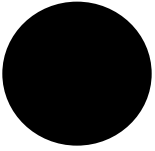


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Getting Beyond New York Reforming Peacekeeping in the Field

Peter D. Bell and Guy Tousignant

“Peacekeeping” is known in American political jargon as a third-rail issue, to be touched only with great caution. In fact, though little has been said about the issue recently, we see some hopeful signs. The long-standing deadlock over America’s unpaid assessments to the United Nations—and specifically for peacekeeping—has ended in compromise, a new secretary of state is well disposed toward the world organization, a top-flight French diplomat, Jean-Marie Guehenno, has taken control of U.N. peacekeeping operations, and the General Assembly has before it the first truly comprehensive review of all U.N. peace operations. For the moment, there is the prospect of fundamental reform; it is a moment worth seizing.

Our purpose is to discuss specific and practical steps, based on CARE’s experience, that can increase the effectiveness of both peacekeeping operations and the longer-term enterprise of peace building. We do not intend to broach the perennial problem of developing standby forces—the “heavy strategic reserve” mentioned in the August 2000 report of the Panel on United Nations Peace Operations, chaired by Algerian ambassador Lakhdar Brahimi.¹ Nor will we deal with suggestions for a global peacekeeping strategy, much less the heated debate over humanitarian intervention. Our purpose is more modest: to discuss ways to reform peacekeeping in the field.

The peacekeeping system malfunctioned terribly in the 1990s for a host of reasons. In Bosnia, the United Nations was asked to do too much with too little; in Rwanda,

world powers failed to act in time; and in Somalia, the United Nations was blamed for an ill-planned operation under direct U.S. control. A chronic condition underpinning all of these disasters was the failure of member states to back their rhetoric with resources—with the United States itself setting a shameful example in its decade-long dues-paying delinquency. Another systemic problem that receives far less attention is the way the U.N. system fails from start to finish to engage local civil society in the peace process in conflict areas. The reform package pending before the U.N. General Assembly makes many worthy recommendations—which include overhauling the management of the U.N. Department of Peacekeeping Operations and authorizing peacekeeping missions only when resources are available to carry out their mandates—but ignores the endemic weakness of the United Nations in eliciting civil society involvement.

Peacekeepers now often enter environments where the conditions for peace are fragile or barely exist. In such places as East Timor, the Balkans, Rwanda, and the Democratic Republic of Congo, the United Nations must extend a measure of security to civilian populations and catalyze efforts to lay the foundations for peace—rebuilding civil institutions, providing economic opportunities for ex-combatants, and creating mechanisms to promote dialogue and reconciliation. The United Nations cannot do this alone. Local leaders, regional and subregional groups, civic groups, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are crucial to

the promotion of a durable peace in societies emerging from conflict. Nascent U.N. efforts to incorporate conflict prevention and peace-building activities more effectively in peacekeeping mandates and operations will fall short unless local civil actors become part of the equation.

Our field-based experience in relief and development leads us to make four recommendations.

First, U.N. members should take positive steps, and commit resources, to avert conflicts before they start, recognizing that an ounce of conflict prevention is worth a pound of peacekeeping cure. They should give peace building a legitimate place in both the budgets and mandates of peacekeeping operations. Reduction of poverty must be integral to both enterprises.

Second, U.N. staff on the ground should encourage the greatest possible involvement of local leaders and organizations in the spectrum of conflict prevention, peacekeeping, and peace-building operations; this is all the more important when peacekeeping forces are drawn into a conflict and U.N. personnel are no longer perceived as disinterested outsiders.²

Third, policymakers should reexamine the role currently played by the military in humanitarian and civil affairs during peacekeeping operations. The military can be crucial in facilitating humanitarian assistance, as they were, despite the eventual debacle, in protecting the relief convoys in Somalia. At the same time, the military must assign high priority to civilian protection and make certain that military activities do not undermine civilian leadership, humanitarian aid, or the emergence (or reemergence) of local civil institutions.

Fourth, a review of the roles and responsibilities of agencies that respond to humanitarian emergencies is long overdue. The United Nations must work with other emergency-response actors to differentiate military and civilian functions and to devise a strategy to guide all of these organizations.

The United Nations can contribute more by coordinating the on-the-ground activities of international agencies than it can by itself trying to build new foundations for societies emerging from conflict.

Peace Is a Long-Term Dividend

Ambassador Brahimi's U.N. panel on peace operations paid homage to conflict prevention and peace building in its analysis of the shortcomings of the peacekeeping system, but it gave them short shrift in its recommendations for reform. Only in the past year have these areas begun to receive more serious attention.

The June 2001 report of the U.N. secretary general, *Prevention of Armed Conflict*, contains valuable insights. Successful peace building begins during the early days of an emergency and extends into the long term, relying on respected community representatives, such as teachers, doctors, and village elders. Peace-building strategies must take into account what has caused and perpetuated a given conflict, which is frequently the struggle for control of natural resources (diamonds drive the war economies in Sierra Leone and Angola; oil is a central source of conflict in Sudan).

In emergency situations, donors may be willing to fund "quick impact projects" to address the immediate needs of civilians for food, medicine, and housing. Once international attention subsides, however, donors are often not interested in funding less visible, but vital, reconstruction initiatives, such as infrastructure repair, mine removal, demobilization, and restoration of public services.

Jobs for ex-combatants are crucial to economic recovery. In the aftermath of the conflict in East Timor, the biggest problem facing the tiny new nation was not its food supply, but its 80 percent unemployment rate and the large numbers of East Timorese refugees, including ex-combatants, just over the border in West Timor. Last year, pro-Indonesian militia members led fatal attacks

against these refugees as well as against the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) staff in the camps. Meanwhile, public unrest over unemployment led to physical assaults on front-line relief staff—East Timorese and international alike.

U.N. agencies, NGOs, and national governments need to diffuse tensions through local programs that help to reintegrate former combatants into communities. One of the underlying causes of El Salvador's civil war (1979–92), which resulted in 70,000 deaths, was the uneven distribution of land. Although the peace agreement of December 31, 1992 called for redistributing land to combatants on both sides, a poorly designed implementation process that imposed high costs on participants impeded progress. In the mid-1990s, local NGOs representing ex-combatants played a major role in developing land-use strategies that local communities could agree upon. With legal assistance from the national government, 30,000 ex-combatants eventually obtained title to their land and the means to build their postwar livelihoods.

But NGOs are not beyond criticism. We need to pay closer attention to the distorting effects of our presence on local wages and prices, and do more to ensure that the projects we promote do not exacerbate local tensions. In addition, we should commit more resources to the reintegration of combatants and to the promotion of civic participation and the inclusion of local citizens in decisions that affect the well-being of their community.

Devolving Power to the Local Level

In peacekeeping operations, the primary role of the United Nations is military. The current system is ill suited to the transition from peacekeeping to long-term peace building. Although the United Nations can bring important resources to bear during this stage, its involvement (and that of international nongovernmental organizations) can also inadvertently foster dependency and

interfere with civilian-led mediation efforts. Often, peace-building efforts—including civil reconstruction and the reintegration of combatants into local communities—are better carried out by non-U.N. personnel. The same is true of conflict prevention, as acknowledged by the U.N. secretary general in his recent report to the General Assembly: “The United Nations is not the only actor in prevention and may often not be the actor best suited to take the lead. Therefore, Member States, international, regional and subregional organizations, the private sector, non-governmental organizations, and other civil society actors also have very important roles to play in this field.”³

U.N. involvement can be particularly problematic when U.N. troops are drawn into a civil dispute (as in Angola, Somalia, Bosnia, and Sierra Leone). The United Nations may be viewed as partisan. The intermittent but brutal civil war in Sierra Leone, driven by factional competition for diamonds and power, is a good example. The U.N. Mission (UNAMSIL) has a mandate to facilitate humanitarian assistance, but local residents see UNAMSIL as biased in favor of the government of Sierra Leone and against the Revolutionary United Front (RUF). Last year, when UNAMSIL was attempting to secure access to more than one million citizens at risk in RUF-held areas, humanitarian groups, including CARE International, felt the need to distance themselves from these discussions in order to remain impartial. Instead, we preferred to seek independent negotiations. Where the United Nations lacks credibility, it should delegate responsibility for obtaining access to civilians at risk to organizations that can exercise more effective influence.

Peace requires not just physical security, but a return to normal daily living. Healing and rebuilding a wartorn society often must begin at the community level, since conflict occurs not only in contested territory but also in schools, homes, community centers, and places of worship. The needs of women

and children, who are frequently special targets, require special attention. These issues are much more likely to be at the forefront for development-oriented U.N. agencies, NGOs, and community-based groups than for peacekeeping troops.

The United Nations can promote peace in the absence of peacekeepers. In the civil conflict in Sri Lanka, CARE and local humanitarian organizations are working together on a project to promote respectful coexistence at the community level. This effort, one of several similar projects worldwide, provides training in conflict resolution to dozens of local NGOs and civil administrators. The local organizations promote such peace-building activities as interfaith workshops, teacher training, and the integration of internally displaced people into host communities.⁴ Through VOICE, dozens of women on opposite sides of the conflict recently met to share strategies for community peace building. For many, this was the first time meeting people from the “other side,” and significant progress was made in building the foundations of understanding. The recent move within the Security Council to incorporate funds for peace-building activities into peacekeeping operations is promising. But it remains to be seen whether such funds will be made available to community-based initiatives such as this one.

The secretary general’s plans to implement the Brahimi panel’s recommendations call for the United Nations to overhaul the civilian staffing of peacekeeping operations.⁵ But for all the detailed recommendations on international staffing, the report makes barely any mention of plans to expand or improve the use of local staff members in peacekeeping administrations. The United Nations could do far more to cultivate the skills and leadership of local citizens if it would hire more local staff.

In some cases, local tensions may impede hiring local staff, but this impediment often can be overcome. Many NGOs are committed to multiethnic staffing in areas re-

covering from civil war. We do not underestimate the enormity of this challenge, but building professional relationships can lead to a willing coexistence, normality, and eventual reconciliation. After one CARE training session involving Albanians and Serbs, a young woman commented that she was surprised “the participants from the other side were just regular people, like us.” Such tiny advances can become the building blocks of peace.

Peacekeepers, Not Aid Workers

While the military’s mandate to prevent conflict needs to be stronger, its mandate in local civil affairs needs to be restrained. The role of peacekeepers in civil affairs is not a decision that should be left to the military. The special representative of the U.N. secretary general should be charged with determining three matters during the initial three months of any new operation: first, the appropriate roles for peacekeepers in rebuilding local infrastructure and remaking civil institutions; second, which civil functions can be filled by military personnel and which cannot; and third, the criteria for determining when military involvement in civil affairs must be curtailed so that the rebuilding of civil society can proceed. The special representative should decide these matters with input from civilians, including local citizens.

Problems arise when humanitarian assistance fails to build on local knowledge, when it fails to reinforce local capacity, and when it raises excessive expectations. The risks are greater when humanitarian decisions are made by soldiers rather than by civilians with development expertise. Peacekeeping forces are motivated by political and military objectives, and military staff are not trained in community development. Humanitarian organizations, while not immune to being sidetracked by their own agendas, are both obligated and trained to help meet the needs of civilians.

Military involvement in the provision of aid, while important when security risks are high, may subsequently impede aid. In Kosovo, for example, various peacekeeping battalions received funding from national governments for ambitious but ill-conceived aid initiatives. One example of a poorly designed military aid project was a large clinic built by troops from the United Arab Emirates based in Mitrovica, Kosovo. This project led to frictions with neighboring communities and was widely criticized because it established a level of services far above any that could be sustained in the region. Initially, NATO troops were key in assisting a refugee population whose needs went beyond the response capacity of NGOs. Later, however, NATO troops assumed roles that would better have been left to civilians, including delivering aid and initiating long-term development. By initially delivering aid through their nations' military battalions, bilateral donors undermined the work of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, leaving humanitarian groups without coordinated leadership or strategy.⁶

Civilian Protection: When and How Much?

The number of civilians threatened by conflict worldwide is compelling evidence that peacekeeping is needed now more than ever. Whereas only about 5 out of 100 of the injured in the First World War were civilians, between 80 and 90 out of 100 of those injured in the 1990s were civilians.⁷ The legacies of war—ubiquitous firearms, unexploded ordnance, and landmines—multiply human suffering. Two million children have been killed and more than three times that number have been injured in conflicts since adoption of the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989.⁸

The protection of civilians is one area of humanitarian affairs where the military needs to take on more, rather than less, responsibility. This function is carried out unevenly across—and even within—peacekeeping missions. One problem encountered

by these missions is the lack of consensus among various national military forces on what constitutes adequate protection of civilians. In postwar Kosovo, for example, the credibility of U.N. peacekeepers has been diminished by the markedly different ways that peacekeeping battalions of different nationalities have responded to outbreaks of violence. As a result, certain troops are viewed as being sympathetic to Serbians, while others are viewed as pro-Albanian.

To avoid confusion, operating principles with respect to civilian protection must be devised for each U.N. peacekeeping mission, in consultation with both international and local actors. The more local input, the more likely it will be that residents will respect peacekeepers and their directives will be observed. Several overarching principles should apply in all cases. Two years ago, Secretary General Kofi Annan suggested that civilian protection should be defined to include unimpeded access to humanitarian assistance.⁹ This is an excellent guiding principle since it assigns clear priority to human needs and implies that troops have a duty to facilitate such access. Obviously, when the United Nations becomes militarily engaged, NGOs must keep their distance.

Clarifying Roles and Responsibilities

We do not claim to have all the answers to this problem, but at least part of the solution is to define more clearly the roles of the myriad actors. Because of the endemic competition among U.N. agencies for lead roles, this is properly a matter for the U.N. secretary general.

While the United Nations has begun internal discussions, it should cast its net wider, examining contingencies in which U.N. civilians, military personnel, NGOs, and local groups may collide. Discussions could begin with an “inventory” of activities carried out by organizations that respond to emergencies, an analysis of where these functions overlap or conflict, and how local input could be added, improved, or

increased. The United Nations should produce a framework document to guide decision making in the field.

NGOs also need to examine their performance. Large international organizations, like CARE, should develop a code of conduct that would convey our missions, objectives, and operating procedures more clearly to military personnel. We should seek agreement among ourselves on modalities of civil-military cooperation. The Steering Committee on Humanitarian Response—a coalition of large international NGOs that informs U.N. agencies and committees about NGO policies—would be an excellent forum in which to tackle these questions.

The Full Potential of Peacekeeping

The story of peacekeeping—the good, the bad, and the ugly—unfolds in the field, but the strategy for reform presented by the Brahimi panel and in subsequent reports are almost purely New York.

The military's job in peacekeeping is temporary. It is up to civilians to restore normality and create lasting peace. To realize the full potential of peacekeeping, U.N. missions must draw strength from the entire community of actors that responds to complex emergencies. Change of this magnitude requires a broader vision than the reform agenda now before the United Nations—one that breaks down barriers between local and international actors, defines roles more clearly, and promotes shared resolve among all those who can contribute to the resolution of conflict. Most important, the international community needs a peacekeeping model that puts faith first and foremost in the very people whose futures are at stake. ●

Notes

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1. *Report of the Panel on United Nations Peace Operations*, August 21, 2000, U.N. document A/55/305-S/2000/809.

2. Throughout this article, we refer frequently to the input of “local” residents, citizens, and groups. By this, we mean to distinguish between expatriates and those living in a region where peacekeeping efforts are under way. We have avoided the use of the term “national,” as peacekeeping operations are sometimes deployed in areas that are not strictly defined as nations (e.g., Kosovo). Our definition of “local” residents encompasses people active in communities as well as those at the national level—people with a direct stake in the governance of the region where peacekeeping is taking place.

3. *Prevention of Armed Conflict*, report of the Secretary General to the General Assembly, June 7, 2001, U.N. document A/55/985-S/2001/574.

4. This project, called VOICE, was developed in cooperation with the Local Capacities for Peace Project, directed by Mary Anderson.

5. *Report of the Secretary-General on Implementation of the Recommendations of the Special Committee on Peacekeeping Operations and the Panel on United Nations Peace Operations*, June 1, 2001, U.N. document A/55/977.

6. Only 3.5 percent of assistance provided by the top six EU contributors was designated for UNHCR directly, limiting its effectiveness (“The Kosovo Refugee Crisis: An Independent Evaluation of UNHCR’s Emergency Preparedness and Response,” [United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, February 2000], p. 1).

7. *Arms Availability and the Situation of Civilians in Armed Conflict* (Geneva: International Committee of the Red Cross, June 1, 1999), p. 4.

8. UNICEF, *The State of the World’s Children 2000*, p. 28.

9. *Report of the Secretary-General to the Security Council on the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict* (United Nations Security Council, September 8, 1999), U.N. document S/1999/957.