

Input to the United Nations Review on the Future of All Forms of Peace Operations (DPPA-DPO)

Submitted to: UN DPPA-DPO

Submission by: Nonviolent Peaceforce (NP)

Date: 15 August 2025

About us: Nonviolent Peaceforce (NP) was established in 2002 with the mission of protecting civilians in violent conflicts through unarmed strategies, build peace side-by-side with local communities, and advocate for the wider adoption of these approaches to safeguard human lives and dignity. NP has active programs in 10 countries across Europe, the United States, Africa, and Asia, including the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Sudan, Myanmar, Ukraine, and the United States. In all these country contexts and in all our work, we are guided by principles of nonviolence, non-partisanship, primacy of local actors, and civilian-to-civilian action. For more information, visit us at <https://nonviolentpeaceforce.org/> or contact: ikarimou@nonviolentpeaceforce.org.

****Caveat:** In this submission, we will focus primarily on the protection dimensions of the future of UN peace operations, as this reflects the core of our operational and policy work. Our contribution takes a more reflective, structural critique and less technical approach, as we believe that this moment of institutional uncertainty calls for honest introspection, rather than just surface-level fixes. That said, we conclude with a set of practical and actionable recommendations which are primarily directed at the UN secretariat as the lead entity in this review process but also relevant to Member States. These are intended to inform both policy reform and advocacy efforts, including internal messaging within the secretariat vis à vis its own leadership.

Introduction

Globally, civilians are facing rising levels of violence and direct threats to their lives. According to this year's Secretary General's report on protection of civilians in armed conflict, the UN recorded more than 36,000 civilian deaths in 14 armed conflicts in 2024. Amongst the series of grim facts the report highlights, it also points to the fact that 2024 was the deadliest year on record for humanitarian personnel, with more than 360 humanitarians – often local aid workers – killed in 20 countries, some in their homes and others at work. This reflects both the rapid erosion of IHL norms where distinction between combatants and non-combatants are increasingly blurred but is also a mirror of the shortcomings of existing frameworks for the protection of civilians.

At the UN, discussions on the future of protection are intertwined with debates on the future of peace operations. Over time, the protection of civilians has become central to peacekeeping mandates as well as to special political missions, although the latter is less well-known. However, both at the Security Council and in operational contexts, this core function of peace operations is under strain. Hence, this present review must confront a central paradox. While protection of civilians remains a stated priority across peace operations, the UN's delivery is increasingly challenged by the scale and complexity of violence civilians face. In many contexts, uniformed components are overstretched, political strategies are stalled and international access is limited. Yet, even in these constrained environments, local protection continues – not because of, but often despite formal operations. What remains underacknowledged is the agency of civilians themselves in carrying out these efforts. They are not passive recipients of protection, but active frontline responders, mediators, peacebuilders and monitors. From Gaza to Sudan, the DRC to Myanmar, civilians continue to shape

protective environments – even in the absence or withdrawal of UN missions and the future of peace operations must recognise and centre this reality.

This makes the current review both a risk and an opportunity. If only treated as an exercise of administrative streamlining, it risks reinforcing the very limitations that have undermined the UN's credibility and led to this moment of reform. But if approached with honesty and ambition, it could become a real turning point – one that moves away from institutional defensiveness and toward a renewed vision for protection, rooted not in rigid institutional mandates but in civilian needs.

What is at stake is not just the future shape of peace operations themselves, but the political and normative identity of the UN itself. Will the UN continue to invest in militarised, state-centric models of stabilisation, despite the fragile track records of such interventions? Or will it support approaches that are more locally anchored and people-centred, moving away from vocal commitments to actual actions? Some analysts have already recognised the need for a more pluralistic model – one that supports and co-implements protection alongside civilians, particularly in fragile contexts where formal missions are absent or limited. The present submission is made in the same vein. It is not a call for replacing missions with NGOs, nor an idealisation of community action. Rather, it is a call to reframe the UN's protective role from "service provider" to enabler and from centre to "bridge-builder" at both local and international levels.

Thoughts, reflections and recommendations:

Planning for uncertainty requires an honest look inwards

When engaging in recent policy debates around the future of peace ops, particularly that of protection, we've repeatedly heard that peace operations are struggling because they're deployed into increasingly complex environments, or because political solutions remain elusive. From the Secretariat's point of view, these challenges are often framed as external: geopolitical shifts, a deadlocked security council or a decline in host government consent. These are real constraints – but to suggest they fully explain the system's shortcomings is simply disingenuous. The UN was designed to operate in crisis (or at the very least, to grapple with it). That is exactly when and where everyday people expect it to deliver, particularly on their protection. In other words, protection cannot wait for perfect political conditions to be delivered.

What's often missing in these narratives is a willingness to look inward. An honest introspection would reveal how many of the obstacles to effective protection are not merely geopolitical – rather, they are institutional. The UN's protection architecture – including within its peace operations themselves – remains siloed, slow and overly preoccupied with internal mandate distinctions rather than with lived realities on the ground. Persistent internal bickering over whether protection should be delivered by a peacekeeping force, a special political mission or a UN country team are self-inflicted and unhelpful. Most important, they are far from people-centered since civilians under threat do not – and should not – care precisely who within the UN systems primarily holds the protection mandate so long as they receive the support they need. Other bureaucratic barriers also persist: peacekeepers unable to act without central-level authorisation, red tape blocking access to small-scale mission funding for first responders, punctual consultations with no sustained engagement etc. These are not immovable constraints. They are self-inflicted and, in many cases, fixable.

That said, given the acute financial uncertainty the UN now faces, where peace and security budgets are shrinking, forcing operations to scale back, it is perhaps understandable that internal actors resort to external explanations to explain certain limitations. But that tendency, however human, is dangerous. Overemphasis on resource scarcity or political gridlock – while important in some cases, this is not to suggest otherwise – can be interpreted less as an objective contextual analysis and more as a justification for inaction. It can come across as institutional self-preservation, driven more by the need to defend mechanisms that UN staffers were entrusted to implement than by the urgency civilians experience on the ground. And for civilians facing violence, that distinction matters. If politically enabling environments cannot be guaranteed, the very least the UN system can do is ensure that it is sufficiently honest with itself to break down the structural and logistical barriers it has imposed on itself.

This also means recalibrating how we think about and plan for the future. Right now, a lot of the conversation is focused on what kinds of missions the UN should deploy in different settings – whether modular approaches, lighter footprint or other setups depending on the crisis. But that approach risks turning into another one-size-fits-all solution. The truth is, we can't predict what the next crisis will look like. What we do know is that it will likely be complex and fast-moving. Climate change, cyber threats and emerging technologies like AI are already reshaping conflict and exposing civilian to new types of vulnerabilities in ways current mission models can't keep up with. So, the real question then is not what kind of context to expect, but whether the system is equipped to adapt when the time comes (and some would argue that time is now) – whether analytically, logistically and institutionally.

That means focusing less on mission templates and more on building the right capabilities and partnerships: stronger early warning, faster and more flexible funding, more localised decision-making, and partnerships with local first responders. The goal is to make sure that when new challenges arise, the system isn't slowed down by its own bureaucracy – and has the tools, relationships and information it needs to act. Hence, the current popularity of “modular approaches” may be to some conceptually useful in the short term, but it shouldn't become another rigid model that fails to adjust to real-life complexity or fails to provide space for local ownership.

Likewise, the growing calls by some of the UN member state constituency to “go back to traditional peacekeeping” may sound appealing in a moment of strategic uncertainty but they miss the point. We've seen too many times that narrow mandates and limited deployments often fall short when civilians are facing widespread violence. If we ignore those lessons, we risk repeating the same failures.

Protection as the measure of mission legitimacy and local ownership

Realistically however, at least as a tangible outcome of the present review, various concrete models of future UN peace operations will continue to be put on the table. Faced with that, we'd argue that however nimble or modular, it is unthinkable that any future UN mission would be deployed without a core protection mandate. Protection is not a peripheral add-on but instead a fundamental obligation of the international community, rooted in international humanitarian law and historically one of the defining features of UN peace operations.

In fact, in moments of strategic uncertainty like the current one, it is worth recalling the very mass atrocities that have shaped the world's collective consciousness and led to the normative introduction of the “protection of civilians” mandate. From Srebrenica to Rwanda and Darfur, the

lesson over the years has been painfully clear: if the UN is deployed – regardless of the fashion in which it is deployed – and fails to meet the immediate security needs of civilians, it risks losing credibility, legitimacy and ultimately its ability to operate.

Recognition of this vicious cycle – where the absence of a strong protection mandate and practice weakens the mission’s ability to operate effectively across all other areas of its mandate – is precisely why protection cannot be treated as optional. In essence, when civilians are not protected, the mission can lose public trust and freedom of movement, thereby undermining its ability to deliver on other priorities. MONUSCO and the wave of popular protest it experienced in 2022 was perhaps one of the starkest examples of this: without protection efforts perceived as credible by conflict-affected communities, the mission’s broader political, developmental and stabilisation objectives became virtually impossible to pursue.

So, as much as host-state consent is secured through formal channels and however state-centric and intergovernmental the UN system may be, missions cannot bypass people. They will, whether they like it or not, be judged by popular perceptions and civilian experiences on the ground. Ultimately, as past failures have shown, protection must remain central to any peace operation’s purpose – and where blue helmet cannot provide it directly, they must find ways to support and partner with others who can. In practice, this means investing more deliberately in people-centered approaches i.e civilian-led efforts; efforts that expand the protection toolbox beyond the conventional reliance on armed presence.

Expanding the protection toolbox to advance people-centred approaches

Too often in UN circles, protection is still narrowly equated with deterrence through force – armed patrols, quick reaction forces or temporary bases. And **while these may be necessary in certain contexts**, they are not sufficient. In other words, civilian protection cannot rest on force alone – particularly in environments where missions are politically constrained, under-resourced or facing significant access challenges. Instead, future missions could learn from current local protection practice that relies heavily on unarmed strategies, leveraging local knowledge and relationships to keep people safe.

However, community-led protection remains disputed within the wider UN policy space. Critics often caution that community-led protection is idealistic or overly romanticised. Some point out that communities themselves demand external security provision – sometimes even through force. That may be true, especially in moments of acute crisis. But this doesn’t negate the value or necessity of more localised approaches. If one looks at the example of Sudan for instance, that currently ranks as one of the worst humanitarian and protection crisis worldwide, some community members of El Fasher and Tawila have expressed to NP the desire to see the deployment of a UN mission (even specifically referring to “peacekeeping”; likely because it’s the most well-known form of UN deployment) as part of their key asks. But precisely in contexts like Sudan and increasingly in others where such a scenario is unrealistic (at least in the immediate term) partly because of the difficulty of bringing warring parties into a peace process that could create the political and operational conditions needed for a mission to materialise, people are not sitting idle. Communities are taking matters into their own hands to meet their protection needs – most notably through Emergency Response Rooms (ERRs). In other words, the nuance here is that communities are not waiting for the UN to intervene. When protection needs arise, they respond. Importantly, they are also not asking to be left alone; rather, they are asking to be heard, supported and treated as active agents in their own protection, not passive beneficiaries.

At NP, we employ an unarmed civilian protection (UCP) approach, where trained local civilians use nonviolent tools – protective presence, accompaniment, community-based early warning systems, and mediation – to prevent and reduce violence. These are not abstract models; they are already functioning in some of the world’s most volatile environments, often where armed multilateral actors cannot or will not go. The community protection teams we support, often composed of women, youth or other trusted local figures, are anchored, consistent and credible. It is that trust and local anchoring that makes for the strength of their protection practice. In some ways, this is reflected in past UN peacekeeping practice itself. Recent engagements we’ve had in the Democratic Republic of Congo with civilians in Bukavu and staffers of MONUSCO’s civil affairs division in Kinshasa revealed that when community protection in UN peace ops works and most importantly, is assessed positively by local populations, it often does so because it is able to support community-based mechanisms and intervene at the grassroots level. Community Liaison Assistants (CLAs), for example, have been described to us as being among the most trusted and effective parts of the mission architecture. This is not incidental – they are local staff with deep contextual knowledge and unique access. Crucially, they understand both the mission’s internal dynamics and the community’s needs and, hence, can mediate between the two. It’s precisely that positionality that is a valuable resource to advance protection outcomes and needs to be further leveraged in future missions.

Some may argue that civil affairs units and the community engagement work they carry within UN missions are already quite robust and therefore not an area that needs major reform. While there are indeed promising examples in some missions, their impact remains largely uneven – often depending on how mission leadership interprets the given protection mandate. These approaches can also be sidelined when priorities shift toward state-focused stabilisation. In addition, local staff face systemic inequalities: they are often underpaid, lack adequate social protections and have limited opportunities to feed their insights into senior decision-making. Addressing these human resource gaps is not just a matter of fairness – it will be key to making protection efforts more creative, responsive and locally grounded in the future.

Expanding the protection toolbox to include and emphasise more clearly-defined, locally-owned and driven unarmed strategies also does not mean replacing peacekeepers altogether. It means matching tools to context and recognising that the most effective protection strategies often blend international presence with empowered local action. Community-led protection provides something armed actors often can’t: legitimacy, early access and the social infrastructure for sustaining peace long after international forces withdraw. So, if the UN is serious about protection through peace operations, it must focus on recognising the range of local people-centred protection approaches, focus on scaling them, resourcing them and embedding them as central, not simply complementary, to the way the UN protects.

Changing the culture of protection in UN peace operations: emphasizing trust and proximity with local communities

Finally, the future of protection will not be defined by mandates alone – it will depend on relationships. That is largely because protection cannot just be understood as a set of tasks but rather as a practice that is fundamentally relational and, at its core, relies on trust.

However, trust is not built by compounds, convoys or technical reports. Rather, it is built by proximity, presence and responsiveness. Communities trust those who show up consistently, listen genuinely

and take unequivocal action when it matters. In too many contexts where the UN is or has been present, however, that trust has been eroded – not always because of bad intent but because of a perceived institutional distance, delayed responses or engagement deemed as merely “extractive”. Rebuilding this trust with local communities will require more than surface-level fixes. It will require a complete cultural shift toward humility, toward shared ownership and toward protection strategies that are first and foremost shaped by and accountable to those they are meant to serve.

That shift begins with how missions view communities. An honest introspection like the one argued for earlier would acknowledge that “community engagement” or “local ownership” have become somewhat of a catchphrase at the UN, particularly in its peace operations discussions. These are often framed as a tool for visibility or messaging. But a genuine relationship with communities cannot be built through surveys, consultations and optics alone. As we have shown, communities are not passive recipients – they are already acting to protect themselves, often under impossible conditions. When their knowledge, strategies and networks are sidelined or instrumentalised, the whole UN operation risks losing not only credibility, but also effectiveness.

Hence, we’d argue that it is truly time to move from engagement to partnership. From consultation to co-design. From seeing local actors as beneficiaries to recognising them as frontline protection agents. As missions are expected to adopt lighter footprints wherever they are deployed, local communities can only be seen as natural and central partners to holistic protection strategies. They can complement mission efforts not only through physical presence but also by contributing to early warning, mediation, de-escalation and broader peacebuilding initiatives. This is not just a moral imperative – it’s a strategic one. Communities know the threats they face better than any external actor. They understand local dynamics, power structures and early warning signs. Hence, when the UN listens and adapts accordingly, protection efforts become more targeted, timely and trusted.

That also means closing the feedback loop. Community consultations should not be merely summarised in UN technical reports that never shape operational activities. For the longest time, communities have expressed their desire to see the insights they share translate into real-time decisions. If future missions still fail to deliver on this need for genuine inclusion, the credibility gap will only continue to widen. To avoid this, they will need to be guided by the fundamental fact that protection is much more than being present in fact – rather, it’s about how that presence is felt. Where you position yourself, how much you engage on a human-level with communities hosting you, when you show up and how quickly you respond – these are what communities remember. And they are what determines whether missions are seen as protective or as “performative”.

Finally, all of this requires risk-tolerant mission leadership. Too often, fear of failure or political backlash leads to overly cautious approaches. But the cost of inaction is higher. In this moment of institutional introspection, we need leaders at all levels who are willing to admit what isn’t working and take their queue not just (some would argue – not at all) from security council resolutions or NY-issued mandates, but rather from the lived realities of civilians facing horrific levels of violence.