

Operationalizing Conflict Prevention: The Role of Civil Affairs Officers in Local Conflict Management

Tanja Bernstein and Alischa Kugel

Conflict prevention is often seen as an activity undertaken at the national level with key actors involved residing in capitals or neighboring states. More and more, practitioners are focusing on local conflict dynamics, realizing the importance of addressing these conflicts as part of a wider conflict prevention strategy. With hundreds of Civil Affairs Officers in the field, the UN has a valuable channel through which it can pursue conflict prevention. As part of the ZIF series on how conflict prevention is being operationalized on the ground, this Policy Briefing explores the role of Civil Affairs Officers in local conflict management and how their activities are essential to a broader conflict prevention strategy.

Why Local Conflict Management Matters

Local-level conflict jeopardizes the wellbeing of communities, can create intercommunal mistrust, generate destabilization and threaten civilians. If left unaddressed, locally-driven conflict – be it simmering, long-standing tensions and grievances or localized manifestations of national-level conflicts – can have serious implications for efforts in securing national-level peace agreements and can threaten existing accords. Unaddressed local grievances can also become a breeding ground and source of strength for extremist groups, bolstering the spread of violent extremism. Early recognition and an adequate response to threats at the local level is thus an important conflict prevention measure.

The 2015 report of the *High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations* (HIPPO) recognizes

“how conflict often has multiple local manifestations” and underlines the importance that peace operations “understand these local conflict dynamics, by regularly engaging with local populations.”¹ Working closely with communities is also the centerpiece of the “field-focused and people-centered” approach which the panel views as one of the four essential shifts that can make peace operations more effective.² In 2017, UN Secretary-General António Guterres embraced this notion, stating that in order to effectively prevent conflict, attention needs to be paid to the local level.³

The Role of Civil Affairs Officers

An important tool the UN uses for local conflict management and prevention are Civil Affairs Officers (CAOs). CAOs are deployed at the local or so-called deep-field level with three primary functions:⁴

¹ Report of the High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations on “uniting our strengths for peace: politics, partnership and people” (S/2015/446), p. 77, para. 251, June 2015.

² UN, Information note on High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations, 16 June 2015, available at <https://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/documents/High-Level-Independent-Panel.pdf>

³ See: https://www.un.int/sites/www.un.int/files/Permanent%20Missions/delegate/attachment_the_vision_of_the_sg_on_prevention.pdf

⁴ For more detailed information, see the UN Civil Affairs Handbook, available at http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/documents/civil-handbook/Civil_Affairs_Handbook.pdf

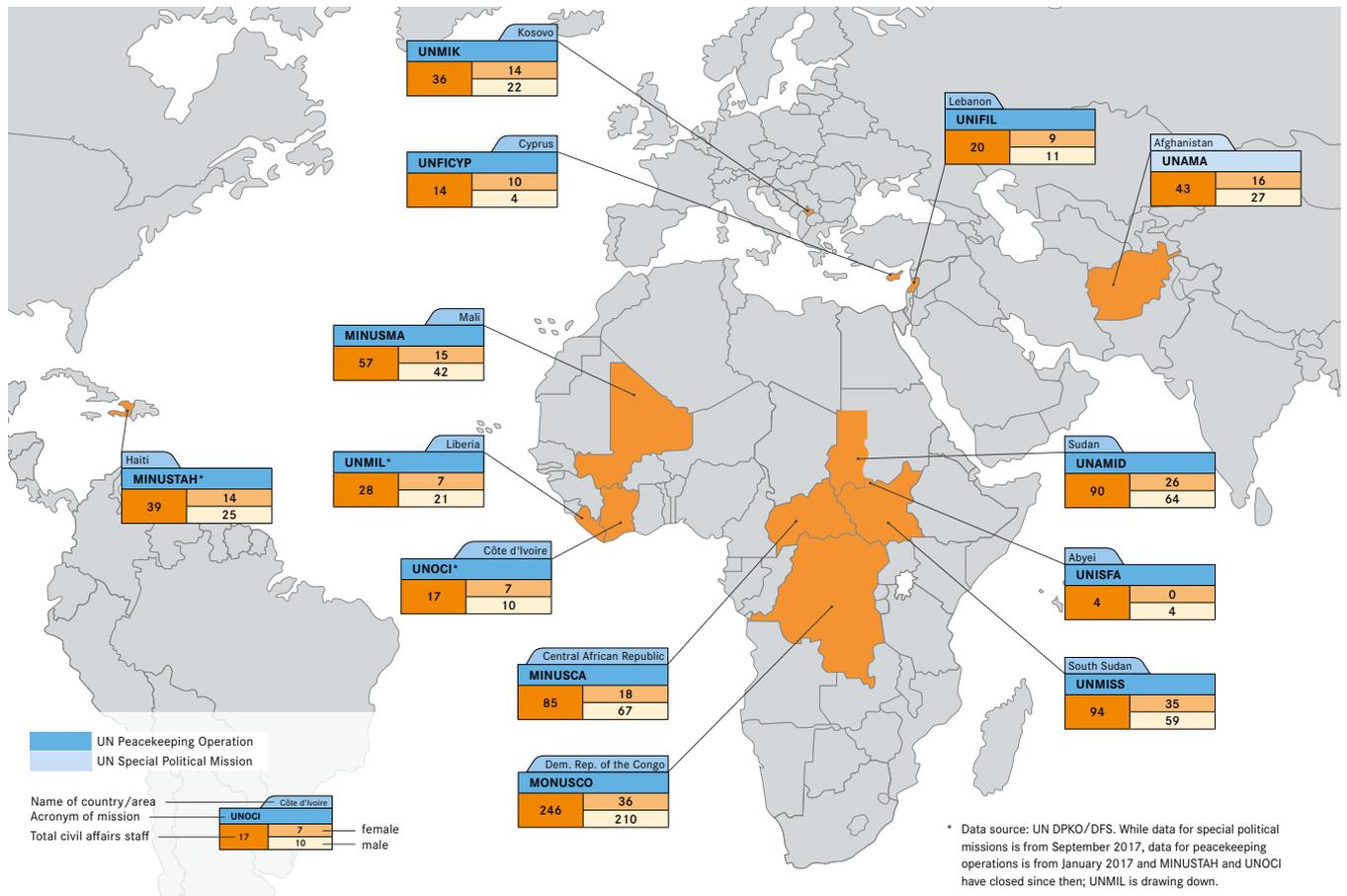
Cross-mission liaison, monitoring and facilitation at the local level | CAOs are the main civilian interface between the mission and local actors at the deep-field level. CAOs also work closely with other mission components at the field level, and with partners inside and outside of the UN family. In their monitoring and reporting function, CAOs fulfill an important early-warning function for conflict at the local level and thus contribute to strengthening a mission's conflict prevention efforts.

Confidence building, conflict management and reconciliation | The breadth of this CAO function is mission and context specific. Some peace operations, like the UN mission in Mali, are explicitly mandated to support local conflict management, dialogue facilitation or reconciliation. Others engage in local conflict management when a specific need arises. However extensive the engagement, CAOs take the lead at the local level on dialogue, mediation support and reconciliation process support, focusing primarily on enabling

and strengthening local conflict resolution and reconciliation mechanisms. Practitioners interpret CAOs reconciliation work in a wide sense, including supporting the creation of the necessary political space to enable political reconciliation.

Support to the restoration and extension of state authority | A legitimate, resilient and functioning state is a critical requirement for lasting peace and sustainable development. CAOs focus on (re-)building the legitimacy of and trust in state institutions at the local level, acting as a linkage between state and local government authorities and citizens and civil society organizations. This may be done through facilitating communication between the entities, increasing citizens' access to government authorities, supporting local ownership by promoting a participatory approach to decision-making and enhancing accountability and transparency. CAOs' work in strengthening participatory processes and local democratic governance structures contributes to the creation of governing institutions that are resilient to conflict.

Civil Affairs Deployments in United Nations Peace Operations 2017*



Civil Affairs in Numbers

Around 67 percent of CAOs in peace operations are national, while 33 percent are international. The majority of international CAOs are from African countries, while only 23 percent are from Europe. With only 27 percent, female CAOs in peace operations are vastly underrepresented.

Challenges to Effective Local Conflict Management

While there are many successful examples of how Civil Affairs Officers have helped manage local conflict, key challenges are:

Challenging environments | Precarious security environments are problematic for the whole of the mission as they increase risk to staff and can lead to the restriction of access to the local population. However, given that the work of CAOs is almost wholly dependent on having this access to local actors outside the capital, working in such challenging security environments begs the question where and when CAOs should be deployed.

High politics vs. local conflict management | While recognizing that local conflict management is key to the “field-focused and people-centered” approach in reality, much of conflict management activity is still focused on so-called “high politics.” The rhetoric on the importance of local conflict management needs to be reinforced by real support from mission leadership and New York headquarters. This includes integrating the work of the civil affairs component into the wider vision of the mission by institutionalizing a cross-sector strategy. It also means making more funding available to CAOs for programmatic activity.

Faraway spoilers | Oftentimes local conflicts are affected by non-local actors, including from abroad, which manipulate local grievances for their own political or economic gain. However, CAOs are usually not in a position to engage these actors and need to coordinate with the political side of their mission to align strategies on how best to proceed. Thus, local conflicts are not only an issue for the Civil Affairs Officers to manage – a “whole-of-mission” approach is required.

Examples of Civil Affairs Activities

Central African Republic | In 2016, Christian residents were preventing Muslims from circulating freely in a neighborhood cemetery, causing significant tension between the two communities. MINUSCA civil affairs helped convene dialogues with community representatives, mediate discussions and draft a “nonaggression pact” signed by both sides. CAOs also worked with other partners to build social cohesion by supporting income-generation projects and infrastructure projects in the area.

South Darfur | In 2015, cattle raiding between two tribes led to clashes resulting in 68 deaths. UNAMID civil affairs conducted a thorough analysis of the situation and engaged with local authorities and tribal leaders at the local and national level to review root causes and find the best way forward. CAOs provided technical advice to a government-formed reconciliation committee and also helped arrange a conference with actors involved in the conflict to encourage their role as agents for peace. The initiative resulted in ending the active fighting and signing of a peace agreement.

Haiti | In 2013, fighting between two localities in Haiti erupted due to a land dispute. MINUSTAH civil affairs supported local authorities in mediating between the two parties and facilitated dialogue to give both sides an opportunity to express their views. In addition, civil affairs supported the establishment of a “reflection committee” which conducted prevention activities through awareness-raising; provided logistical and technical support along with other partners to local authorities in distributing food kits to affected communities; and engaged Haitian National Police to enhance security in the disputed area.

Acting as fire brigades | Mission leadership should help prioritize the work of CAOs to make it less ad hoc. However, because CAOs are often working as “fire-brigades” dealing with isolated conflicts as they pop up, time for more strategic engagement is limited. Addressing medium- and long-term risks become less of a priority when officers are too busy putting out daily “fires.” But the root causes need to be addressed if local conflict management is to yield sustainable solutions.

Mandate content | Until now, the Security Council mandates missions to manage local conflict inconsistently. While the Secretariat has criticized the Security Council for increasingly micromanaging peace operations, some practitioners have argued that in particular instances, explicit mention of local conflict management activities in a mission's mandate would make it easier for CAOs to perform their tasks. Support to and prioritization of the activities of CAOs could improve. However, a strategy on local conflict management is also needed even when there is no specific mention of this activity in the mandate but CAOs are part of the mission.

Coordinating with other actors | CAOs need to be careful not to fall into the trap of the "herd mentality," focusing on local conflicts which are en vogue and/or easily visible while ignoring others. This leads to oversupply in some areas and undersupply in others. Good coordination with NGOs and other actors on the ground is necessary in order for civil affairs to concentrate on engagement to which they can add the greatest value and which addresses root causes. Besides prioritizing work, building a better network of partners and enabling other peacebuilding actors who are present in the area of operation longer than the mission is also a way of ensuring sustainability.

Skills | The skills of CAOs vary, as they do with all mission personnel. While focus on professionalizing staff remains a priority for the UN, attention also needs to be given to finding CAOs with the right competencies in conflict management, including mediation. Although generic job profiles are useful in the process of creating rosters, knowledge of specific local conflict drivers and language skills are very important. The use of *National Professional Officers* and *Community Liaison Assistants* has helped immensely in this regard, but having international officers with such profiles helps provide additional perspectives regarding the conflict and its resolution.

Way Forward

Even though local conflict management is often key to supporting a political process that leads to

sustainable peace, it is rarely seen as a strategic priority. However, local conflict management can be critical to how effectively a peacekeeping operation can implement its mandate, help support a national political process and contribute to sustaining peace. CAOs are an essential tool in this regard, preventing conflict from arising, escalating or reoccurring.

In order to fully empower CAOs and enable them to help address local conflict, the above challenges must be addressed. A shift in thinking must occur: local conflict is not just a local problem but one of the strategic priorities for the mission. CAO activities must be better integrated within the work of the mission, particularly with the *Political Affairs Officers*, as well as with relevant counterparts at headquarters so that the information they gather and the analyses and activities they undertake feed into a wider strategy to strengthen conflict prevention efforts. In addition, partnerships with non-mission entities (such as the *UN Country Teams*) should be bolstered to ensure that the results of their interventions are sustainable.

Recommendations for Member States:

- When drafting Security Council mandates, consider including a specific reference to local conflict management activities.
- Encourage the allocation of resources to strengthen local conflict management efforts.
- Support training on local conflict management skills, including mediation, to CAOs.
- Increase pool of prospective CAOs, especially women, with appropriate skills who could be deployed to peace operations by offering targeted training to potential candidates.
- Support transitions from a mission to the *UN Country Team*, including by funding programmatic activity focusing on local conflict management.

Tanja Bernstein is a Senior Analyst at ZIF and previously worked for the United Nations in the Office of the Secretary-General.

Alischa Kugel is a research fellow at ZIF and was formerly Senior Program Officer in the Crisis Diplomacy and Peace Operations Program at the NYU Center on International Cooperation.

