

PEOPLE-CENTRED PROTECTION AT THE UNITED NATIONS

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INTRODUCTION

The **protection of civilians** (POC) has been an overarching priority for the **United Nations** (UN) since the end of the Cold War. While the UN has traditionally pursued this agenda through **peacekeeping operations** (PKOs), the UN has increasingly demonstrated a willingness to engage with and support **community-based self-protection** mechanisms. This shift toward a **bottom-up** approach to peacekeeping and protection is a major change for an organization that has worked tirelessly to solidify its status as a credible protection actor.

RESEARCH QUESTION

Why has the UN **emphasized** community self-protection? What **implications** arise from this people-centred approach to peacekeeping?



OBJECTIVES/METHODS

The purpose of this research is to inform two academic articles on sources of **institutional change** at the UN and the possible **dilemmas** arising from **international support**—both that of the UN and other non-government organizations (NGOs)—for civilian self-protection.

This research proceeded by conducting a **literature review** of primary documents from the UN, as well as the Center for Civilians in Conflict, Peace Brigades International, and the International Committee of the Red Cross.

KEY FINDINGS

- The UN has **shifted** from viewing civilian engagement as a **strategy for legitimizing PKOs** to a **critical part of mission planning**;
- The UN's **2020 Peacekeeping Handbook** recognizes that PKOs must carefully determine whether supporting existing self-protection mechanisms might **violate the UN's 'do no harm principle,'** which indicates that the organization has recognized at least some of the **dilemmas**—such as the creation of armed self-defence militias—that arise from this approach to the POC;
- All three NGOs studied have begun to **emphasize** and **incorporate civilian self-protection** mechanisms in their own work.

CONCLUSION

While specific use of the term “people-centred” is **uncommon** in most UN documents, a tacit understanding of this community-based approach to the POC is **pervasive** in contemporary UN reports. Similarly, leading NGOs have likewise begun to **develop their own conceptions** of civilian self-protection. This approach to the POC has been driven by the **failures** of past top-down protection efforts, and the **belief** that communities are best able to recognize their own protection needs. There is



only a **limited awareness**, however, of the **possible dilemmas** that may arise from supporting civilian self-protection mechanisms.

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