conflict parties**, where appropriate, using language to which parties may be more receptive. For example, in Mali, the government is extremely resistant to language about human rights violations but has been willing to engage in discussions with some protection actors about taking into account the needs of the population when conducting military operations.[34] Similarly, some organizations find that local interlocutors may be more willing to engage when issues are framed around reducing violence rather than protection,[35] or when framed around the specific political costs to that actor of harming civilians.[36]

- **Increasing engagement with UN special rapporteurs and mandate holders in Geneva** to explore whether they may be able to play more active roles in raising protection issues with senior interlocutors.

VI. IMPLICATIONS FOR PROTECTION STRATEGY AND COORDINATION

The departure of a UN peacekeeping mission often has important implications for strategic coordination among protection actors, but these effects are complex and specific to each context. Depending on the country context and the specific protection actor concerned, a mission's departure may have more or less significant implications for protection coordination funding and personnel. For actors that have received funding through the mission (such as UN Mine Action Service [UNMAS], OHCHR, and DDR), a mission's departure may mean the loss of personnel and funding that enabled coordination with other protection actors. Depending on the setting, for example, the mission's protection of civilians (POC) advisor may have participated in the Protection Cluster or other coordination mechanisms. More indirectly, a mission's departure may contribute to reduced international attention on a crisis generally and/or on protection issues within that crisis specifically. Over time, this decreased attention may result in donors providing less funding for protection coordination to other protection actors.

> *A mission's departure may also have variable effects in different contexts on other protection actors' footprint in the country, which may in turn affect their coordination on protection monitoring and service delivery.*

A mission's departure may also have variable effects in different contexts on other protection actors' footprint in the country, which may in turn affect their coordination on protection monitoring and service delivery. Depending on the level of insecurity in a given country, some protection actors may not be able to maintain their previous presence in specific areas after the mission's departure. Moreover, in settings with abrupt mission withdrawals, the mission's departure may create new security vacuums and dynamics that may prompt other protection actors to change their physical presence in the country. For example, a mission's departure may prompt protection actors to attempt more or different kinds of area-based coordination to ensure that protection data can be collected and protection programming can be delivered to as many vulnerable communities as possible. This what happened when UNHCR, as lead agency of the Protection Cluster in Mali, coordinated with two of its protection monitoring implementing partners to reposition their teams in an effort to enhance monitoring in the wake of MINUSMA's departure. They attempted to increase their visibility in areas that MINUSMA had vacated and from which they were now receiving much less protection information, as well as in border areas where there were increased cross-border movements that represented protection threats.[37]

One important protection gap that may emerge after the departure of a UN peacekeeping mission relates to the development of a comprehensive protection strategy. All missions with a protection of civilians mandate are required to develop a protection strategy. This strategy is informed by a comprehensive analysis of threat actors, vulnerabilities, and protection capacities in the country. After the mission departs, however, there is no standard process for ensuring that the work of the UN Country Team is informed by this kind of systematic protection analysis. This gap is a particular concern due to the recent reduction in the capacity

of Peace and Development Advisors, whose roles include ensuring that Resident Coordinators' offices are provided with conflict analysis and advice on conflict-sensitive programming. Although the Protection Cluster has primary responsibility to produce comprehensive protection analysis, a 2022 independent review examining the implementation of the IASC protection policy found that this analysis was "often focused on the institutional priorities of UNHCR and the [areas of responsibility] rather than driven by a detailed analysis of risks and patterns of abuse for affected populations."[38]

Moreover, once the mission departs, there is no formal place for a protection strategy to be housed to ensure that it has institutional relevance for the full UN Country Team. Humanitarian Country Teams (HCTs) are meant to have an HCT Protection Strategy, but this strategy focuses exclusively on the activities of humanitarian actors. In some contexts, the UN Country Team may have integrated protection elements into the UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework, but this is not done systematically. In several contexts where missions have departed or where transitions are being discussed, there have been requests of the HCT or Protection Cluster to develop a POC strategy—often in addition to the HCT Protection Strategy and the Protection Cluster operational strategy. Both the HCT and Protection Cluster strategies should already include some elements of protection and risk reduction, but neither is well-placed to take on the broader dimensions of a protection strategy—notably, incorporating the political, peacebuilding, and human rights dimensions that are critical to successful protection. Indeed, humanitarian personnel have reported that the articulation of another protection strategy under the HCT or Protection Cluster adds little value, and that it creates duplication and added work for those tasked with drafting and implementing it.

The various protection coordination implications outlined above may also prompt protection actors to consider whether new coordination structures are needed after mission departures. Two of the most important coordination mechanisms relevant to protection are the Humanitarian Country Team and the Protection Cluster; however, these are specifically for humanitarian personnel and do not coordinate the work of development, political, or peacebuilding actors. However, some actors may believe that the standard coordination processes facilitated by these two structures may not be sufficient in some contexts. In Sudan, for example, there is an ongoing discussion about whether to create a protection of civilians working group and, if so, whether this should be housed in the office of the Deputy Humanitarian Coordinator or the Protection Cluster. Yet many protection actors interviewed for this study were generally reluctant to support the establishment of new mechanisms on top of existing ones, as these may add unnecessary layers of bureaucracy and place greater demands on the time and resources of protection personnel.

Ideas that protection actors could explore include:

- **Ensuring that Protection Clusters are sensitized to recent steps** by the Global Protection Cluster to enhance comprehensive protection analysis, including through the consistent application of the 2021 Protection Analytical Framework.[39]

- **Working with the UN Country Team to embed the Protection Cluster's protection analysis** within the Common Country Analysis (CCA), as proposed in the Agenda for Protection.[40] This could help ensure that the work of the broader UN Country Team is informed by protection analysis after a mission's departure.

- **Developing a joint Humanitarian Country Team and UN Country Team protection strategy** during a mission's transition or after a mission's withdrawal, drawing on the capacities of humanitarian, development, human rights, and peacebuilding actors who sit across the two fora. This strategy should be explored if protection actors on the ground determine that doing so would add value.

- If relevant to the country context, **exploring whether the Resident Coordinator and/or the Humanitarian Coordinator** could engage the government on developing a national protection strategy with support from the Humanitarian Country Team and/or the Protection Cluster.

VII. IMPLICATIONS FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

A major factor for protection capacity gaps after the departure of a mission with a human rights mandate from the Security Council is whether OHCHR is able to retain a presence on the ground. Governments do not always allow this—for example, the transition government in Mali did not support an ongoing OHCHR presence in the country.[41] The risk that OHCHR will not be able to retain a presence also exists in numerous current peacekeeping and special political mission settings where there are no host country agreements with OHCHR. These contexts include CAR, South Sudan, Iraq, Afghanistan, Abyei, Libya, Haiti, and Somalia.

If OHCHR does retain a presence, gaps are likely to emerge related to fewer resources and reduced access.[42] For example, MONUSCO's departure from South Kivu meant a reduction from fifteen personnel on the human rights team to seven (funded by the Mission for one year as a buffer, after which OHCHR will need to fund any remaining personnel). OHCHR anticipates that MONUSCO's full withdrawal could mean going from a human rights team of more than 130 personnel to around 30.[43] This loss of MONUSCO security and logistics support in South Kivu has meant having to employ more laborious methods of remote monitoring on top of the reduced capacity.[44] Moreover, it creates additional access challenges for OHCHR, such as pre-arrival efforts to check for safety and security risks, security escorts to establish a safe perimeter, and access to armored personnel carriers.[45] UN protection actors have sometimes been able to work with national actors to supplement their own reduced human rights capacity. For example, after MONUSCO's withdrawal from Tanganyika, the residual UN capacity on conflict-related sexual violence collaborated with a local civil society partner to verify and follow up on alleged attacks in one area, and it drew on a WhatsApp group established by a Ministry of the Interior entity to conduct remote verification in another.[46]

In contexts where OHCHR is unable to retain a field presence after the mission's departure, there is generally a significant gap in human rights monitoring and reporting, which no other UN entity is mandated to carry out (with the exception of monitoring and reporting pursuant to the conflict-related sexual violence and children in armed conflict agendas, as discussed below). Non-UN human rights actors may be able to continue monitoring and sharing human rights information, but many have been heavily reliant on the peacekeeping mission for capacity-building opportunities and financial resources. Moreover, non-UN human rights actors may be more vulnerable to intimidation or violence from those perpetrating human rights violations than are UN actors. In Mali, the very high risk of retaliation against NNGOs means that virtually none of them are in a position to report publicly on human rights abuses.[47] In such settings, local civil society groups, NNGOs, and INGOs may still carry out human rights monitoring work, but they often do so without public reporting, with less systematic coverage across the country, and with less ability to draw attention from the international community.

If neither a mission nor OHCHR are present on the ground, other agencies are mandated to continue monitoring and reporting on conflict-related sexual violence through the Monitoring, Analysis, and Reporting Arrangements (MARA). They are also mandated to continue monitoring and reporting on children in armed conflict through the Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism (MRM) on grave violations committed against children in times of armed conflict. However, gaps can arise with these mechanisms in the context of sudden mission withdrawals. In Mali and Sudan, the abrupt closures of MINUSMA and UNITAMS led to challenges with ensuring the continued production of the MARA. Though OHCHR and UNFPA would normally co-lead this task after a mission's departure, OHCHR was not permitted to

October 9, 2020, Mali: Aerial view of the city of Sévaré, in the Mopti region in central Mali.

establish a field presence in Mali after MINUSMA's departure and there were concerns about UNFPA's capacity and resourcing to engage on the MARA.[48] Specifically, UNFPA assessed that it had capacity to facilitate coordination for the MARA but not to conduct direct monitoring or engagement with parties to the conflict.[49] In Iraq, it remains unclear which entity will be able to take on responsibility for the MARA after UNAMI's departure.[50]

By contrast, when the Somali government proposed the departure of the UN special political mission (UNSOM—UN Assistance Mission in Somalia), the Security Council took a phased approach to the transition. It replaced UNSOM with the UN Transitional Assistance Mission in Somalia (UNTMIS), to focus on a limited set of transition priorities with a view to an anticipated closure over a two-year period.[51] UNTMIS's mandate includes the promotion of human rights, and this approach allowed the human rights team to maintain work on the sexual violence in conflict and child protection agendas while providing a two-year window for the UN Country Team to plan for the transition of this work.

The reduction in human rights capacities also has a knock-on effect related to the application of the UN's Human Rights Due Diligence Policy (HRDDP). The HRDDP requires all UN entities to conduct human rights risk assessments and apply appropriate measures to mitigate risks when providing any

support to state security actors. With fewer human rights monitors in place, it is harder to gather and analyze information that would inform an effective application of the HRDDP, including information about misconduct by specific individuals or units within the state security sector. This in turn makes it harder for UN entities to use the HRDDP as a tool to incentivize good conduct and discipline or disincentivize misconduct from state security forces.[52] This gap may be significant in contexts like Somalia, where there may be high levels of ongoing support to state security institutions as well as to the AU mission in Somalia even as the political mission there plans its transition. Although the HRDDP must also be applied by members of the UN Country Team, these entities use different standard operating procedures for its application and often do not have the resources to apply the HRDDP in as rigorous a way.

Ideas that protection actors could explore include:

- **Encouraging other UN member states to engage with host governments** in current UN peacekeeping and special political mission contexts to promote the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding that would enable OHCHR to retain a presence in the country independent of a UN mission.

- **Encouraging UN missions, OHCHR, and donors to invest** more heavily in strengthening local and national human rights capacities and networks, with a view to sustainability after a mission's departure.

- **Encouraging donors to continue supporting funding for OHCHR** to continue conducting human rights monitoring and reporting activities and supporting the application of the HRDDP even when not permitted to maintain a presence in the relevant country.

- **Encouraging donors to support funding for other UN agencies** (such as UNICEF and UNFPA) to maintain the MARA and the MRM after mission departures, as well as encouraging member states to apply phased approaches to transitions—where possible—to give UN Country Teams more time to plan for taking on human rights responsibilities.

- **In contexts where OHCHR is unable to maintain a presence on the ground**, engaging in Geneva with relevant UN special rapporteurs and mandate holders (as well as OHCHR) to look for opportunities to draw member states' attention to human rights reporting by INGOs and NNGOs where appropriate.

VIII. IMPLICATIONS FOR MINE ACTION

In settings with peacekeeping operations or special political missions with relevant mine action mandates, UNMAS generally receives a majority of its funding through those missions. After the mission departs, that funding can shrink considerably. For example, the UNMAS budget in Mali shrank from $30–40 million per year to less than $1 million after MINUSMA's departure. Moreover, this quite limited funding came only after a six-month gap, and it only supported a year-long project. It has now dried up, and UNMAS is faced with the prospect of ending its presence in Mali altogether despite ongoing high needs and continued government interest.[53]

Loss of funding may force UNMAS to reduce or cut certain services after mission departures. In Mali, the funding drop meant having to reduce programming in most areas, as well as cutting many types of programming altogether, as in the case of victim assistance.[54] It can also include reductions to services like weapons and ammunitions management (including safe storage or destruction of weapons and ammunition), which can increase immediate protection risks for civilians.

Coordination roles, specifically, can be cut due to the drop in funding. For example, in Afghanistan, UNMAS retained a presence after the Taliban takeover of the country forced UNAMA to close or relocate most of its offices, but it has had to cut the post responsible for coordinating mine action due to reduced funding.[55] Though mine action coordination still happens, it is now done less consistently and without systematic linkages to the work of other protection actors or to other UN agencies' work.[56]

The lack of consistent coordination with protection actors can create protection risks when mine action work is implemented as a technical activity without a protection mindset. For example, a mine action actor applying a purely technical approach may enter an area, clear the land of explosives, and leave without assessing the potential for land ownership to be contested by conflict parties once cleared.[57] Similarly, they may fail to consider the order in which different areas are cleared and how that might create security vacuums or alter the dynamics of an ongoing conflict between communities.[58]

Data collection and analysis can also be undermined by the drop in funding after a mission's departure. In Mali, UNMAS had to stop providing analysis to the Protection Cluster after MINUSMA's departure due to reduced capacity.[59] In Afghanistan, a gap in funding after the 2021 Taliban takeover led to a six-month period during which mine action casualty data were not correctly collected or verified, and underreporting gave the misleading impression that risks to civilians were lower than they were in reality.[60]

The mission's departure and UNMAS's subsequent reduction in resources can also reduce engagement with government authorities on mine action. For example, MINUSMA's departure left a gap in coordination and information-sharing with the Malian military. The military used to share data relevant to mine action with the Mission through a liaison officer, and military officers used to receive training from MINUSMA on mine action topics. Neither of these activities has continued with UNMAS since the Mission's withdrawal.[61] (It is worth noting that this change might not have been triggered solely by the Mission's departure, per se; rather, the Mission's departure and the change in information-sharing might have both been caused by a change in government sentiment toward the UN.)

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August 15, 2017, CAR: *Women gather during a Catholic ceremony at Tokoyo Parish in Bangassou.*

Ideas that protection actors could explore include:

- **Considering an even greater shift toward hiring national staff**, as they can ensure greater continuity even as funding cuts may force the departure of many international staff. (Their salaries also generally cost less than those of international staff). In Sudan, UNMAS has raised enough funding after UNITAMS's departure to retain two personnel for mine action coordination—one international and one national staff member. It has found that its national staff member can play a particularly valuable role in the wake of UNITAMS's departure by leveraging good relationships with some government officials.

- **Considering whether the Protection Cluster** or OCHA could fill some gaps in data collection and analysis related to specialized protection capacities. For example, to avoid gaps in data collection on mine action, the Protection Cluster or OCHA could have information management personnel attend UNMAS trainings on data collection and entry so that maintenance of the UNMAS information management system database—whose data is shared with Protection Cluster members—can continue without interruption after a mission's departure.

IX. IMPLICATIONS FOR DISARMAMENT, DEMOBILIZATION, AND REINTEGRATION

Unlike UNMAS, the UN's DDR unit cannot currently operate in non-mission settings. Although it is mandated to be a UN system-wide service provider, it does not currently have the capacity to operate as robustly as UNMAS in non-mission settings. This can create significant gaps in light of the current tendency for the Security Council to end missions altogether rather than transitioning from a peacekeeping mission to a special political mission.[62] Moreover, the abrupt ending of sensitive DDR processes and programs can itself create new protection risks.

A particularly important gap can emerge in the political dimensions of protection through DDR. As with

> *Although UN peacekeeping missions tend to take a state-centric approach to DDR, more engagement with non-state actors could help create more continuity for protection efforts by other actors after a mission's departure.*

mine action, protection can be undermined when DDR is approached as a series of technical projects and not as a strategic political initiative. Similarly, DDR can create risks if it does not incorporate protection considerations such as a meaningful reintegration strategy that takes livelihoods into account. Notably, other actors can play important roles in implementing or supporting DDR technical programming after a mission's departure, including a wide array of UN agencies, funds, and programmes, international financial institutions like the World Bank, local civil society organizations, and INGOs. But a mission's departure can mean that there is no actor well-placed to ensure that this technical programming flows from and is consistent with a protection-informed political strategy, such as by working with national authorities to support the development of a protection-informed national DDR strategy and ensuring that the strategy is based on a comprehensive threat analysis of armed groups.[63]

Although UN peacekeeping missions tend to take a state-centric approach to DDR, more engagement with non-state actors could help create more continuity for protection efforts by other actors after a mission's departure. For example, MONUSCO's DDR section has engaged armed groups in the DRC to sign codes of conduct on the release and non-recruitment of children.[64] Codes of conduct could also be used to encourage other types of civilian harm mitigation by non-state armed actors. Other protection actors—including INGOs, NNGOs, and local civil society representatives—could then continue to engage these non-state actors on their adherence to codes of conduct after the mission's departure.

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October 6, 2017, CAR: A displaced man rides a bicycle in the PK3 IDP camp in Bria.

Ideas that protection actors could explore include:

- **Engaging with the Secretariat, UN agencies, funds, and programmes, and member states** to encourage creative modalities for the continuation of a small DDR capacity that can engage national authorities on developing and maintaining a protection-informed national strategy for DDR to guide program implementation by other actors. This capacity could be housed within the office of the Resident Coordinator or a relevant regional office, and could potentially draw on the standing capacity of the Office of Rule of Law and Security Institutions (OROLSI) in Brindisi. The capacity should also support coordination by national authorities with a wide range of implementing partners.

- **Exploring opportunities for UN DDR personnel to increase their engagement** with and input into the UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework as an alternate avenue to ensure that the work in support of DDR by the UN Country Team is informed by protection analysis and approaches after a mission's departure.

- **Advocating to peacekeeping operations and special political missions to engage** more directly with non-state armed actors—including armed groups as well as potentially private military and security companies—to promote protection (including through tools such as codes of conduct).

X. IMPLICATIONS FOR RULE OF LAW

Both peacekeeping operations and special political missions may be able to play important roles in advancing protection by strengthening the rule of law in a way that may be challenging for other protection actors to do. UNITAMS, for example, was able to use its political mandate, resources, and good offices to create political space for other actors to engage the government on rule of law issues, as well as to engage the government directly on some sensitive issues.[65] As part of this effort, the Mission brought in international forensics experts and put pressure on the government to allow them to support it on forensic analysis to advance the investigation of the Khartoum massacre on June 3, 2019.[66] The combination of the sensitivity of the issue, the use of the Mission's good offices, and the ability to bring in specialized technical capacities would be difficult for another protection actor to substitute.

After a mission departs, and if OHCHR is unable to retain a field presence, UN entities other than OHCHR may be mandated to conduct some human rights activities related to building national rule of law capacities that were previously carried out by the mission and/or OHCHR. For example, UNDP is mandated to support many rule of law capacity-building activities. Nevertheless, some protection capacity gaps can emerge—and some protection risks may even be created—if this work is not done in a protection-sensitive or human rights-sensitive way.[67] Progress has been made in recent years to develop parameters to mitigate these risks and ensure that projects are developed jointly between other agencies and OHCHR. However, in funding-scarce environments, competition over funds can disincentivize this kind of collaboration between agencies.[68]

Ideas that protection actors could explore include:

- **Engaging with the Secretariat, member states, and other UN agencies, funds, and programmes**, including the UN Development Coordination Office and UN OCHA, on whether an expanded Resident Coordinator's office or regional envoy's office could house a small capacity to enable the continuation of some types of rule of law work after a mission's departure.

- **Advocating for Peace and Development Advisors to be obligatory capacities** in all Resident Coordinator Offices in contexts where UN peacekeeping missions have departed in order to provide advice on this and other protection matters.

- **Engaging with OROLSI to explore opportunities for relevant protection actors** to benefit from OROLSI's standing capacity. This standing capacity has been deployed to Sudan, DRC, and Mali to support transition processes.[69]

XI. IMPLICATIONS FOR SECURITY, LOGISTICS, AND ACCESS SERVICES

One of the most tangible ways that some protection actors may feel the impact of a mission's departure is in the reduction of common services, such as the security services provided by security components of a peacekeeping mission and mission assets that can directly or indirectly facilitate access. While significant, the change is not perceived as uniformly negative by humanitarians. Across several contexts, NGOs have attempted to replace services that UN entities had been providing. For example, actors have been turning to the International NGO Safety Organisation (INSO) for security analysis otherwise provided by the UN.[70] On the one hand, non-UN organizations can sometimes provide more flexible, timely, and detailed responses; on the other hand, they have less capacity than their UN counterparts and may not be able to use information provided by NGOs to have the same impact on advocacy or programming.[71]

Security

The Integrated Security Workforce (ISW), composed of personnel from the UN Department of Safety and Security (DSS) as well as mission personnel, is responsible for facilitating the safe delivery of services and activities by UN entities. The ISW loses significant capacity with the closure of either a peacekeeping operation or a special political mission. While DSS employs some of its personnel directly, missions (particularly peacekeeping missions, which are often mandated to protect UN personnel and premises) generally fund a sizeable number of security personnel such as field security officers stationed at field offices. When a mission closes, those positions are lost; in some cases, this may mean losing more than half the security personnel on the ground.[72] In addition to personnel, the ISW may also lose capacities when missions withdraw, such as operations centers and medical and emergency evacuation capacities. Mission departures can therefore mean that UN protection actors may be trying to respond to greater protection needs while the UN security workforce has significantly less capacity to facilitate their activities.

UN DSS can employ a surge capacity by borrowing personnel serving in other duty stations, though this capacity has not been employed to support transitions thus far.[73] Also, in Iraq, there are ongoing conversations about whether UN agencies, funds, and programmes could relocate their offices to sites from which UNAMI will withdraw by the end of the year, as this would allow DSS to use fewer resources to support their security.[74] Yet many of the humanitarian actors interviewed for this study expressed frustration with what they saw as excessive risk aversion from DSS, which was limiting their protection activities. Some perceived this risk aversion as related to DSS approaches in former mission settings. For example, if DSS was used to evaluating risks in the context of a UN peacekeeping mission's deployment (e.g., having uniformed personnel present on the ground or having access to regular reporting on security risks from mission patrols or bases in remote locations), it may be more risk averse or influenced by more militarized security response measures in those contexts after the mission leaves. This seems to be a contrast to DSS approaches in contexts that have never had a peacekeeping mission.[75]

UN DSS can employ a surge capacity by borrowing personnel serving in other duty stations, though this capacity has not been employed to support transitions thus far.

Ideas that protection actors could explore include:

- **Engaging DSS in discussions about ideas to enhance coordination** and efficient use of resources in the context of mission departures under the Saving Lives Together (SLT) framework.[76] Some options could include a more systematic approach to co-location/consolidation of UN agencies, funds, and programmes; greater coordination of humanitarian actors' operations within the country to reduce the number of separate movements needed to the same locations by different organizations; the application of a DSS surge capacity during mission withdrawals; and, where appropriate, increased use of national or local civil society organizations to deliver services and programs. Approaches can be accompanied by appropriate risk-sharing modalities, as reduced transportation needs for these actors creates cost efficiencies, and national or local civil society personnel may have local contacts and expertise making implementation of certain programs less risky for them compared to UN personnel. These conversations could include general approaches for future mission transitions, as well as more specific conversations to plan for future transitions in current contexts with peacekeeping operations (e.g., CAR, DRC, and South Sudan) and special political missions (e.g., Somalia and Haiti).

Logistics

The loss of peacekeeping mission logistics support can create a significant capacity gap. In CAR, many humanitarian protection actors have been vocal about the need to maintain operational space and would not, for example, not use armed escort provided by MINUSCA even when recommended by DSS in order to adhere to global guidance and policy. They state that humanitarians will not use armed escorts except as a last resort.[77] Yet many of these organizations may rely on MINUSCA to conduct roadworks or bridge repairs to ensure that they can continue to access remote parts of the country, particularly during the rainy season.[78] In a separate example of mission logistics support, international UN staff were only permitted to remain overnight in some higher-risk areas of Mali if they stayed on a MINUSMA base.[79] In Sudan, one non-UN protection actor said that the loss of UN infrastructure in Darfur had made it much more difficult to send in international staff, thus putting a greater burden on national staff.[80] Indeed, NGOs' risk assessments, which enable them to travel to a particular area, may factor in the ability to rely on a mission for medical or casualty evacuation if needed, or their funding proposals to donors may factor in the ability to use mission logistics and assets.[81] Several humanitarians interviewed for this study expressed concerns that humanitarian protection actors, including non-UN actors, can become reliant on mission logistics support in contexts with long-term peacekeeping mission presence.

The logistics gap is often particularly felt in regards to air transport. Although the UN Humanitarian Air Service (UNHAS) continues to support air travel for humanitarians, these flights may become scarcer or more challenging after a mission's withdrawal because of the loss of mission resources to maintain and provide security for the air infrastructure and services used by both mission flights and UNHAS.[82] Currently, UNHAS flights are also seriously threatened by the ongoing drastic cuts to USAID as well as reductions in humanitarian assistance among other donor governments.

In Mali, MINUSMA helped maintain security and air traffic control at the airstrip in Menaka used for both MINUSMA and UNHAS flights. After the mission's departure, when it became the Malian authorities' responsibility to maintain security at the airstrip, several challenges arose that created concerning delays for UNHAS flights. First, there were initial concerns from some humanitarians that this would undermine armed groups' perception of humanitarians' impartiality. Then, there were delays from the Malian authorities in terms of indicating their willingness to provide security at the airstrip. And, even after both of these challenges were addressed, there was a capacity issue: the Malian authorities sometimes lacked basic resources such as the fuel needed to fulfil their responsibility to provide security.[83] Ultimately, a solution was reached with humanitarians providing fuel to the Malian authorities on an ad hoc and very limited basis and in only the amount needed to undertake a specific operation (so as to minimize the risk of diversion or misuse of the resources).[84]

Ideas that protection actors could explore include:

- **Developing a shared resource laying out how logistics costs increase with mission departures** and using this resource to sensitize donors when Security Council members begin discussing the future withdrawal of a UN mission.

- **Together with the World Food Progamme** (which operates UNHAS flights) and mission personnel, engaging government authorities prior to a mission's departure about how security at airstrips will be managed after the mission withdraws with the aim of developing a common understanding.

Access

In some settings, humanitarian access may become more limited after a peacekeeping mission departs due to a reduction in the security and logistical support that peacekeepers provide. A gap can arise in civil–military coordination after a peacekeeping mission departs, for example. This is particularly the case if there has been a reliance by humanitarian actors on peacekeeping missions to lead on engagement with armed actors regarding access, which several humanitarian protection actors interviewed for this study said they had observed in some settings. Notably, such a reliance can undermine humanitarian principles. Additionally, institutional frameworks including established protocols, communication channels, and joint operational procedures may facilitate more ready coordination by state security actors with uniformed peacekeepers than with humanitarians. OCHA's UN Civil–Military Coordination (UN-CMCoord) mechanism supports this function for all humanitarian actors by establishing coordination mechanisms for dialogue with armed actors, but it may be limited by both funding and human resources constraints as well as the parties' willingness to engage with humanitarians.

In the two to three years before MINUSMA's unanticipated departure, OCHA's Mali office had already begun to apply a more community-based approach to access that was focused on working directly with community representatives to facilitate their secure access to an area (while notifying the

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November 6, 2021, DRC: *Families displaced by the Ituri conflict are seen at their shelter in the village of Kilo-Mission, Ituri Province.*

government in parallel, as needed).[85] This community-based approach mitigated some of the access challenges OCHA faced after the Mission withdrew, and it also enabled continued access to areas both within and outside the government's control.[86]

Ideas that protection actors could explore include:

- **Considering options to surge CMCoord and access capacities during transitions** to support the Humanitarian Country Team in countrywide reassessments of access in the context of the mission's departure. Also consider options to support a reorientation of agreements with parties to the conflict, as needed.

- **Placing greater emphasis on and resources behind a community-based approach to access** for all humanitarian protection actors well before a mission's departure.

- **Considering new coordination arrangements for access**, as needed, based on an evaluation of existing arrangements including coordination purposes, participation, and common goals. New arrangements could include mechanisms to increase coordination between structures covering access, protection, and civil–military coordination.

XII. STRATEGIC PROTECTION CONSIDERATIONS

The previous sections examined how specific protection capacities may be affected by mission departures as well as ideas for protection actors to explore in managing gaps that may emerge. This section briefly lays out cross-cutting implications of mission departures at the strategic level for protection funding, capacities, and integrated planning.

Funding

Some of the most significant protection capacity challenges are those brought about by the "financial cliff"[87] that arises with mission departures. UN peacekeeping missions are funded through UN assessed contributions, which are mandatory funds paid by UN member states based on a formula linked to their GNPs. UN peacekeeping missions' budgets are often both far larger and more predictable than those of in-country UN agencies, which rely on voluntary contributions that may fluctuate from year to year and may wane as international attention to that conflict setting reduces with the departure of a peacekeeping mission.

> *UN peacekeeping missions' budgets are often both far larger and more predictable than those of in-country UN agencies, which rely on voluntary contributions that may fluctuate from year to year and may wane as international attention to that conflict setting reduces with the departure of a peacekeeping mission.*

Drastic cuts to U.S. foreign assistance, together with other global cuts to humanitarian funding, have already prompted a series of conversations about restructuring humanitarian aid. Protection advocacy actors could use these conversations as entry points to catalyze new thinking about how donors approach funding for protection in the context of UN mission departures.

Protection actors could also consider engaging donors in a series of high-level conversations to spur transformative thinking about funding protection in contexts where missions are withdrawing or where UN missions are likely not going to be authorized in the coming years due to political polarization (despite significant protection threats). As a tool to facilitate these conversations, protection actors could consider collectively developing a list of core capacities needed to carry out essential protection functions during transitions.

Protection actors in settings where there are large missions that are not yet planning imminent departures could initiate conversations with mission personnel and donors about whether some of the funding in trust funds managed by those missions could be transferred to other protection actors once those missions do leave. This would require agreeing on modalities by which such a transfer could happen. Having these conversations without the time pressure of an imminent mission departure may allow for more flexible arrangements to be developed. For example, in Mali, donors seemed initially receptive to a conversation about reallocating funding administered through the MINUSMA Trust Fund for use by other UN humanitarian and development actors as the Mission prepared to leave. However, uncertainty about the correct modalities to facilitate this process during the Mission's departure prevented it from happening.[88]

In addition, protection actors could explore with donors ways to make voluntary funding arrangements as flexible as possible for access by a wide variety of protection actors. This would enable both greater localization of protection activities during a mission's deployment and help address the potential for an abrupt mission withdrawal. The South Sudan Reconciliation, Stabilization, and Resilience Trust Fund (RSRTF), established in 2018, is an example of a funding mechanism that fostered area-based coordination and partnership among UN and non-UN actors.

Capacities

To mitigate the added demands on humanitarians that can arise when missions depart, protection actors could engage UN entities and donors on options for deploying surge capacities of protection personnel in transition contexts. Some standing capacities already exist and could be leveraged or expanded. This includes capacities created through the Inter-Agency Protection Standby Capacity Project (ProCap) and the Inter-Agency Gender Standby Capacity (GenCap), as well as various others. For example, OROLSI maintains a standing capacity that has been deployed to support several transition contexts. [89]UNMAS also recently created a small standing capacity based out of Brindisi that was used to support mission transitions, among other activities. However, this capacity comprised only two experts, and both positions are currently unfilled.[90]

Protection actors could consider mapping the full range of standby capacities and rosters on protection that could be explored to deploy short-term operational support to agencies as they take on files from a transitioning mission. Additionally, protection actors could explore with donors the idea of a roster for secondments from donor countries to serve in specialized protection roles within missions during transition processes. Donor countries with an interest in protection could also maintain a shared roster of protection specialists ready to be deployed to support increased needs in transition contexts.

One factor that can contribute to reduced protection capacities within missions during withdrawals is how protection personnel within UN peacekeeping missions are categorized internally. Protection personnel's categorization can affect how long into the mission's transition or withdrawal they can remain in place—or whether they may even be able to stay for some time after the mission's departure as part of the UN Country Team. For example, the fact that women's protection advisors in MONUSCO were not deemed critical staff affected how long these personnel were able to remain in place during MONUSCO's earlier withdrawals from specific provinces.[91] Thus, protection actors at the headquarters level could consider engaging the Secretariat about whether it is appropriate to review these staffing policies to mitigate capacity gaps during mission withdrawals—particularly in missions where protection of civilians is a core priority.

October 10, 2017, CAR: Residents of the Sara/Yakité neighborhood in Bangui clear grass amidst the ruins of their homes.

At the headquarters level, protection actors could also consider advocating to the Secretariat and to member states for missions currently deployed to start putting much greater emphasis on building national capacities for protection. At the country level, protection actors could consider reviewing the mission's protection of civilians strategy to look for opportunities to strengthen the focus on building national capacities, including through support to state actors and NNGOs. This could potentially include encouraging the mission to support the government in developing its own national protection of civilians strategy as well as embedding this support into the mission's protection of civilians strategy.

Protection actors could also explore how they can themselves place greater emphasis in this area with a view to sustainability after mission departures. For example, in Mali, the Protection Cluster is co-coordinated by UNHCR and the Danish Refugee Council. However, its intention is to progressively hand over the Danish Refugee Council's coordinating role to an NNGO as part of a general shift toward enabling local organizations to become more active and take over responsibilities in all clusters.[92] Protection actors could similarly review their programming to look for opportunities to increase support allocated to strengthening local and national protection capacities at different levels: the strategic level (e.g., developing national protection strategies); the technical level (e.g., strengthening protection capacities within specific ministries); and the local level (e.g., strengthening local civil society groups engaged in human rights monitoring or supporting community-based protection).

At the country level, protection actors could consider reviewing the mission's protection of civilians strategy to look for opportunities to strengthen the focus on building national capacities.

In the 2024 Agenda for Protection, OHCHR pledged to create a new protection capacity called the Protection Support Hub, which would (among other things) "provide first-instance guidance and advice, as well as referrals to relevant protection capacities and mandates to assist in dealing with protection issues" during crises.[93] At the time of this report's writing, the creation of the Protection Support Hub appears to be under consideration as part of the UN80 reform initiative.[94] Once there is greater clarity about whether the Hub will be created and how it will take shape in terms of structure, mandate, and capacities, other protection actors could engage with OHCHR and the UN Secretariat to explore whether it could support surge capacities or offer technical assistance to protection actors during mission transitions.

Integrated Planning during Withdrawals

Protection actors interviewed for this project pointed to many instances when they were brought into mission transition processes very late or ineffectively, exacerbating protection coordination gaps. For example, planning for the MONUSCO withdrawal from South Kivu began among a very small number of mission personnel. This group was kept small and information was deliberately restricted to mitigate the risk of panic or misinformation about the Mission's departure. Over time, additional Mission and non-Mission UN personnel were added to the planning process, but engagement with non-UN personnel—such as NGOs, whose work would be affected by the Mission's withdrawal—began very late in the process.[95] The very limited engagement with INGOs and the lack of engagement with NNGOs created frustration.[96] Although an internal after-action review of MONUSCO's disengagement from South Kivu identifies late engagement with the UN Country Team as an area for improvement, it does not identify the need to engage with non-UN entities such as INGOs and NNGOs or entities like the Protection Cluster, all of which may be able to represent their views as a lesson learned for the future.[97] By contrast, during MONUSCO's withdrawal from the Kasaïs region, which was conducted under less political pressure and in a more gradual manner than the South Kivu transition, the Mission consulted with both INGOs and NNGOs through a dedicated POC working group.

Even when missions do engage in joint transition planning, protection actors often express frustration that these plans are not always followed through on. For example, after UNMISS was criticized for insufficiently consulting with other protection actors in their transition of the first protection of civilians sites housing displaced persons, it made an effort to engage in joint planning in preparation for the closure of the remaining sites.[98] Yet many non-UN humanitarians believe that UNMISS did not adhere to those plans and instead made last-minute or reactive decisions that deviated from their agreements.[99]

A lack of data-sharing protocols between missions and other protection actors can also interfere with coordination during withdrawals. This applies to both UN and non-UN protection actors. In Mali, for example, UNFPA did not have access either to the OHCHR-managed database storing sensitive information about specific conflict-related sexual violence cases or to the less-sensitive database compiling conflict-related sexual violence cases that had been managed by women's protection personnel in MINUSMA.[100] Relevant UN agencies could thus consider engaging currently deployed missions about establishing data-sharing protocols now in anticipation of future withdrawals.

> *Protection actors could consider advocating to Security Council members that, when drafting resolutions that anticipate a future departure of a peacekeeping operation or special political mission, they incorporate explicit language on engagement or integrated planning with both UN and non-UN protection actors.*

In parallel to coordination in the field, there are also opportunities at UN Headquarters to strengthen joint planning and coordination for protection during mission departures. Although there are policies in place to promote integration and to ensure that relevant UN agencies, funds, and programmes are part of mission transition task forces, these policies may be followed inconsistently in practice.[101] Mission withdrawals or transitions may be fast paced, and the Department of Peace Operations (or the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, in the case of special political missions) may inadvertently exclude some of these agencies, funds, and programmes from planning discussions. OCHA can play an important role in advocating for agencies, funds, and programmes to have a seat at the table, where possible, and in representing their views in fora where they are absent.

Protection actors could consider advocating to Security Council members that, when drafting resolutions that anticipate a future departure of a peacekeeping operation or special political mission, they incorporate explicit language on engagement or integrated planning with both UN and non-UN protection actors. UN protection actors could also consider sensitizing their staff in the field to existing UN integration policies, including those on UN mission transitions, which already incorporate processes to solicit input from UN and non-UN protection actors.

XIII. CONCLUSION

At the time of this study's writing, significant changes to the global protection landscape are underway. Drastic cuts to humanitarian funding have been made and more may follow. A "humanitarian reset" is in progress. Some reports indicate that the United States—the largest contributor to the UN regular and assessed budgets that fund UN peacekeeping and special political missions—is considering not paying or paying only a small portion of its UN dues, which could affect UN missions' ability to maintain their current footprints in the field. Meanwhile, the Secretary-General has embarked on a "UN80" reform initiative that is considering sweeping structural changes, including to the UN's protection architecture.

It is impossible to know what the outcome of these potentially radical changes will be or what their implications will be for protection by UN peacekeeping missions and other protection actors. In part, because of the uncertainty of this moment, this study has avoided making specific recommendations. Rather, the study hopes to offer a few ideas that protection actors navigating capacity gaps can use as starting points for discussions and for them to consider based on their specific contexts and the capacities and resources available to them.

The interviews conducted for this study turned up many examples of creativity and adaptability by protection actors attempting to mitigate gaps—including in contexts where mission departures were abrupt or chaotic, with little opportunity for transition planning. This creativity and adaptability will be essential in the years ahead, as protection actors continue to navigate future mission departures while supporting the protection of communities facing ongoing threats long after UN peacekeepers have left.

ENDNOTES

1. ACLED conflict index, https://acleddata.com/conflict-index/

2. For analysis of increased protection risks after mission departures, see also: "Democratic Republic of Congo Protection Analysis Update," Global Protection Cluster, March 12, 2024, https://globalprotectioncluster.org/publications/1782/reports/protection-analysis-update/democratic-republic-congo-protection-analysis, and "Mali Protection Analysis Update," Global Protection Cluster, August 12, 2024, https://globalprotectioncluster.org/publications/1949/reports/protection-analysis-update/mali-protection-analysis-update.

3. For analysis of increased protection risks after mission departures, see also: "Democratic Republic of Congo Protection Analysis Update," Global Protection Cluster, March 12, 2024, https://globalprotectioncluster.org/publications/1782/reports/protection-analysis-update/democratic-republic-congo-protection-analysis, and "Mali Protection Analysis Update," Global Protection Cluster, August 12, 2024, https://globalprotectioncluster.org/publications/1949/reports/protection-analysis-update/mali-protection-analysis-update.

4. At the time of writing of this study, MONUSCO's transition plan has been disrupted by the M23 crisis in the DRC, and it is not known when and under what configuration the DRC government and the UN Security Council may want to proceed with the Mission's withdrawal.

5. Damian Lilly, "Considering the Protection of Civilians during UN Peacekeeping Transitions," International Peace Institute, 2021.

6. For analysis of increased protection risks after mission departures, see also: "Democratic Republic of Congo Protection Analysis Update," Global Protection Cluster, March 12, 2024, https://globalprotectioncluster.org/publications/1782/reports/protection-analysis-update/democratic-republic-congo-protection-analysis, and "Mali Protection Analysis Update," Global Protection Cluster, August 12, 2024, https://globalprotectioncluster.org/publications/1949/reports/protection-analysis-update/mali-protection-analysis-update.

7. Interview, March 12, 2025.

8. Interview, March 10, 2025.

9. Interview, March 14, 2025; Daniel Levine-Spound and Wendy MacClinchy, "Prioritizing the Protection of Civilians during Peacekeeping Transitions," CIVIC, 2022.

10. Daniel Levine-Spound, "Early Warning and Rapid Response Takes Root in UN Peacekeeping," CIVIC, 2021; Josh Jorgensen, "Strengthened Early Warning in UN Peacekeeping Field Offices," CIVIC, 2024.

11. Daniel Levine-Spound and Wendy MacClinchy, "Prioritizing the Protection of Civilians during Peacekeeping Transitions," CIVIC, 2022, 25.

12. Interview, April 3, 2025.

13. Ibid.

14. Daniel Levine-Spound and Wendy MacClinchy, "Prioritizing the Protection of Civilians during Peacekeeping Transitions," CIVIC, 2022, 25.

15. Interview, March 11, 2025.

16. "Supporting Community-Based Protection in the Democratic Republic of Congo," InterAction, DRC Protection Cluster, and Global Protection Cluster, 2024, 3.

17. Interview, March 12, 2025.

18. Interview, March 14, 2025.

19. "What Works in UN Resident Coordinator-led Conflict Prevention: Lessons from the Field," UNU-CPR, 2018, 7.

20. See also: Emily Paddon Rhoads and Aditi Gorur, "United Nations Peacekeeping and Civilian Protective Agency" in Civilian Protective Agency in Violent Settings: A Comparative Perspective, Oxford University Press, 2023.

21. Interview, March 11, 2025.

22. Interview, March 18, 2025.

23. Interview, April 2, 2025.

24. Interview, March 19, 2025.

25. Ibid.

26. "Supporting Community-Based Protection in the Democratic Republic of Congo," InterAction, DRC Protection Cluster, and Global Protection Cluster, 2024, 2.

27. Interview, March 11, 2025.

28. Interview, April 2, 2025.

29. Interview, March 14, 2025.

30. Interview, March 10, 2025.

31. Interview, March 12, 2025.

32. Interview, March 31, 2025.

33. Agenda for Protection, OHCHR, 2024, 21–22.

34. Interview, March 12, 2025.

35. Interview, March 11, 2025.

36. Interview, March 10, 2025.

37. Interview, March 19, 2025.

38. Jane Cocking et al., "Independent Review of the IASC Protection Policy," Humanitarian Policy Group Commissioned Report, ODI, 2022, 59.

39. Ibid., 58.

40. "United Nations Agenda for Protection," OHCHR, 2024, 18.

41. Interview, March 11, 2025.

42. See Charles T. Hunt et al., "UN Peace Operations and Human Rights," Effectiveness of Peace Operations Network, 2024, 119–121.

43. Interview, March 11, 2025.

44. Interview, April 2, 2025.

45. Interview, March 11, 2025.

46. "The Impact of Mission Withdrawals on the Prevention and Response to CRSV: MINUSMA AND MONUSCO Case Studies," Department of Peace Operations, 2024, 14.

47. Interview, March 12, 2025.

48. Interview, March 11, 2025.

49. "The Impact of Mission Withdrawals on the Prevention and Response to CRSV: MINUSMA AND MONUSCO Case Studies," Department of Peace Operations, 2024, 8.

50. Interview, March 11, 2025.

51. UN Security Council Resolution 2753 (2024).

52. Interview, April 2, 2025.

53. Interview, March 21, 2025.

54. Interview, March 21, 2025.

55. Interview, March 13, 2025.

56. Ibid.

57. Ibid.

58. Ibid.

59. Interview, March 21, 2025.

60. Interview, March 13, 2025.

61. Interview, March 19, 2025.

62. Adam Day, "UN Transitions: Improving Security Council Practice in Mission Settings," UN University—Centre for Policy Research, 2020.

63. Interview, April 3, 2025.

64. Ibid.

65. Interview, March 20, 2025.

66. Ibid.

67. Interview, March 11, 2025.

68. Ibid.

69. Interview, March 20, 2025.

70. Interview, March 18, 2025.

71. Ibid.

72. Interview, April 4, 2025.

73. Ibid.

74. Interview, April 4, 2025.

75. Interview, March 31, 2025; Interview, March 14, 2025.

76. The Saving Lives Together (SLT) framework was established to improve coordination between INGOs and UN entities on common security challenges. See https://www.un.org/en/un-department-safety-and-security/saving-lives-together.

77. Interview, March 31, 2025.

78. Interview, March 31, 2025.

79. Interview, April 2, 2025.

80. Interview, March 18, 2025.

81. Interview, March 14, 2025.

82. Interview, April 4, 2025.

83. Interview, April 2, 2025.

84. Ibid.

85. Interview, April 2, 2025.

86. Interview, April 2, 2025.

87. Adam Day, "UN Transitions: Improving Security Council Practice in Mission Settings," UN University—Centre for Policy Research, 2020, 19.

88. Interview, April 2, 2025.

89. Interview, March 20, 2025.

90. Interview, March 21, 2025.

91. "The Impact of Mission Withdrawals on the Prevention and Response to CRSV: MINUSMA AND MONUSCO Case Studies," Department of Peace Operations, 2024, 12.

92. Interview, March 19, 2025.

93. "Agenda for Protection," OHCHR, 2024, 21–22.

94. "UN80 Structural Changes and Programmatic Realignment," undated (internal UN document on file with the author).

95. Interview, April 3, 2025.

96. Interview, March 18, 2025.

97. "After-Action Review Report: Disengagement of MONUSCO from South Kivu Province," 2024; "Integrated United Nations Approaches to Protection During Peacekeeping Transitions," CIVIC, 2023.

98. Interview, March 19, 2025. Note: this was not a context involving a peacekeeping mission's departure from a country; rather, it involved the withdrawal and transfer of responsibilities from a specific site.

99. Interview, March 19, 2025.

100. "The Impact of Mission Withdrawals on the Prevention and Response to CRSV: MINUSMA AND MONUSCO Case Studies," Department of Peace Operations, 2024, 16.

101. Interview, April 23, 2025.

November 7, 2021, DRC: Views of abandoned villages deserted due to CODECO rebel attacks close to the town of Kilo-Mission, Ituri Province.

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