

Briefing Paper

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A MISSING MANDATE?

Casualty Recording in UN Peace Operations

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Front cover photo

Local troops mingle with UNMISS uniformed elements at the establishment of an UNMISS base in Yei, South Sudan.

Source: Eric Kanalstein/UN Photo, January 2018

Overview

This Briefing Paper examines how UN peace operations are using casualty data to enhance the implementation of key elements of their mandates, including the protection of civilians (PoC), the promotion and protection of human rights, and conflict prevention, thereby contributing to achieving UN Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16.1: ‘Significantly reduce all forms of violence and related deaths rates everywhere’.

It argues that, in the absence of data from state institutions, UN peace operations can be a good alternative source of data in conflicts where they operate for measuring SDG 16 Indicator 16.1.2: ‘Conflict-related deaths per 100,000 population, by sex, age and cause’. The paper assesses the current casualty-recording efforts of three of the largest UN missions operating in highly volatile contexts: the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS), and the UN Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO). The aim is to obtain a fuller understanding of these missions’ functions—and the gaps in aligning their data collection efforts with the fulfilment of elements of their mandate and the recording of data relevant to SDG Indicator 16.1.2.

Key findings

- UN peace operations are in a unique position to contribute to measuring conflict-related deaths, which are a critical indicator under SDG 16.
- The cases of MINUSMA, UNMISS, and MONUSCO demonstrate that multiple UN peace operation actors are already engaged in casualty recording that has supported their ability to implement elements of their missions’ mandates, including PoC, the promotion and protection of human rights, and conflict prevention.
- Several challenges prevent UN-mandated peace operations from producing timely analysis of conflict-related deaths in their operating environment.
- With improved coordination among UN peace operation actors, casualty recording can contribute to the collection of data relevant to SDG Target 16.1, and also to Target 16.4, which calls on states to significantly reduce illicit arms flows.

Introduction

Data collection and analysis, including but not limited to casualty recording, is already a part of UN-mandated peace operations, with most missions having dedicated components with the capacity to collect and analyse such information.¹ Increasing and strengthening this capacity has often been the subject of successive UN reforms in order to improve the effectiveness of peace operations and ultimately reduce conflict and armed violence.² Building on the Small Arms Survey’s work to identify and evaluate data sources for measuring conflict-related deaths, this Briefing Paper seeks to examine the current capacity of the UN as a provider of data on conflict-related deaths, in particular in countries where it maintains a presence in active conflicts through its peace operations.³

The Briefing Paper begins by arguing the unique position of UN peace operations to monitor armed violence, and specifically to measure conflict-related deaths and contribute to Indicator 16.1.2 of the SDG framework. This is followed by a brief overview of how this type of data can be used to support the implementation of elements of UN peace operations mandates and, by extension, SDG Target 16.1 to ‘Significantly reduce all forms of violence and related death rates everywhere’ in their national context. Finally, the paper considers the various types of challenges facing efforts to align information management approaches within UN-mandated peace operations with the data requirements of SDG Indicator 16.1.2, which would in turn improve existing casualty-recording practice within UN peace operations.

The Briefing Paper uses MINUSMA, MONUSCO, and UNMISS as case studies to highlight best practices and gaps in casualty recording by UN peace operations. These are among the world’s largest UN peace operations in terms of personnel and budgets, are multidimensional in nature,⁴ and have robust mandates to protect civilians. All three operate in active conflict zones where they increasingly face asymmetric threats and high levels of conflict violence (Bellamy and Hunt, 2015, p. 1277), and in relatively large host countries with remote terrain and poor infrastructure. As such, they represent a good barometer of how casualty recording is currently being undertaken in UN peace operations.

The Briefing Paper is based on a review of all publicly available information on casualty recording in UN peace operations and a series of interviews with MINUSMA, UNMISS, and MONUSCO field officials, as well as with UN headquarters officials and NGO experts.

Unique position of UN field missions

UN field missions, including special political missions, commissions of inquiries, human rights offices, and observer missions, are uniquely placed to contribute to monitoring and measuring armed violence, including conflict-related deaths. They are present in most conflict-affected countries (see Map 1), and peace operations in particular typically have thousands of personnel (both uniformed and civilian) deployed across multiple regional and field offices. Among these personnel, many could potentially contribute to measuring conflict-related deaths. In many cases the UN can be viewed as an impartial actor in a conflict that can provide credible data. The UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) is an example of a UN field mission that consistently provides credible data on civilian casualties of the conflict in the country in which it is deployed, in this case Afghanistan (see Box 1).

UN peace operations are already collecting a wide variety of information on their respective operating environments, including violent incidents involving fatalities among civilians and combatants. Three mission elements coordinate this activity, the first two of which are Joint Operation Centres (JOCs) and Joint Mission Analysis Centres (JMAs). Both are

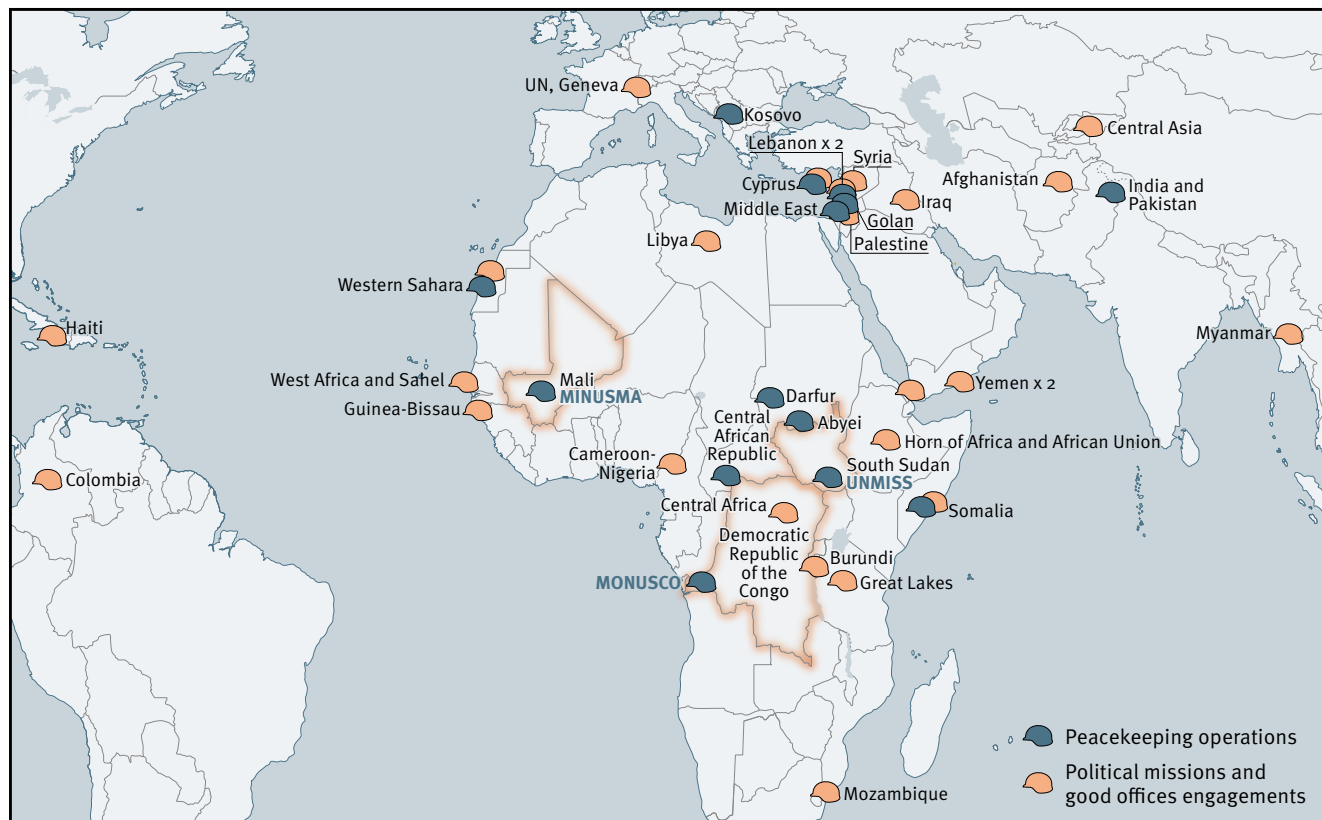
Box 1 UNAMA casualty recording

UNAMA's practice is an example of good casualty-recording practice in the UN system. Since 2007 the Human Rights Unit (UNAMA-HR) has systematically recorded civilian casualties of the non-international armed conflict in Afghanistan. UNAMA releases quarterly reports with detailed, disaggregated information about civilian casualties that provide a continuing record and observation of overall trends in the conflict. In addition, UNAMA demonstrates that recording casualties and acting effectively on this information can help to save civilian lives. This is achieved through using the evidence base of detailed, systematic casualty data to advocate with parties to the conflict, mainly the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). ISAF was able to use the information to review and revise its policy and operational practices and change its tactics to mitigate harm to civilians. This is also achieved through timely information sharing, both within the mission and externally with organizations working in Afghanistan that can use it to assist victims of the conflict.⁵

According to a detailed review of UNAMA-HR's casualty-recording practice, the success of this mechanism and its continued relevance is due to multiple factors. As one UNAMA-HR official put it: 'It wasn't about collecting data, it was about reducing the direct impact of the war on civilians' (Beswick and Minor, 2014, p. 24), alluding to the mission's clearly articulated purpose for establishing this mechanism. The perceived credibility and impartiality of the data, the rigorous fit-for-purpose methodology, and the information-sharing capacity (both within and outside the mission) were also highlighted as strong success factors (Beswick and Minor, 2014, p. 8). Apart from these factors, many other considerations have supported the success of UNAMA-HR's casualty-recording work, including UNAMA's nature as a political mission (as opposed to other types of UN missions) and its internal prioritization of this work and the resources and staff allocated to it.

UNAMA-HR's success in contributing to the larger mission's PoC mandate is likely to be difficult to reproduce: the political imperatives of the conflict—especially the unacceptability of civilian casualties to the Afghan people—and the commitment of the conflict parties to protecting civilians were unique to the dynamics of the conflict at the time when Beswick and Minor (2014, p. 37) carried out their study. This changed, however, as both the political landscape and the conflict's actors continued to evolve, which they have done since the beginning of UNAMA-HR's casualty-recording work. For example, the number of civilian casualties caused by improvised explosive devices (IEDs) had been declining in the period before Beswick and Minor (2014, p. 37) published their study. In July 2019, however, UNAMA-HR documented a spike in civilian casualties caused by non-state armed groups opposing the government increasing their use of IEDs (UNAMA, 2019).

Map 1 UN missions



Source: UNPO (n.d.)

responsible for mission-wide information gathering, reporting, and analysis (UN DPKO, 2006). JOCs in particular play an important role in compiling and deconflicting information submitted to them by their respective mission's substantive components in the form of narrative reports. JMACs integrate information from outside sources and from mission components to provide analysis products that allow the leadership of each mission to understand violent trends in the mission's area of operations, support mission planning, and enhance mission-related decision making (UN DPKO, 2006, pp. 3–4).

The third of these elements is a mission's uniformed components, which include military and police personnel. Uniformed elements also gather information on violent incidents in the context of intelligence gathering, through both the U2 branch of the force at mission headquarters and the police intelligence capacity (Willmont, 2017, p. 48). UN missions may have other elements undertaking casualty reporting. Within MINUSMA, MONUSCO, and UNMISS, for example, the Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism on Grave Violations Against Children in Situations of Armed Conflict (MRM; specifically the child rights team within the human rights sections), the Civil Affairs section, the PoC Unit under the Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary-General for a particular mission, and the UN Mine Action Service (UNMAS) all collect related data.⁶

Measuring conflict-related deaths and SDG Indicator 16.1.2

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is the first global framework of its kind to explicitly recognize the links among violence, conflict, and development. It states that 'Sustainable development cannot be realized without peace and security; and peace and security will be at risk without sustainable development' (UNGA, 2015, p. 9). Through the introduction of SDG 16—particularly Target 16.1, which calls for a significant reduction of 'all forms of violence and related death rates everywhere' (UNGA, 2015, p. 25)—the SDG framework has established two indicators by which to measure progress against this goal: 16.1.1 (measuring 'intentional homicide' deaths) and 16.1.2 (measuring 'Conflict-related deaths per 100,000 population, by sex, age and cause') (UNSD, 2020a, p. 17).

With only ten years left until 2030, data for both these indicators is still lacking and not uniformly available for all countries (Mc Evoy and Hildeg, 2017, p. 15). While homicide statistics are available for many countries through national statistics institutions, official data for Indicator 16.1.2 barely exists (Pavesi, 2017). As such, the Inter-agency and Expert Group on Sustainable Development Goal Indicators classified Indicator 16.1.2 as Tier II, meaning that 'data are not regularly produced by countries' (UNSD, 2020b).

To fill this gap other sources of data must be considered, especially since the presence of conflict on their territories often compromises states' capacities, willingness, and motivation to collect this type of data (Salama, 2018, p. 13). NGOs, civil society organizations, academia, and intergovernmental agencies have all been identified as possible sources of data for Indicator 16.1.2 (OHCHR, n.d., pp. 9–10). Data from these sources is likely to vary greatly in quality, disaggregation, and consistency because of the myriad methodological and practical challenges associated with measuring conflict-related deaths (Salama, 2018, pp. 7–11). This is also true of casualty data produced by UN peace operations, and even of data produced by different components of a single mission. Despite this, UN peace operations should nevertheless be seen as a principal contributor to SDG indicator-relevant data, given their presence in most conflicts. Moreover, UN

peace operations could potentially standardize casualty-recording efforts across all their operations, given that they are coordinated at a central level.

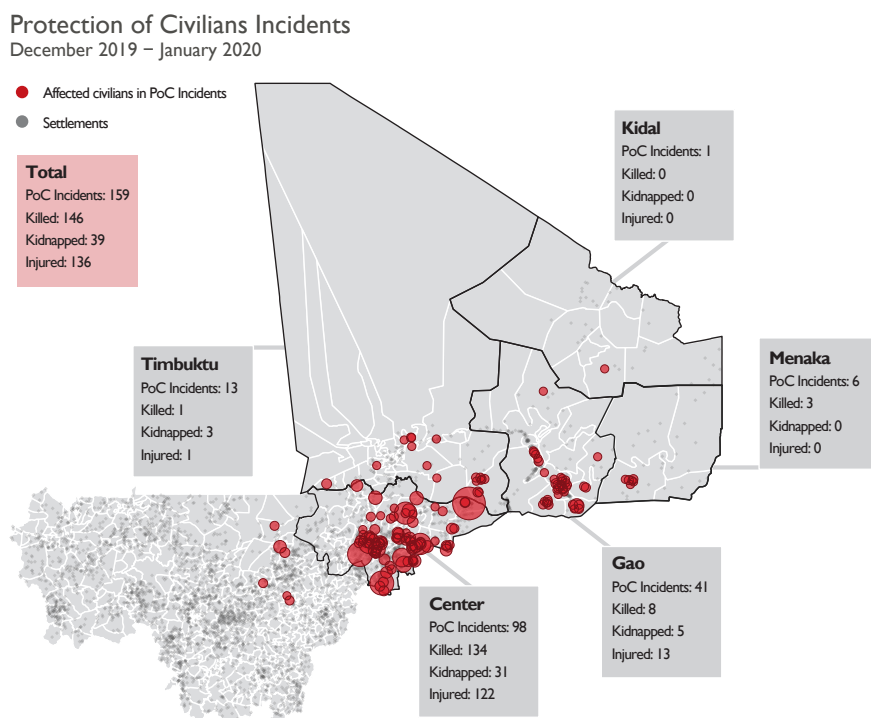
Operational benefits of casualty recording in UN peace operations

In addition to contributing to tracking progress against SDG Target 16.1, casualty recording can support the implementation of mandated elements of UN peace operations. This includes improving PoC activities, supporting the protection and promotion of human rights, and preventing local-level conflict, which are fundamental pillars of any UN peace operation.

Improving the protection of civilians

Nearly all UN peace operations have a robust mandate to protect civilians that applies to all components of such an operation. These operations engage in a number of activities to protect civilians. This includes monitoring threats to civilians, strengthening early-warning mechanisms, and responding to threats through assigning military personnel (such as patrols) to provide physical protection and engaging politically and

Map 2 Heat map generated from data aggregated by MINUSMA PoC Unit



Source: Document provided to the author by MINUSMA PoC staff, May 2020

technically with host governments and other actors in the conflict to prevent or mitigate conflict (UN Peacekeeping, n.d.a). In a 2019 UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs policy report—marking 20 years of UN protection mandates—timely information on casualties is recognized as:

an essential component of allowing the [UN Security] Council to promote and pursue its Protection of Civilian (PoC) agenda. . . . Such information can be used by the Council to understand protection concerns, define priorities and inform decisions to most effectively achieve the protection of civilians on the ground. It can also be used for advocacy and humanitarian diplomacy, including with parties to the conflict, operational planning, deterrence and accountability efforts, as well as conflict analysis, prevention and response more generally (UNOCHA, 2019, p. 55).

Establishing a well-functioning system to identify casualties of violent incidents in a timely manner is essential to both the type and speed of a peacekeeping mission's responses to threats against civilians. In its 2018 evaluation of peace operations' PoC responses, the UN Office of Internal Oversight Services found that prior knowledge of incidents and fatalities is a significant determinant of missions' speed of protection response. It also stated that knowledge of the number of people killed and the exact location of prior incidents was more effective in this regard than increasing a mission's capabilities, such as the number of troops and levels of equipment, or even the proximity of troops to the incidents (OIOS, 2018, p. 28). However, many UN peace operation officials pointed to the shortage of transportation equipment, such as helicopters, as a limitation restricting enhanced coverage of violent incidents.⁷

Protection and promotion of human rights

UN peace operations are mandated to 'monitor, investigate, verify, and report immediately, publicly, and regularly on abuses and violations of human rights and violations of international humanitarian law' (UNSC, 2019a).⁸ Peace operations are also called on to build host country institutional capacity; support accountability and transitional justice mechanisms; and work closely with host governments,

national institutions, and civil society in order to respond to and prevent violations of human rights. They also contribute to the protection of civilians and investigate

conflict-related violence against children and sexual and gender-based violence (UN Peacekeeping, n.d.b). Casualty recording is recognized as a key activity to support

Box 2 MINUSMA: identifying and responding to changing threats

Background

MINUSMA was established in 2013 to support the political process in Mali and carry out a number of security-related tasks as a response to the conflict that had started in the north of the country. In 2015 a peace agreement was signed between the armed groups in the north and the government in Bamako. Only slow progress has been made in implementing this agreement, however, and insecurity has grown and spread from the north to the centre of the country, including to Bamako (CFR, 2020a).

Currently, more than 13,000 UN peacekeepers remain deployed in Mali (MINUSMA, 2020b). Despite a more robust and proactive mandate dating from 2016, the mission is confronted by asymmetric threats from extremist groups that often make peacekeepers their targets (UNSC, 2019c). According to the report of Lt. Gen. Carlos Alberto dos Santos Cruz on peacekeeping fatalities entitled *Improving Security of United Nations Peacekeepers*, MINUSMA had the highest death toll of peacekeepers of an active peacekeeping mission up until 2017 (Cruz, 2017, p. 8), while another wave of attacks on UN peacekeeping troops in Mali took place as recently as April 2020 (Malijet.co, 2020).

Casualty data's role in identifying and responding to threats to civilians

Casualty recording was developed in the MINUSMA PoC Unit to improve the operation's situational awareness of the conflict. In their own databases the regional PoC teams compile data on violent events through a combination of reviewing daily reports from the JOCs; reports from other parts of the mission, such as the UN Police and its gateway notification system, which is connected to the national police in Mali; occasional joint investigations with the Human Rights Division; the protection cluster coordinated by UN humanitarian actors; local civil society networks; and media sources. This data is used to map violence in the central and northern regions of the country.⁹

Through analysis of this data, MINUSMA personnel became aware that increasingly in Mopti and the central regions, violence was not necessarily being perpetrated by signatory armed groups, but by a combination of religious extremist groups who fuelled and intensified vicious cycles of intercommunal violence (van der Lijn, 2019, p. 71).¹⁰ As one PoC advisor from the mission stated, 'what is traditionally classified as a POC incident is increasingly irrelevant to the situation in some regions [in Mali]' and requires different responses by the mission. The lack of specific data results in a failure to design appropriate responses to such violence.¹¹ As a result of the growing violence in the centre of the country MINUSMA's mandate was extended in 2018 to support stabilization in this region (UNSC, 2018).

The information on civilian deaths gathered by the PoC Unit is published through the Secretary-General's quarterly reports. Although there is narrative information about who was killed and how they were killed, and descriptions of the prevalence of the use of certain weapons, the data itself is not given in a disaggregated or consistent way, making it difficult to analyse trends.

Key challenges

The overlapping types of violence in Mali present some serious challenges to distinguishing between signatory or 'compliant' armed groups that have signed the peace agreement, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, terrorist and criminal actors who have fluid interconnections and cannot be easily separated into rudimentary categories, particularly if intercommunal violence is included in the mix. In this context, identifying whether individuals who have been killed are combatants or civilians is difficult, especially in situations where armed groups go to significant lengths to deliberately blur the distinction between the two.¹² This is important for the MINUSMA PoC teams who are interested in identifying and responding specifically to threats to civilians. In addition, identifying the status of an individual killed in a violent incident is considered a requirement for SDG Indicator 16.1.2 (see Table 1) and in general for producing disaggregated casualty data. Attacks on peacekeepers and related security concerns mean that MINUSMA's civilian officials have significantly reduced access to data on violent incidents and have to rely on 'remote' casualty recording. This has an impact on coverage and the levels of disaggregated casualty data that they can collect.¹³

the implementation of the human rights mandate by the MINUSMA, MONUSCO, and UNMISS human rights teams (see Boxes 2–4). Apart from UN peace operations, other UN elements have recognized the importance of casualty recording:

Casualty data is not simply a set of abstract numbers but represents individual human beings with families, who belong to communities. The very purpose of the data collection effort is to strengthen the promotion and protection of these individuals and communities and their rights (OHCHR, 2019, p. 1).

Conflict prevention

Much of UN peace operations' conflict prevention work is centred around preventing and mitigating local-level conflict between communities (UN Peacekeeping, n.d.c). This type of violence can be driven by a variety of factors, including ethnic tensions, political disputes, or disputes over resources such as land or cattle migration routes (Mc Evoy and LeBrun, 2010). As the main interlocutor between local communities and UN peace operations, a mission's civil affairs section plays a primary role in mitigating local-level conflict. This is done by 'supporting communities and actors at the sub-national level with community dialogue, facilitating mediation efforts, and supporting localized peace agreements and reconciliation processes' (UN Peacekeeping, n.d.c). In this context, casualty recording is a useful tool for understanding trends and underlying causes of inter-communal violence and prioritizing limited conflict prevention resources and efforts (see Box 4).

Aligning data collection by peace operations with SDG Indicator 16.1.2

Lack of uniform criteria

There is little to no awareness—let alone use—of UN-drafted operational guidance on how to conduct casualty recording outside of human rights sections staff who work using an OHCHR-established methodology.¹⁴ This lack has led many other mission sections to develop ad-hoc casualty-recording methodologies. The lack of a consistent approach necessarily has an impact on the consistency of the data collected. Because the various

mission sections are collecting data for disparate purposes, its quality and consistency can vary considerably across the mission. This also means that the data

collected is specific to the section that collects it and is not of the uniform quality needed to fulfil the data requirements of SDG Indicator 16.1.2 (see Table 1).

Box 3 MONUSCO: supporting accountability measures in the DRC

Background

The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) has experienced two waves of conflict since the 1990s. The first wave started with the spillover from the 1994 Rwandan genocide; the second has come to be known as the 'Second Congo War'. This conflict, which lasted from 1998 to 2003, saw DRC government forces, supported by troops from Angola, Namibia, and Zimbabwe, fighting rebels backed by Rwanda and Uganda (Zapata, 2011). Despite a 2002 peace deal and the formation of a transitional government in 2003, ongoing violence perpetrated by armed groups against civilians in the eastern region has continued (Burke, 2018). This is largely 'due to poor governance, weak institutions, and rampant corruption' (CFR, 2020b).

Currently several crises are afflicting the DRC, including an Ebola outbreak in the east and ongoing violence across the country, particularly in the Ituri, Kasai, and Kivu regions. In 1999 the UN deployed the UN Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (known as MONUC). In July 2010 this peace operation was renamed the UN Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) to reflect its focus on strengthening stability and peace in the country (CFR, 2020b).

Casualty data's role in promoting justice

At MONUSCO casualty recording supports the promotion of accountability measures. Casualty data has been used to refer cases to domestic prosecution: MONUSCO's Joint Human Rights Office (JHRO) has identified 38 priority cases for which it is providing technical and logistical support to the courts. Casualty data is not necessarily used directly by the courts, but provides a basis for further investigations. This is especially true in cases involving children in armed conflict or sexual and gender-based violence, for which the mission was able to collect detailed and disaggregated information about victims.¹⁵ Between 2016 and 2017 MONUSCO supported 22 legal aid clinics, resulting in the convictions of 585 perpetrators of sexual violence crimes (MONUSCO, 2018).

Casualty data and the HRDDP

Another area where casualty recording supports the implementation of a human rights mandate is that of the Human Rights Due Diligence Policy (HRDDP). The HRDDP requires UN entities to ensure that their support for non-UN security forces is compliant with international human rights and humanitarian law. This requires the UN and peacekeeping missions to carry out a risk assessment to identify potential risks and benefits involved in providing or withholding such support—essentially an assessment of the human rights record of local security forces (UNGA and UNSC, 2013).

MONUSCO has a historical database that includes all the human rights violations committed by the National Armed Forces of the DRC (FARDC). The database includes all information gathered by the JHRO on casualties caused by the FARDC. If the FARDC or national police require any support—supplies, logistical support, etc.—they are required to address any human rights violations committed by their personnel. Although a rare occurrence, some parts of the security forces have been blacklisted from receiving MONUSCO support, based on JHRO monitoring and data in the HRDDP database.¹⁶

Key challenges

Cycles of armed rebellion, government repression, political settlements, and short-term alliances, coupled with the involvement of both neighbouring countries and regional actors, require MONUSCO to continuously update its analyses of the conflict and navigate the cast of nearly 100 armed actors in eastern DRC (CFR, 2020b). Using casualty data as the basis for structured discussions, like the ones that UNAMA-HR holds in Afghanistan, is difficult in the DRC because of the number of armed groups and their varying organizational structures.¹⁷ Casualty recording is also made difficult by the terrain and geography of a country that is about the size of Western Europe. The lack of transport infrastructure in the country also contributes to the difficulty: access during the rainy season to sites where fatalities have occurred is nearly impossible because there are few road or telecommunication networks beyond population centres where MONUSCO's field offices are based.¹⁸





Images (clockwise from top left)

MINUSMA staff survey the aftermath of an attack in the village of Sobana De, central Mali, in June 2019. Source: Harandane Dicko/UN Photo, June 2019

Uniformed elements of MONUSCO conduct a patrol through the village of Fataki, in the northeast Democratic Republic of the Congo, after attacks by armed groups against the civilian population. Source: Michael Ali/UN Photo, April 2018

A MINUSMA staff member walks towards a waiting helicopter. MINUSMA Protection of Civilians and Human Rights Division staff were undertaking a joint investigation of an attack in the village of Sobana De, central Mali, in June 2019. Source: Harandane Dicko/UN Photo, June 2019

UNMISS staff specializing in gender, child, and vulnerable people protection, meet with women suffering from domestic violence and health issues in the Protection of Civilians site in Juba, South Sudan. Source: Nektarios Markogiannis/UN Photo, September 2018

A MINUSMA staff member examines a cartridge found at the site of an attack in the village of Sobana De, central Mali, in June 2019. Source: Harandane Dicko/UN Photo, June 2019

Box 4 UNMISS: preventing intercommunal violence

Background

South Sudan gained its independence in 2011 after decades of civil war between the government in Khartoum and southern Sudanese rebels. Two years after independence, however, the power-sharing arrangement between President Salva Kiir and Vice President Riek Machar collapsed into large-scale violence along ethnic lines and political allegiances. Two successive peace agreements were reached, though neither were able to definitively stop the violence and armed groups continued to target rival ethnic groups, committing rape and sexual violence, and even recruiting children into their ranks. As a result, millions of people have been displaced and famine is widespread (CFR, 2020c). A power-sharing deal, under the framework of the second peace agreement, was reached in February 2020, with the opposing sides agreeing to form a unity government, although it is still uncertain what effect—if any—this latest agreement will have on intercommunal violence (Craze, 2019).

In 2011 UNMISS was established after South Sudan's independence. The mission's size and scope has changed over the succeeding years in response to the political unrest and violence described above.

Mapping intercommunal violence

UNMISS is tasked with preventing and mitigating intercommunal conflict (UNSC, 2020; UNSC, 2019a). To address this the UNMISS Civil Affairs Section has established a robust and well-resourced reporting and analysis team at its headquarters in Juba to analyse reports from civil affairs officers in the field and compile information about casualties. According to a staff member,

From the casualties lists . . . compiled at HQ [Juba] we are working on a map of communal violence. We have identified 42 hotspots in the country where there is heightened tension and likelihood of escalating violence.¹⁹

This mapping allows the reporting and analysis team to focus the mission's resources and provide support to field offices in areas where it has identified patterns of intercommunal violence by designing policies that guide field offices' response to help them prevent such violence.²⁰

Key challenges

In South Sudan the relationship between intercommunal violence and politically driven conflict is complex and can be difficult to demarcate. Many experts on the conflicts in the country have observed that the underlying drivers of local-level intercommunal violence frequently have links to the larger power struggles within and between the main political and warring parties in South Sudan (Day, 2019, pp. 33, 38–39, 73). However, there does not seem to be a common understanding within UNMISS of the relationship between political and intercommunal violence. Some UNMISS officials have observed an increase in intercommunal violence during the implementation of peace agreements, for example, and others believe that intercommunal violence is directly fuelled by political violence.²¹ The lack of historical disaggregated casualty data contributes to the lack of understanding of trends that are observed and their underlying causes. The overlapping of the realms of intercommunal and politicized violence in South Sudan means that victims of intercommunal violence are difficult to distinguish in the context of recording casualties, as are the causes and manifestations of such violence.

In addition, definitions, categories, and inclusion or exclusion criteria vary significantly across casualty-recording efforts in a single mission. Again, the variance often depends on the purpose of a particular casualty-recording effort and the type of violence with which those collecting the data are concerned. Access to violent incidents, the types of sources used, and verification standards can also vary. These may depend on a number of factors, such as the availability of human resources, budget limitations, and access to mission assets.

Establishing common information requirements for casualty recording within

a peace operation is a necessary first step to ensuring that the data collected meets the level of disaggregation required by SDG Indicator 16.1.2. Mission documents that outline information requirements for the whole mission or for uniformed personnel are sometimes in place, but awareness of these tools is low, which means that they may not always be used or updated to reflect gender-disaggregated data, for example (CIVIC, 2018, pp. 26–27).

Beyond common information requirements, a common methodology must also be in place (including common definitions, categories, and inclusion and exclusion criteria). The methodology should be such

that it can be adapted to different mission capacities and situations. UN peace operations can draw on a number of sources for methodological guidance, including the OHCHR's most recently published guidance on casualty recording (OHCHR, 2019).

Other structural challenges to the alignment of data

Of crucial consideration are the structural challenges faced by large, multidimensional peace operations that prevent them, among other things, from producing timely, disaggregated casualty data that can ultimately enhance their capacity to prevent violence. According to a recent review of data collection efforts at UNMISS and MONUSCO, peace operations often lack the structures needed for integrated planning, while sections tend to work in silos and only engage in ad-hoc collaborations, which do not allow for alignment of purpose between the activities of the various sections and even between the military and civilian components of the mission (CIVIC, 2018).

This is equally true of their casualty-recording efforts, as evidenced by the multiple actors using different casualty-recording mechanisms in a single mission. As a result, information exchange among these actors can be limited. For example, the human rights sections do not generally share data with the other elements of a mission. Instead, its data is uploaded directly to a central database in Geneva managed by the OHCHR. The main reasons given for this are confidentiality and the need to protect sources. This does not prevent data from being shared, but it does mean that, when it is, it is done orally at meetings. More frequently, data is shared when staff members think a specific case might be useful for another mission element or based on personal relationships between mission staff in different sections.²² The lack of systematic information-sharing channels affects the ability of the mission to build up a fuller picture of violent incidents in its area of operations and produce accurate analysis that can be useful for the mission as a whole.

Moreover, disaggregated casualty data from UN peace operations is rarely shared outside the mission,²³ which would be necessary to compile data for SDG Indicator 16.1.2. Considering that national ownership of SDG indicators is essential, this means that UN peace operations may have to coordinate data collection activities with their respective host governments, which will inevitably be sensitive, particularly if the government is a party to the

Box 5 Information management tools

The development of information management tools can play a key role in integrating data requirements for casualty recording for SDG Indicator 16.1.2 and facilitating data analysis. Many of the existing tools for collecting such data are ad-hoc creations to fulfil mission- or even section-specific needs. Examples of these custom tools include the ITEM database created for MONUSCO, the I2 Database for JMAs, and a similar Ushahidi geo-tagged database created for MINUSMA (Duursma and Karlsrud, 2019).

In an effort to collect data from the various mission components in a comprehensive and structured way, the UN Department of Peace Operations (UNPO)²⁴ has started to roll out its Situational Awareness Geospatial Enterprise Incident and Events Database tool (SAGE). SAGE is designed to collect data in order to facilitate the analysis of a variety of incidents, including violent incidents. This new tool, together with its associated mobile features, is broadly seen as a ‘step in the right direction’ to increase peace operations’ capacity for field-level analysis and support standardized reporting (Duursma and Karlsrud, 2018, p. 1).

Currently, of the three peace operations described above (see Boxes 2–4), UNMISS has been using the SAGE tool for a year, while MONUSCO

is only starting to roll it out and MINUSMA does not have it in place. Even UNMISS has yet to implement SAGE on a mission-wide basis, however, and it is only being used by some sections of the mission.²⁵ One of the reasons for this is that not all casualty data is viewed or valued equally due to the different sections’ varying methodologies and verification standards. As one UNMISS official noted, some sections struggle with information management and would need to strengthen their methodology, especially around the so-called ‘4W’s’ (Who? What? Where? and Why?). In the absence of such strengthened methodology, these sections will not be able to properly integrate their data with that coming from various mission components into a single database and produce confident, mission-wide analyses.²⁶

Rather than SAGE being an additional reporting requirement adding to the ‘reporting burden’, UNPO needs to ensure that it is linked to the various existing information management tools in order to promote its use and avoid duplication. In addition, categories relevant to casualty recording in each peace operation—including those to be covered by SDG Indicator 16.1.2 (see Table 1)—need to be included. Moreover, training on both how to use the database and casualty-recording methodology will be key to improving missions’ uptake of SAGE and ensuring that it becomes a useful mission-wide analytical tool.

Table 1 Data to be covered by SDG Indicator 16.1.2

Field	Category
Alleged perpetrator(s)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Entity ● Individual(s) ● Unknown
Cause of death	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Heavy weapons and explosive munitions ● Planted explosives and unexploded ordnance (UXO) ● Small arms and light weapons ● Incendiary weapons ● Chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear (CBRN) weapons ● Electromagnetic weapons ● Less lethal weapons ● Denial of access to/destruction of objects indispensable to survival ● Accidents related to conflict ● Use of objects and other means ● Unknown
Name of individual killed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Free text
Status of individual killed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Civilian ● Other protected person ● Member of armed forces ● Person directly participating in hostilities ● Unknown
Sex of individual killed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Male ● Female ● Unknown
Age group of individual killed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Adult (18 and above) ● Child (below 18) ● Unknown
Date of incident	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Day/month/year
Location of incident	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Town/city/province or other subnational entity where the incident happened, geo-coded if available ● Country of incident ● Region of incident

Source: Adapted from OHCHR (n.d.)

conflict. In addition, public reporting by UN peace operations is usually contained in quarterly reports to the Security Council, and is often neither disaggregated nor consistent, unlike the detailed regular reports on civilian deaths and injuries produced by UNAMA (see Box 1). This kind of detailed reporting by UN peace operations would greatly contribute to knowledge about a particular conflict and could potentially be used by humanitarian actors and civil society organizations operating in the same context.

It is apparent that, as an activity, casualty recording often suffers from a lack of prioritization by peace operation missions. A mission’s leadership sometimes favours contextual information over quantitative information and may see the gathering of the latter as costly and impractical. As one UNMISS official stated: ‘[systematic] casualty recording in so many sections is problematic . . . many don’t see the value of this work or they get pulled away into other work’.²⁷

The lack of clear and explicit language in a mission’s mandate requiring casualty recording may also contribute to this, and has an impact on access to mission assets to conduct field investigations. Mission assets such as protective equipment, helicopters, and special vehicles are typically managed by the logistics cluster, which more frequently works with the uniformed component of the mission. It therefore tends to prioritize the uniformed component’s patrols and protection mission over other types of activities such as human rights investigations.²⁸

The recent waves of budget cuts to peacekeeping have compounded this

problem (Carver, 2018). For example, MONUSCO is anticipating the closure of seven field offices (Defense Post, 2019). This, coupled with associated staff cuts,

will have a significant impact on the coverage of violent incidents, among other things. Thus, it will be difficult to determine whether an increase or decline in

casualties reflects real trends on the ground or changes in coverage due to factors such as staff cuts or turnover, lack of resources, or lack of access to the sites of violent incidents. Some UNPO staff believe that not only are insufficient human resources dedicated to casualty-recording efforts, but staff often lack the requisite data analysis skills that could maximize the use of casualty data.³⁸ A key stumbling block in this regard is the current way in which the UN human resources system is structured, including the length of time it can take to fill key information coordination posts (CIVIC, 2018, p. 2).

Box 6 The value of recording weapons

Improved situational awareness

Disaggregation by cause of violence and category of weapon used to perpetrate it is useful in the assessment of violent trends in a conflict. Disaggregation can contribute to the mapping of armed actors by potentially revealing information about their modus operandi. In turn, this information would improve the situational awareness of the relevant UN peace operation actors (Anders, 2018). This is essential to enabling effective responses to violence and can also potentially be used as a basis for future evidence-based dialogue with armed actors themselves with the aim of reducing harm to civilians (see Box 1).

Unfortunately, among UN peace operations the recording of the cause of death, particularly the category of weapon used, is not systematic or consistent with the broad categories of weapons outlined by SDG Indicator 16.1.2 (see Table 1).²⁹ Where weapon type or types are recorded, it is usually in the narrative description of the incident. Furthermore, SAGE and most other information management tools do not have a separate weapons category in which to record such data, making it impossible to undertake trend analysis by weapon category.³⁰

Currently, efforts led by the UN Office for Disarmament Affairs (UNODA) and OHCHR are under way to improve this capability and provide the civilian component of missions with a weapons categorization tool for casualty recording and human rights investigations.³¹ Personnel from several sections undertaking casualty recording said that one of the reasons that they do not record the weapons used in acts of violence is that they often lack staff with specific weapons identification expertise.³²

Improved monitoring of illicit weapons

Casualty data disaggregated by specific weapon type can also support the monitoring of the illicit use of weapons. Some UN peace operations are mandated to assist in addressing the issue of the illicit trafficking of small arms and light weapons and support and cooperate with the monitoring of applicable arms embargoes.³³ This capability would not only support work on illicit weapons flows, but would also be of help with monitoring progress towards SDG Target 16.4 to ‘significantly reduce illicit . . . arms flows’ (UNGA, 2015, p. 25).

Some UN peace operations, such as MINUSMA, have been able to support mission-wide efforts to document and centralize information on illicit arms and ammunition, despite the lack of a formal structure to do so (Anders, 2018, p. 8). These efforts, however, are not necessarily linked to the incident-based casualty recording undertaken by other sections in a mission.³⁴

This is also the case for MONUSCO’s newly established Arms Embargo Cell. The cell, which documents violations of the current arms embargoes on the DRC by collecting information on illicit arms and ammunition, does not currently have the capacity to make linkages to specific casualty-causing incidents. The information gathered is shared with the Group of Experts on the DRC and a limited number of actors in the uniformed component of the mission.³⁵

Arms Embargo Cell personnel acknowledge that there is a potential to share some of the cell’s information more widely across the mission and at the same time pool expertise from different sections, which could reinforce both casualty and weapons documentation efforts.³⁶ One simple solution could be to train those investigating violent incidents in the field to obtain photographic evidence of recovered weapons and ammunition that would be useful for weapons identification activities.

Improved tracking of weapons and ammunition lost from UN missions

In addition to monitoring arms embargoes, data on specific weapons used in incidents resulting in a casualty or casualties can contribute to tracking the loss of arms and ammunition from UN peace operations themselves. This under-captured phenomenon contributes to the illicit flow of weapons and adversely affects missions, not only in their host countries, but across borders (Berman, Racovita, and Schroeder, 2017, p. 10).³⁷ In order to support weapons tracing of this kind a coordinated approach to documentation would be required among weapons documentation experts, JOCs, JMACs, and those who are responsible for the management of weapons and ammunition in peace operations, in addition to weapons documentation experts.

Conclusion

UN peace operations will continue to be key actors in the global monitoring of conflict-related deaths. Their extensive presence across many conflict zones gives them the potential to be the most comprehensive source of detailed information on conflict situations. This is especially true in areas where state authorities are unwilling or unable to provide such information (Salama, 2018).

In addition to this, monitoring conflict-related deaths—specifically casualty recording—has emerged as an important tool for UN peace operations to support missions’ mandated tasks. Such monitoring can improve understanding of the complex conflict environments in which UN missions operate, including supporting an understanding of the causes and manifestations of the different types of violence they face. Whether peace operations are prioritizing violent ‘hot spots’ for intervention, monitoring emerging threats to civilians, or supporting local accountability initiatives, the examples from MINUSMA, MONUSCO, and UNMISS have shown that this type of data is key to supporting fundamental pillars of UN-mandated peace operations.

Given this, the dual role of casualty recording—supporting the implementation of peace operations’ mandates and contributing to the monitoring and achievement of SDG 16 (particularly Targets 16.1 and 16.4)—should be explicitly recognized in future UN peace operations’ mandates. Mandate language should clearly emphasize the importance of producing disaggregated data that is consistent with the data requirements for SDG Indicator 16.1.2. In addition to mandate language, the role that casualty data plays in supporting mandate implementation should be highlighted by documenting further examples of best practice in other missions.

Uniformed elements of MONUSCO provide protection for talks between the UN, Congolese government, and Ituri Patriotic Resistance Front in the town of Kamatsi in the north east Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Source: Michael Ali/UN Photo, April 2018



But adding language to a mandate alone (along with related policies and guidance on casualty recording) will not be sufficient to enhance the casualty-recording practices of UN peace operations. Systemic issues related to the structure of such peace operations currently prevent various actors from coordinating their data collection efforts and limit a whole-of-mission approach to casualty recording that would otherwise be beneficial. Ideally, casualty recording will require a champion to raise awareness of reporting requirements across mission components. At the field level, this awareness would need to be sustained through regular training.

Missions' information coordination capacities also need to be increased. Although some missions have already

taken steps in this direction, improvements need to be systematic to be effective. For example, MONUSCO is currently planning to introduce JOCs in six field offices to focus on information coordination among the various sections of the mission. This would include coordinating the type of data required by the mission and training mission personnel on how to triangulate information.³⁹ This has the potential to ensure that a minimum standard of information is reflected in the recording of violent incidents, while also aligning the verification standards among the mission's various sections. Efforts such as these should be encouraged across all UN peace operations.

According to one UNMISS official, '[casualty recording] needs to be in the DNA of a peacekeeping mission' and

should be minimally affected by mission budgets and changes in human resources.⁴⁰ However, multiple sections within a mission are already recording casualties, so coordinating existing casualty-recording efforts would require minimal investment. At the most, additional staff would be needed to coordinate data collection, management, and analysis, while targeted regular training on casualty-recording methodology and basic weapons identification would be required to maintain expertise despite frequent staff turnover. This training could be done remotely in order to minimize costs and could utilize the expertise of existing mission components that are already involved in intelligence gathering (uniformed components, for example), making the endeavour a truly whole-of-mission one. ●

List of abbreviations and acronyms

CBRN Chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear

DRC Democratic Republic of the Congo

FARDC National Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (Forces armées de la république démocratique du Congo)

HRDDP Human Rights Due Diligence Policy

IED Improvised explosive device

ISAF International Security Assistance Force

JHRO Joint Human Rights Office

JMAC Joint Mission Analysis Centre

JOC Joint Operation Centre

MINUSMA United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali

MONUSCO United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo

MPOME Making Peace Operations More Effective

MRM Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism on Grave Violations Against Children in Situations of Armed Conflict

NATO North Atlantic Treaty Organization

NGO Non-governmental organization

PoC Protection of civilians

SAGE Situational Awareness Geospatial Enterprise Incident and Events Database

SDG Sustainable Development Goal

UNAMA United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan

UNAMA-HR United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan Human Rights Unit

UNDPO United Nations Department of Peace Operations

UNMAS United Nations Mine Action Service

UNMISS United Nations Mission in South Sudan

UNODA United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs

UNPO United Nations Department of Peace Operations

UXO Unexploded ordnance

Endnotes

- 1 Casualty recording refers to the 'process of systematically and continuously attempting to document and record incident or individual-level information about direct violent deaths from armed violence' (ECW, 2016, p. 2).
- 2 See, for example, UNGA and UNSC (2015).

- 3 The Small Arms Survey's Making Peace Operations More Effective (MPOME) project defines a peace operation as:

a mission that deploys active police or military personnel that: (i) has broad governmental backing—usually including support from a regional or international body; (ii) promotes the reduction of armed violence (for example, implementing peace accords, enforcing arms embargoes, engaging armed groups, or professionalizing state security forces); (iii) seeks to maintain internationally recognized national borders and governments—or to support a peace agreement that calls for a possible change to this status quo; and (iv) is not part of any formal collective defence or bilateral military agreement (Berman, Racovita, and Schroeder, 2017, p. 13).

This differs from the definition of a peace operation used by the UN High-level Panel on Peace Operations, which also includes other types of UN-mandated missions such as special political missions, observation missions, and technical specialist missions. This paper uses the term 'peace operation' consistently with the MPOME definition, while exclusively focusing on UN-mandated peace operations.

- 4 Multidimensional missions refer to peace operations that bring together various military and civilian actors to support conflict management and peacebuilding activities (UN DPKO and DFS, 2008, pp. 22–25).
- 5 Based on Beswick and Minor (2014).
- 6 For a discussion of MRM, see MRM (n.d.). For examples of data collection by UN missions, including MINUSMA and MONUSCO, see MINUSMA (2020a) and MONUSCO (2020). And for a discussion of UNMAS support to UN missions, see UNMAS (n.d.).
- 7 Author interview with MONUSCO staff member, April 2019; author interview with UNMISS representative, April 2019.
- 8 This is an example of the typical language for a UN peace operation mandate. Each individual mandate may be slightly different.
- 9 See Map 2. Author interview with MINUSMA staff member, April 2019.
- 10 Signatory armed groups in Mali are those non-state armed groups who have signed the 2015 Algiers peace agreement.
- 11 Author interview with MINUSMA staff member, April 2019.
- 12 Author interview with MINUSMA staff member, February 2019.
- 13 Author interview with MINUSMA staff member, February 2019.
- 14 See, for example, UN DPKO and DFS (2015).
- 15 Author interview with MONUSCO staff member, May 2019.
- 16 Author interview with MONUSCO staff member, April 2019.
- 17 Author interview with MONUSCO JHRO staff member, April 2019.
- 18 Author interview with MONUSCO staff member, April 2019.
- 19 Author interview with MONUSCO staff member, April 2019.

- 20 Author interviews with UNMISS staff members, May 2019.
- 21 Author interviews with UNMISS staff members, May 2019.
- 22 Author interview with MONUSCO staff member, May 2019.
- 23 Author interviews with MONUSCO and UNMISS staff members, April 2019.
- 24 UNPO was known as the Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO) before 1 January 2019.
- 25 Author interviews with UNMISS staff member, April 2019.
- 26 Author interview with UNMISS staff member, April 2019.
- 27 Author interview with UNMISS staff member, May 2019.
- 28 Author interview with UNMISS staff member, May 2019.
- 29 The exception to this general rule is UNMAS, where the focus is on casualties from anti-personnel landmines.
- 30 Author interview with UNPO staff member, February 2019.
- 31 Author interview with UNODA staff member, February 2019.
- 32 Author interview with OHCHR staff member, February 2019.
- 33 See UNSC (2019b).
- 34 Author interview and correspondence with MINUSMA JMAC personnel, June 2019.
- 35 Author interview with MONUSCO staff member, May 2019.
- 36 Author interview with MONUSCO staff member, May 2019.
- 37 For a fuller discussion of the diversion of arms and ammunition from peace operations, see MPOME (n.d.).
- 38 Author interview with UNMISS staff member, April 2019.
- 39 Author interview with MONUSCO staff member, April 2019.
- 40 Author interview with UNMISS staff member, April 2019.

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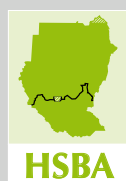
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