

POLICY NOTE: FUTURE-PROOFING UN PEACEKEEPING BY STRENGTHENING ANTI-CORRUPTION AND GOOD GOVERNANCE MEASURES

As armed conflicts are becoming more complex, so are the challenges that peace operations face on deployment: a fragmented landscape of non-state armed actors, hybrid and cyber threats, displacement, and climate-related security risks are all changing the face of what peace operations encounter upon deployment.

In these already volatile and high-risk settings, an operation's ability to prevent and respond to corruption can be a determining factor its success or failure. As conflict-affected contexts are often characterised by a weak governance structure and fragile institutions, this creates a fertile breeding ground for corruption, financial crime, and organised crime. Peace operations are hence frequently deployed in highly corruption-prone areas.

Corruption can [threaten mission success](#) in multiple ways. It can undermine key objectives, such as to consolidate government authority, or peaceful political transition. It can also fuel the [smuggling and diversion](#) of arms and weapons and enable organised crime, which has been raised a [serious and growing concern](#) to peacekeeping and peacebuilding. Furthermore, as a [root cause of violence and conflict](#), corruption deepens inequalities, erodes trust in institutions, and creates conditions for conflict drivers such as intercommunal tensions. As the same time as it contributes to security threats, it also erodes states' abilities to prevent and respond to security threats of any kind.

The links between corruption, conflict and fragility, and their impact on efforts to sustain peace and build sustainable development, are increasingly acknowledged, including [by the UN](#). In the mission mandate for [South Sudan](#), for example, the UN Security Council recognises "that intercommunal violence in South Sudan is politically and economically linked to national-level violence and corruption". In 2021, States Parties to the UN Convention Against Corruption [requested](#) closer coordination and cooperation between the UNODC, UN DPPA and UN DPO to strengthen the rule of law and anti-corruption in UN peacekeeping and peacebuilding.

Further steps can be taken to operationalise these commitments and ensure that peace operations have the right tools to adequately respond to corruption risks. [The Review on the Future of UN Peace Operations](#), mandated by the [Pact for the Future](#), presents a good opportunity to assess how responses to corruption as root cause of conflict can be improved in peacekeeping operations.

This policy note recommends five steps to future-proof UN peace operations by improving responses to corruption:

- A) Recognise corruption as key [strategic and operational risk](#) and [embed specialised expertise in missions](#)
- B) Collect, share and strategically use [data](#) on corrupt activities and arms trafficking to incentivise key actors
- C) Build [institutional resilience](#) in host country defence and security institutions
- D) Increase [institutional safeguards](#) to corruption in military operations for T/PPCs
- E) Strengthen [corruption risk assessments](#) and improve military assistance standards

HOW CAN PEACE OPERATIONS IMPROVE THEIR RESPONSES TO CORRUPTION?

A. Recognise corruption as key strategic and operational risk and embed specialised expertise in missions

Anti-corruption can be integrated in peacekeeping mandates and combined with efforts to combat organised crime, to advance security sector reforms, and/or to support the rule of law. With missions increasingly at risk of overstretch, these initiatives to risk being treated as add-ons rather than core tasks and objectives. That leaves operations without the well-resourced specialist capacity they need in anti-corruption, financial crime, and political economy analysis, as it has been [repeatedly observed](#). Writing anti-corruption into peacekeeping mandates and implementing it alongside efforts to disrupt organised crime, advance security-sector reform, and strengthen the rule of law, can help to mobilise resources and build adequate capacities in operations.

- ➔ Recognise corruption as a major strategic and operational challenge facing UN operations and address it as cross-cutting issue rather than as an isolated and technical component. Prioritise and integrate anti-corruption and defence and security governance across the peacebuilding spectrum from the onset, built into conflict transformation and peace processes, where they are currently [underrepresented](#).
- ➔ Establish dedicated specialist capacity on anti-corruption and financial crime—appropriately staffed at senior and technical levels, fully budgeted, and vested with clear decision-making authority. Task them to produce political-economy-informed analysis and develop sector-specific approaches. Put in place formal, whole-of-mission coordination with justice and security sector reform, defence institution-building, and security/defence governance counterparts to ensure coherent and mutually reinforcing institutional arrangements.

B. Collect, share and strategically use data on corrupt activities and arms trafficking to incentivise key actors

In some contexts, operations need to balance [a lack of political will within host governments](#) to [systemically address](#) corruption and related issues, such as organised crime. This challenge often stems from fragile peace agreements that include parties implicated in criminal economies, whose power would be threatened by disrupting these networks. This has led to efforts focusing solely on illicit activities connected to terrorist financing, (e.g. in [Mali](#)), rather than sector-specific, political-economy-based approaches. This approach risks inadvertently consolidating the corrupt networks and practices that contributed to the outbreak of armed conflict in the first place, and [increases the likelihood for relapse](#). Notwithstanding uncertainty regarding the future of sanctions regimes and arms embargoes, these instruments remain [important entry points](#) to engage stakeholders, generate information on corrupt practices, and address corruption as a threat to international peace and security.

- ➔ Connect anti-corruption to other parts of the mission mandate that are beneficial to the host governments, e.g. facilitating a political transition process, promoting economic growth, extending public services, or preventing violence and human rights abuses. This can [help](#) UN agencies to both maintain host nation consent and ensure that host nation populations are protected. Consider this balance also in the planning and implementation of the operations.

- ➔ Use sanction regimes more strategically. Ensure data sharing between peacekeeping missions, panels of experts, anti-corruption agencies, and arms control bodies to monitor arms diversion, corrupt and organised criminal activities, and use this data to sanction key individuals engaging on arms trafficking and arms diversion by UN entities and independent experts can inform sanctions for arms brokers and traffickers.
- ➔ Actively engage with [civil society](#) and community-based organisations and ensure their meaningful participation in corruption risk assessments, context analysis and network mapping, to increase the legitimacy and credibility of the operation, and build trust with local communities.
- ➔ Partner with civil society to build their capacity to ensure the accountability of national defence and security institutions and increase their ownership of, and participation in, good governance mechanisms. [Post-withdrawal](#), the sustainability of the peace operation's work will depend also on the capacity and ability of civil society to perform oversight functions.

C. Build institutional resilience in host country defence and security institutions

Building institutional resilience to corruption and [crime](#) is building resilience to armed conflict. Defence and security institutions are key to sustaining human and state security, but particularly vulnerable to corruption, due to weak oversight, transparency and accountability mechanisms. In these sectors, corruption is inextricably linked to other root causes of conflict, such as human rights abuses and the illicit proliferation of arms and weapons.

A [recent report](#) by the UN Secretary-General recognises that “[in] fragile settings, illicit flows in the defence sector weaken State capacity, sustain patronage networks and delay recovery efforts, exacerbating inequality and undermining the rule of law”, and recommends “greater transparency, independent audits and robust anti-corruption safeguards in both defence planning and procurement” to counteract this.

Peace operations provide a key entry point for implementing this recommendation. Building resilient security institutions is a key precondition for successful transitions and to ensure ownership by national forces and their ability to protect civilians after mission withdrawal, and to avoid power [vacuums](#) that could be filled by non-state armed actors.

- ➔ Recognise anti-corruption measures and good governance of the defence and security sector as core pillars of conflict prevention and peacebuilding, and integrate them as cross-cutting measures in peacebuilding policy, including in national prevention strategies, and programming, to ensure longer-term engagement on state-building.
- ➔ Make building inclusive, accountable, transparent and resilient security and defence institutions in the host country an explicit part of exit and transition strategies from the early stages.
- ➔ In the review of the UN's Peacebuilding Architecture, encourage the Peacebuilding Commission (PBC) to mobilise resources for good governance initiatives, SSR and DDR, and elevate the role of the PBC to closely advise on mission transition and exit strategies.

D. Increase institutional safeguards to corruption in military operations for T/PPCs

Military operations are one of the areas in which institutional safeguards to corruption are weakest: Two-thirds of countries assessed in the Governance Defence Integrity Index ([GDI](#)) were

found to be at critical risk of corruption in their military operations. This means that there is significant potential for corruption to undermine operations on the frontline. Operations that are not prepared to address corruption risks on deployment can suffer from corruption within their own forces, as well as fuel existing corruption in the operating environment. [Reports](#), for example, of peacekeepers selling their weapons to insurgents, or committing [sexual exploitation, sexual abuses, and sexual forms of corruption](#), have had detrimental effects on the legitimacy and public support for operations, as well as on troops' ability to implement their mandate.

To ensure that UN personnel lead by example and set standards for acting with integrity, UN peacekeeping leadership should:

- ➔ Build a robust oversight system for troop and police contributing countries (T/PCCs), ensure clear lines of accountability, reduce risk in procurement to ensure the best deal for the UN, and ensure whistleblower protection, to reduce [operational risks](#).
- ➔ Ensure that T/PCCs embed building integrity in their overarching military doctrine.
- ➔ Require comprehensive training on corruption issues for commanders at all levels as part of pre-deployment for peace operations and ensure that commanders are able to recognise, assess, and mitigate corruption risk while in the field.

E. Strengthen corruption risk assessments and improve military assistance standards

Peace operations are often accompanied by bilateral or multilateral security-force assistance, which prioritise platforms, training, and tactical readiness over the governance functions that make capability durable. But where payment systems are fraudulent, 'ghost soldiers' exist, procurement is opaque, or parallel chains of command have been established, foreign military assistance is absorbed into patronage networks and corruption instead of military effectiveness. Instead, assistance should be sequenced around governance benchmarks, such as transparent public procurement, payroll/HR reform, lifecycle sustainment, and internal and external audits, with delivery of lethal and non-lethal support tied to demonstrable integrity gains. Joint monitoring and robust do-no-harm risk management helps to underpin the whole process.

- ➔ Embed corruption risk assessments in military assistance and security sector governance frameworks, ensuring that high-risk transactions and patterns of misconduct are more easily prevented, identified, and addressed.
- ➔ Apply conditionality on military aid to ensure recipient states implement integrity measures before receiving funds or equipment. Strengthening accountability standards for international donors to prevent military aid from reinforcing corrupt networks and promoting better coordination of security assistance policies across stakeholders.
- ➔ Link exemptions to, and measures to ease and lift of arms embargoes for national security and defence forces to progress on governance, accountability and transparency reforms in defence and security institutions.
- ➔ Support capacity-building for host institutions to strengthen risk assessment methodologies, ensuring that procurement officials and oversight bodies have the tools and expertise to detect and mitigate corruption risks in real time.