COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT DURING COVID-19

Executive Summary

In May DPET launched a series of virtual focus group meetings involving over 50 colleagues from peacekeeping missions to better understand how Missions have adapted their community engagement approaches as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

While community engagement activities have inevitably been affected by movement restrictions and social distancing measures adopted to contain the spread of the pandemic it also emerged that the broad capital of local stakeholders' networks built over the year proved resilient to the shocks of the current situation.

The use of phone communication and digital apps was already widespread before the pandemic because of security restrictions and geographic access issues and has therefore allowed peacekeepers to maintain essential engagement even though this is often limited to "community elites" that have access to phone devices, internet and electricity. As a consequence, marginalized voices have become even more so.

Overall, activities that rely on community engagement to support situational awareness and early warning has continued, while activities focused on sensitization and awareness have even increased – both by leveraging UN broadcasting capacities and making an even greater use of local partners – but activities that relied on the Mission to bring opposing communities together to resolve tensions and conflicts have been instead seriously undermined. Thus, is an area that requires further consideration to identify creative and innovative approaches.

On a positive note, the need to minimize UN's footprint has prompted a much more closely integrated approach across Mission components, especially when it comes to conducting joint patrols and engaging local counterparts. Opportunities have risen to bring together, if only virtually, stakeholders that would have hesitated to do so in person, as it was reported by colleagues in Cyprus.

The use of community radio stations, including UN radio, has proven extremely valuable in conducting sensitization campaigns and fighting misinformation. These radio stations are instrumental in providing direct services to the population, as is the case with Radio Miraya in UNMISS, which is supporting distant schooling.

The rapid decision by Missions to reorient available QIPs or programmatic funds has increased the scope to better address urgent needs of the communities, boosting trust and cooperation. Addressing people's need that are directly related to the health emergency increases the stand of the Mission in popular perceptions while also strengthening local institutional capacities.

Some of the recommendations that emerged from the consultation highlighted that the gains in community engagement should be enhanced by reaching further and beyond "community elites" especially when it comes to women networks and increasing the reach of UN radios by using more local languages. There was also a call to strengthen the capacity of local actors to operate in a digital environment both by providing training and resources, but also by supplying devices and access to internet.

Mission HQs should engage the private sector as key stakeholders in identifying and supporting solutions that can improve the livelihood of communities and address some of the immediate health concerns as well (e.g. production of PPE, supporting the establishment of isolation centers, etc.). Missions should advocate for the use of solar panels in rural areas to improve power supply, which is often the main obstacle to the availability and accessibility of telecommunication networks and devices.

1. Introduction and background

Countermeasures to the COVID-19 pandemic have focused, among other things, on social distancing, self-isolation, and quarantine, including restriction on intra/interstate movement, seriously impacting the peacekeeping work that relies on engaging local actors and communities. To better understand how Missions have adapted their community engagement approaches, and to highlight opportunities and challenges generated by the current situation to mandate implementation, DPET launched a series of virtual focus group meetings (14, 15, 20, and 22 May 2020) with over 50 staff (in particular Civil Affairs, but also Human Rights, Gender Advisors, UN Police; etc.) from peacekeeping missions (MINUSCA, MINUSMA, MONUSCO, UNMISS, UNAMID, UNFICYP, and UNMIK) as well as from other non-peacekeeping settings (UNAMI; BINUH).

2. Noted trends on the local contexts

Despite an **increase in intercommunal violence** in many peacekeeping settings (i.e., Mali, South Sudan, Darfur) the general opinion was that these were not triggered or exacerbated by the pandemic, if not tangentially, but had its roots in country-specific circumstances. The case of South Sudan is an example. The institutional crisis generated by the incomplete implementation of the peace agreement, which required the reappointment of all state governors, was further delayed due to the movement restrictions introduced to mitigate the spread of the pandemic.

Missions in the African continent, as well as in Haiti, noted that the initial **popular reaction was one of skepticism** resulting in the reluctance to implement social distancing and other preventive measures introduced by governments. Further, the socio-economic realities of these countries imply that a significant portion of the population already lived in poverty – or "hand to mouth" as one participant put it – and staying home was simply not an option, resulting in non-compliance

and protests in countries like Mali, where government curfews put in place ended up being lifted despite the likelihood of the continued propagation of the pandemic.

Human Rights reported on how the enforcement of preventive measures had translated in numerous cases of **abuse of authority by law enforcement** actors and in human rights violations in the gravest cases. The detention of violators, further crowding prison population and increasing the actual risk of contagion, was seen as one of the most worrying trends. Human Rights in BINUH highlighted the potential consequences of the non-suspension of the US policy of repatriation during the pandemic, resulting in many infected Haitians being sent back to the island, where health services are notably lacking. These policies have also further aggravated the personal circumstances of those being repatriated, and also the receiving countries, as some of these deportees later tested positive for the virus.

Another common trend in most countries – and surely so in Iraq, Mali, South Sudan and the Central African Republic (CAR) – was the widespread perception that the virus was being imported by foreigners and by UN personnel in particular. Antecedent of the cholera epidemic in Haiti have stricken the perception of local populations as well as the awareness of UN missions which has resulted in a very conservative approach to movement of UN personnel. However, the **anti-UN sentiments** are considered largely the result of political manipulation that do not necessarily represent the feelings of the people on the ground. This is exemplified by the numerous examples of continuing cooperation with local actors in the field as well as that of local notables and influencers who are willing to step-up and counter rumors and hate speech.

The most direct impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has been its impact on **socio-economic** situation which has even farther-reaching consequences, given the pre-existing economic fragility of most of these countries. There have been high unemployment rates, especially among the youth and closures of borders and movement restrictions have drastically reduced access to primary commodities including the production and import of food. UNAMID reported that the suspension of interstate transportation and shorter market opening hours has resulted in limited supply of food and supplies and have consequently caused prices of essential commodities to double and in some cases even triple.

Women and youth have been disproportionately impacted by governments' restrictive measures, as they drive the informal sector of the food supply and transportation. In some cases, like in Kosovo, Mali, and Sudan, there has been an increase in gender-based violence as families have been confined without regular income.

Economic fragility compounded by state fragility has also created **opportunities for organized crime and armed groups** to expand their role in black market activities, including gaining control over food distribution channels, especially at national borders. MINUSMA, UNMISS and UNAMID reported intensified attacks between armed groups for control of territories as governments focus on the COVID-19 response as well as the limited and sometimes absent police presence.

3. Challenges faced by Civil Affairs and Mission components

3.1. Working and engagement modalities

To reduce the risk to communities and staff, missions have had to change the way they work and interact with communities. Missions have rapidly adopted confinement measures for their staff, locked down bases where the staff tested positive to COVID-19, and moved to **telecommuting** to continue mandate implementation. A number of staff, mainly international but also national, were unable to return to their duty stations. In the case of international staff, access to office equipment, internet and other digital platforms, as well as generators, enabled them to continue performing their duties even though not in ideal conditions.

On the other hand, working conditions for many **national staff** are often sub-optimal as many do not have access to regular power supply, office-issued computers, and internet or must incur additional cost to continue using their phones. This leads to the paradox that those staff that are the critical nexus for community engagement purposes are also those that have less access to the technologies and resources required to tap into their community networks.

Communication with interlocutors continues, however this is limited to the use of **mobile phones or relying on platforms such as social media apps like WhatsApp** in areas where phone services exist. This is not a new phenomenon for missions, who often relied on telecommunication and other digital platforms before the pandemic because of prevailing security conditions or adverse seasonal conditions, such as during the rainy season. It must be noted that in some cases there is a reluctancy to engage on more sensitive issues over the phone because in fear that they may be tapped.

Communicating through phones and apps means also that only **a smaller circle of more affluent, urbanized and emancipated community elites can still be engaged** while a broader spectrum of voices has become harder to capture without in-person engagement. Colleagues in UNMISS insisted on the challenges of engaging with communities and local authorities in the absence of patrols because there is no mobile network coverage in the area, and this is even truer when it comes to pastoral communities that are constantly on the move.

The risk of **muting marginalized** voices was also noted as a risk in South Sudan, specifically in Unity State where women do not traditionally have access to phone devices. However, in other cases reported by MINUSMA and UNMIK, the use of digital communication has allowed women to engage more easily in political discussions because of the reduced influence of cultural and behavioral constraints that instead mar physical meetings.

However, some level of **in-person** interaction has continued between a number of participants and modalities while respecting social distancing and using PPE. Some staff have continued to have in-person interaction with their counterparts, as was the case in UNMISS, to address growing tensions among communities, or in Kosovo, when the Mission distributed hygienic-kits to municipalities.

Missions have **reduced patrolling** to minimize perceptions that peacekeepers could be a vector of contagion, and in South Sudan the host government placed additional movement restrictions. However, in efforts to continue implementing priority tasks, such as POC, missions that deploy **Community Liaison Assistants (CLAs)** have allowed them on an exceptional basis to go on patrol with uniformed colleagues, providing an opportunity to maintain some level of in-person interaction with community interlocutors. However, in areas where CLAs have been unable to move freely and accompany patrols, it has resulted in delayed information collection and diminished early warning capacity due to increased reliance on secondary sources without cross-checking.

Local partners – mainly local civil society actors and NGOs – have proven to be a critical link to both maintaining a viable communication across local stakeholders as well as to continuing activities that require physical presence. However, their ability to engage has also been diminished by the confinement measures put in place by the authorities and the halting of transportation activities provided by Missions, in particular internal UN flights where no other alternative exists, making a strong case for <u>the importance of allowing non-UN passengers on UN flights for mandate implementation</u>.

3.2. Mandate implementation

Situational Awareness and Early Warning

Community engagement is at the heart of Missions' situational awareness and early warning approaches, whether through regular interaction with local authorities, civil society, deployment of CLAs or through community-based mechanism such as Community Alert Networks (CANs) or similar mechanisms set up in different missions. But **as a result of the longstanding work done to develop such networks the flow of communication has remained active** since much of it was already reliant on phone communication and other devices before the pandemic.

For example, MINUSMA has been able to generate maps for new security hotspots and needs assessments based on information already gathered and has been able to establish a toll-free hotline to report POC threats which is proving very valuable under the current circumstances. Both UNMIK and MONUSCO mentioned the importance of monitoring developments through the social media especially regarding the circulation of rumors and hate speech that can hint to imminent threats.

Supporting conflict management and local peace initiatives

It goes without saying that the work done, largely by Civil Affairs sections, in support of local peace initiatives relies enormously on the ability to engage local stakeholders. Missions seem to be able to continue relying on their local networks for situational awareness and early warning purposes, the situation changes significantly when it comes to local conflict management, where **the priority is not so much for the Mission to engage with communities, but rather for it to be a convener for communities to engage among themselves** and to find homegrown political

solutions. This kind of work – bringing communities together, a strength of Civil Affairs – has been greatly hampered by the pandemic.

For instance, ongoing efforts by UNMISS to address the violent conflict between the Murle, Lou Nuer, and Dinka that marred Greater Jonglei and Pibor in February and March 2020, resulted in successful negotiations to release the numerous children and women abducted by opposing communities. In this instance, UNMISS allowed local authorities to access Team Sites in order to access MS Team and communicate with the local authorities within the Dinka, Lau-Nuer, and Pibor communities. However, the actual return of these children and women stalled because the pandemic triggered an inability for the Mission to provide the necessary logistical support.

However, similar practices are being tested also in other missions and for instance MINUSCA hosted a VTC to bring the national authorities and local prefects/mayors together while UNFICYP is finding that moving to virtual meeting actually boosted participation in efforts to build confidence and maintain dialogue between the two communities as well as within the communities themselves as a result of reduced exposure and possible social stigma.

Capacity development

An area of work that has been inevitably compromised by measures of social distancing and remote work are those focused on strengthening the capacity of local stakeholders to perform roles in support of mandate implementation, whether this be strengthening institutional capacity; conflict resolution; or reconciliation activities. In this regard, many programmatic activities had to be placed on hold or scrapped altogether. However, Mission have also rapidly adapted by devising formats that allow them to hold smaller events with fewer participants. Training for local authorities and civil society actors have therefore carried on in MINUSMA, MINUSCA, MONUSCO and other missions but overall volume of activities and trainees has inevitably diminished.

4. Using community engagement to support the fight against COVID-19

Sensitization

From 18 March to 31 May, Civil Affairs MINUSCA, MINUSMA, MONUSCO, UNMISS, UNAMID, UNFICYP, UNISFA, and UNIFIL have directly organized or facilitated at least 330 sensitization activities to raise local communities' awareness on COVID-19. These activities have included training of community sensitizers which consisted of coaching sessions with the local government officials and community leaders, CSO's, women and youth groups, medical officers, religious and traditional leaders, IDPs and refugees, traders, etc. Sensitization activities have also been conducted in remote areas during long distance patrols. Local journalists have been trained on how to analyze rumors and crosscheck information. Women have been engaged to sensitize women on COVID-19 prevention, which brings them to the forefront of advocacy and creates an opportunity to generate income.

The use of the radio has been an effective tool used by the missions to sensitize communities. UNMISS supported a delegation of 158 influential community leaders from different communities to sensitize the population on COVID-19 prevention measures through Radio Miraya. Like UNMISS, MONUSCO, MINUSCA, and MINUSMA have engaged with radio stations to sensitize and share messages on human rights issues including in local languages. MINUSCA and UNISFA have also distributed radio sets to the population and UNMISS has used radio to provide education to students. UNMIK has focused on sensitizing and empowering the youth through various projects, such as facilitating dialogue and spreading awareness. They have launched an awareness campaign to empower young people in their community with a focus on remote areas and the villages. In collaboration with UNICEF and UN Women, UNMIK is supporting initiatives on mental health to raise awareness and provide a hotline for psychological support.

Supporting the health sector and preventive measures

All Missions have provided various means of medical support to local communities with some, such as MINUSCA, MONUSCO, UNAMID, and UNMISS, redirecting QIPs an programmatic funds toward such efforts. Missions have distributed medical, food, and cleaning supplies and hygiene kits to the population, as well as training on handwashing, and making of soaps and masks. For instance, in CAR local women groups are implementing a project to make soap and produce masks for the population. Similarly, MONUSCO implemented a project on protective mask manufacturing that resulted in the production of over 2,000 masks per day.

UNPOL in MINUSCA has created projects to support the Internal Security Forces (ISEF) operations as they provide Personal Protective Equipment (PPE). Missions have expanded their mandate to fund and renovate buildings for medical support. Civil Affairs section in Bouar in CAR supported the rehabilitation of an isolation room of the Prefectural Hospital where cases can be treated. As part of this initiative they also provided beds and sheets to the government. Similarly, UNMISS has renovated a hospital and isolation centers, and supported handwashing facilities.

Coordination mechanisms

MINUSCA have supported the Integrated Bangui COVID-19 Response Plan and established Sub-Prefectural Crisis Committees in close coordination with the local authorities. MINUSMA has established a COVID-19 task force at the Bamako-level to avoid duplication of projects and coordinate implementation of COVID-19 prevention activities. It also has a task force where both mission components and UNCT are represented. Civil Affairs in UNMISS is part of the state task force on COVID-19 to offer technical support and flag early warning concerns.

5. **Key takeaways**

- Past work on community engagement and efforts to develop networks across a broad spectrum of local stakeholders has allowed missions to **maintain a very active and effective channel of communication for situational awareness and early warning purposes**, but also to help with **sensitization efforts, diffusing rumors and fighting misinformation** – including against the alleged role of the UN in spreading the epidemic.

UNCLASSIFIED

- Similarly, the support provided to the establishment of local committees and task forces to support POC strategies, local peace initiatives, human rights violation monitoring and so on has proven to be extremely resilient to the reduced in-person interaction. However, the **reduced ability to support engagement among communities to address tensions and conflicts has weakened the ability of Mission to make progress on local peace initiatives and social cohesion activities**.

- The need to minimize the UN's footprint has pushed different Mission components and sections – as well as other UN partners – **to work in a much more closely integrated fashion** especially when it comes to the need to conduct joint patrols and engage local counterparts.

- The **use of UN radios and the broader network of community radios** have proven extremely valuable, playing **critical roles not only in conducting sensitization campaigns and fighting misinformation, but also in providing direct services to the population**, as is the case with Radio Miraya in UNMISS, which is supporting distant schooling.

- The **rapid decision by Missions to reorient available funds, whether QIPs or Programmatic Funding, has given flexibility to components on the ground** to better address the most pressing needs of the communities, fueling trust and cooperation. However, internal mission modalities to redistribute resources were not always effective and reportedly relied heavily on internal bargaining between sections (i.e. those who had unspent money and those that had the capacity to implement projects).

6. Improving community engagement practices under COVID-19

A number of recommendations identified during the consultations on possible initiatives to improve community engagement practices, both in the Mission and possibly at UNHQ include:

- Proactive gender-related programming: Opportunities arise in dynamic contexts and often change the status quo of women, and the COVID-19 is no different. Capitalizing on the pandemic can give Missions an opportunity for the implementation of innovative women-targeted programs. In particular, Missions need to increase efforts to reach out to women who are outside of established networks.

- Increase the ability to use local languages on UN radios in order to reach a broader swath of the population. For instance, outreach efforts by Radio Miraya have been somewhat limited by the fact that it only broadcasts in Arabic and English. UNMISS proposes UNHQ's support in introducing additional languages in order to reach the wider population in South Sudan.

- Missions should make a conscientious effort to promote and advocate the use of solar panels in rural areas to improve power supply, which is often one of the main obstacles to the broader reach and use of telecommunication networks and devices.

- Mission HQs should focus more efforts on <u>developing a dialogue with the private sector</u> as a key stakeholder in identifying and supporting solutions that can improve the engagement of communities in addressing their needs and concerns, including the ones generated by the pandemic (i.e., production of PPE, supporting the establishment of isolation centers, etc.).

- Missions should focus part of their efforts on <u>building the capacity of their counterparts to also operate in remotely</u>, possibly including access and use of MS Teams, and providing communication devices and/or airtime for key local partners and national staff to access internet.