

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

# Assessing the Effectiveness

of the United Nations Mission  
in South Sudan / UNMISS

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# Assessing the Effectiveness of the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS)

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# Executive Summary

This report assesses the extent to which the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) is achieving its current strategic objectives and what impact the Mission has had on the political and security situation in South Sudan. The report focuses on the most recent period of UNMISS' mandate (2014-18), aiming to provide a “snapshot” of the mission's work across its four main mandate areas: the protection of civilians (PoC), facilitation of humanitarian delivery, promotion of human rights, and support to the peace process. As a large, multidimensional peacekeeping operation – with 17,000 troops, 2,000 police and 2,000 civilians – UNMISS has been provided with significant resources and an extraordinarily ambitious mandate. Assessing the match between resources and mandate, and the ways the Mission has adapted its approaches to be effective in extremely challenging circumstances is a key objective of this report.

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Throughout its existence, UNMISS has been part of a much broader regional and international constellation of actors working to stabilise the country and encourage conflict parties to enter into a meaningful peace process. In many cases, UNMISS has played a limited supportive, coordinating, or otherwise indirect role in the overall trajectory of the country; in others, it is a central actor in the eyes of the people of South Sudan. This presents a challenge to any assessment of the Mission because, at most, UNMISS can be considered one contributor among many working together to end the civil war and

lay the foundations for durable peace. Causality in these settings is difficult to establish. Nevertheless, drawing on the substantial data and analyses available, and interviews with more than 260 people in South Sudan and the region over several weeks, this study presents a set of evidence-based findings about the impact of the Mission and the factors that have enabled and inhibited the fulfilment of its mandate.

## Protection of Civilians (PoC)

By providing space within its compounds to those fleeing brutal and widespread violence in 2013 and 2016, UNMISS provided immediate physical protection to more than 200,000 people, including large numbers of women and children. In the view of a wide range of experts and South Sudanese citizens, UNMISS' PoC sites not only saved tens of thousands of lives, they also had the positive effect of isolating the polarised communities from one another at a time when even broader violence was likely. “Without UNMISS

“Without UNMISS there would have been a genocide here.”

there would have been a genocide here,” was the sentiment echoed by dozens of South Sudanese. The sites also have served large numbers of vulnerable people, allowing for the consolidated delivery of aid and life-saving services. The enormous impact of the PoC sites has been underestimated in much public reporting to date, and quite possibly undervalued by

the Mission leadership during the conflict itself. However, there is irrefutable evidence of the powerful lifesaving role played by the UN during one of the most horrific wars in recent history.

The PoC sites come at a price. The majority of UNMISS' military component is employed providing perimeter security to the sites, leaving fewer resources for patrolling in conflict-prone areas. With more than two million people displaced within the country, and large at-risk populations spread across the enormous terrain of South Sudan, many within the UN and elsewhere argue that UNMISS could better use its resources by focusing their deployment beyond the PoC sites. Improvements in the security situation as the Government has retaken most major towns have increased perceptions that the immediate protection needs of many of the PoC site residents may have decreased. Large numbers of PoC residents now express a desire to move elsewhere, though many are worried that Government-controlled areas will not be safe for them.

This has created a dilemma for UNMISS: while the sites may only hold a small portion of the vulnerable people in South Sudan, they are unequivocally providing protection (both physical and humanitarian) to large numbers of people. In contrast, there is little concrete evidence that patrolling more broadly necessarily deters violence or reduces threats in conflict-prone areas. The lack of evidence is most acute on

the military side, where the standard peacekeeping approach to data-gathering leaves the Mission and the broader system with very little of the information it would need to assess the effectiveness of patrolling as one protection tool among many. There are some indications of the potential impact UNMISS could have beyond the sites – and this study’s examination of the Mission’s deployment to several locations like Yei, Leer and Akobo offer models of protection beyond the current sites – but the evidence base is thin. Improved data gathering – including a quite simple step of converting some of the daily patrolling information into electronic format – would significantly help the UN and its partners to evaluate the impact of its protection patrols beyond the PoC sites.

Non-military forms of protection are especially strong in UNMISS, with a range of conflict resolution, good offices and local peace initiatives clearly contributing to a reduction of risks in many areas. This study saw reports of hundreds of instances where the Mission had helped to broker local-level agreements – including between former belligerents in the civil war – with consequent reductions in violence. South Sudanese citizens often pointed to local engagement as the most tangible effect of the Mission. Here, UNMISS’ decentralisation of authority to field offices appears to have allowed for greater flexibility and responsiveness on the ground, offering a useful model for other peacekeeping missions.

This report also explores some of the major impediments to more effective PoC by the Mission, including the challenging physical terrain, obstructions to freedom of movement by the Government and other actors, limited resources for establishing the kind of presence that would contribute to protection in isolated peripheries of the country, and continuing reports of underperformance by some parts of UNMISS. Taking into account the investigations into past shortcomings of the Mission, this report finds that the efforts to make the Mission’s protection work smarter, quicker, and more robustly are only partially achieved goals.

The Mission’s protection of humanitarian convoys and rehabilitation of supply roads have opened access to at least 100,000 vulnerable people who would otherwise have been beyond the reach of life-saving aid.

## Facilitation of Humanitarian Delivery

UNMISS’ mandate to facilitate conducive conditions for humanitarian delivery also has some untold success stories. In recent years, the Mission’s protection of humanitarian convoys and rehabilitation of supply roads have opened access to at least 100,000 vulnerable

people who would otherwise have been beyond the reach of life-saving aid. When combined with the 200,000 people who also receive humanitarian assistance in the UNMISS PoC sites, the impact of the Mission is unmistakable.

With more than two million vulnerable people across the country, a priority for UNMISS is to facilitate the conditions for humanitarian delivery into some of the most remote and challenging parts of South Sudan. Here, the major obstacles to improved humanitarian aid are the terrain and obstacles created by the parties to the conflict. Much of South Sudan is inaccessible, especially during the rainy season, and South Sudan has some of the worst infrastructure anywhere in the world. Compounding this, systematic obstructions to the freedom of movement of UNMISS and its partners – by the Government and other parties – has created serious impediments to the Mission’s ability to deliver on its protection and humanitarian mandates.

One recent study estimated that 382,000 people died as a direct and indirect result of the conflict, while tens of thousands of people have been subjected to sexual violence.

UNMISS points out that its provision of perimeter security to the PoC sites leaves fewer resources to support the humanitarian needs of the millions of vulnerable people across South Sudan. As the UN considers how best to support the relocation of the residents wishing to leave the PoC sites, decisions about where to place services will certainly influence where people decide to move. Striking a balance between Government-controlled cities like Bor, Malakal and Bentiu, versus opposition strongholds like Fangak and Akobo, is complicated by the deep societal divisions in the country.

Simply proposing a South Sudanese-led process does not provide a viable way forward. In this context, this study was encouraged by the efforts UNMISS has put forth to build a consultative process that would ground decisions in cross-cutting needs assessments and on the express will of the displaced people themselves.

## Monitoring and Reporting on Human Rights

Human rights abuses during the civil war demonstrated that the parties on all sides of the conflict chose to inflict horrific harm on hundreds of thousands of innocent people who they associated with their enemies. One recent study estimated that 382,000 people died as a direct and indirect result of the conflict, while tens of thousands of people have been subjected to sexual violence, including brutal cases of rape, sexual mutilation and torture. The sheer scale of the violence – half of the 382,000 people died directly from acts of violence – puts into perspective any claims about protection in this study. The lack

of accountability for these serious crimes is seen by many South Sudanese as a major impediment to long-term stability in the country, and a potential trigger for future violence.

In this context, the human rights monitoring and reporting work of UNMISS has publicly documented some of the more egregious patterns of abusive behaviour by the parties to the conflict, reports which have been used by UN leadership to advocate for greater restraint by the parties. High visibility reports that identify the groups responsible for systematic or widespread abuses become part of the public discourse in South Sudan, and are certainly used as political tools to demand restraint by the parties to the conflict. The direct impact of the human rights work of the Mission on rates of human rights violations is extremely difficult to assess, though it is worth noting the perception within and outside the Mission that the reports over the past two years have been more direct in their assessments of abuses than in previous years.

Addressing impunity and building greater trust in the justice mechanisms of South Sudan is crucial to the human rights work of the Mission. Though the 2014 shift in the mandate of UNMISS largely eliminated any capacity-building role, a small Rule of Law section has achieved a surprising impact with extremely limited resources. Working closely with a range of partners, the Mission has contributed to a number of important initiatives including the imminent establishment of a court to try sexual crimes, doubling the caseload in 2018, the constitution of a mobile court to pursue accountability for crimes committed within the PoC sites, and targeted technical assistance to improve conditions of detention in the national prisons service. In the view of many stakeholders, the work of this section appeared to have a significant impact, possibly because it was done largely behind the scenes.

## Supporting the Political Process

The national-level political process is largely driven by forces beyond UNMISS' control, including longstanding competition between President Kiir and former Vice President Machar, the ripple effects of the oil market, regional positioning by the powerhouses of the Horn of Africa, and the constellation of bilateral actors with leverage over one or more parties. In this context, it is difficult to discern the impact of UNMISS on the broader political trajectory of the country, whether during the failed 2015 process or the more promising revitalised one in 2018.

Despite the relatively minor formal role of the UN, many of the people interviewed by this study saw the UN's support to the revitalised peace process as an important piece of the puzzle. Described as "behind the scenes shuttling" by one senior UN official, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG), the UN has worked to maintain contact with the Government and several opposition delegations, encouraging both to take inclusive approaches to the peace process. This was not a uniform view, and some

South Sudanese suggested that UNMISS played a de minimis role in the political process at the regional level. Some stressed the important role of the UN Special Envoy for Sudan and South Sudan (OSESS), who had often managed to engage with a broader range of opposition groups than was possible for UNMISS, helping to build consensus towards the peace process. Evidence of impact appeared most clear where the UN was able to align approaches with key stakeholders – the Inter-Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD), African Union (AU), and the parties – given their more direct influence over the conflict parties.

Without a clear sense of how key issues in the peace process will proceed, such as cantonment, there remains a serious risk that the parties could again fall into conflict.

At the local level, UNMISS' role in facilitating a series of commander meetings between the Government and the opposition has led to improved security and a sense among many stakeholders that the peace process is moving in a positive direction. In places like Yambio, UNMISS-facilitated agreements have also led to the demobilisation of armed groups, including child soldiers, which directly supports the peace

process. UNMISS' "effects-based approach," which demands that all local engagement be clearly linked to the Mission priorities, offers a potential model for other peace operations.

It is important to emphasise that the trajectory of the peace process is very uncertain. Recent violence in Central Equatoria demonstrates that not all armed groups have been brought into the agreement. Without a clear sense of how key issues in the peace process will proceed, such as cantonment, there remains a serious risk that the parties could again fall into conflict. Signs that the Government has not put forward a convincing plan to fund implementation of the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (RARCSS) are a recurrent concern of major donors interviewed by this study. Here, it is worrying that the parties and guarantors of the RARCSS appear to be increasingly excluding partners like the UN and AU from the core talks.

## Dilemmas of Peacekeeping in South Sudan

In assessing the impact and effectiveness of UNMISS, this study noted that the Mission had been confronted with a number of almost existential dilemmas that may offer insights into peacekeeping more generally. Rather than attempt to resolve them theoretically, we reflect on them as questions that may prompt policy-level discussion within the UN system, as discussed below.

## Dilemmas of protection

UNMISS' role in protecting more than 200,000 civilians from violence has unequivocally saved lives and helped prevent a far worse trajectory for the conflict in South Sudan. The UN family in South Sudan is now faced with a series of questions that cannot easily be resolved: How can the protection of residents of the PoC sites be balanced with the prospect of covering far more territory if the sites were phased out? How can we demonstrate that patrolling and presence do in fact prevent violence? In short, how can a mission like UNMISS clearly communicate the impact of its protection work and base it directly on the most urgent needs of the people of South Sudan?

## Dilemmas of State-centrism

The dramatic shift of UNMISS' mandate in 2014 away from state-building was a clear signal that the Security Council saw the Government as a major threat to the civilians of the country, and that support to Government-led institutions was impossible in such circumstances. At the same time, the UN rests on the principle of sovereignty and the primary responsibility of the state for the welfare of its citizens. As the country moves forward in the peace process, the pressure to return to capacity building will grow. How can UNMISS balance its support to institutions with the recognition that the Government is a party to the conflict and is seen by large portions of the population as a continuing protection threat? Is the Mission prepared to intervene in scenarios where the State of South Sudan might again target civilians? Questions of impartiality and legitimacy loom large as the UN considers how to support a peace process where the divisions between the parties – and indeed within the population – are extremely deep.

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## Dilemmas of time

UNMISS is moving forward on the plan to support the voluntary return/relocation of the PoC residents, which creates a potential tension between the short-term protection needs and longer-term risks to the country. In the short term, residents of the PoC sites appear more likely to choose relocation to areas where they are surrounded by the same ethnic group – e.g., Nuer asking to be removed to Nuer-dominant areas – in part because they do not think they will be safe in Government-controlled areas. But their decision-making

is also strongly influenced by the locations where the UN and its partners establish service delivery. Moving services and facilitating the relocation of people to ethnically homogenous areas is an expedient way to ensure the inter-ethnic tensions do not flare up again in the short term. But, as countless South Sudanese have pointed out, the kind of

## How can we demonstrate that patrolling and presence do in fact prevent violence?

generational shift that is needed for the country to move beyond the current polarised dynamics must be fostered by coexistence and the kind of shared experiences across ethnic lines that occurs in the urban centres of South Sudan. Places like Malakal, Wau, Bor and Juba – which were highly mixed before the war – risk being emptied, contributing to ethnically homogenous regions of the country. What is the future of South Sudan

in this scenario, and how can the UN avoid policies that might deepen ethnic divisions within the country? Merely stating that it is a South Sudanese decision oversimplifies the complex decisions facing the UN today.

### Dilemmas of expectations

The harsh reality is that the populations in the peripheries of South Sudan are extremely unlikely to see many tangible benefits of the peace process in the short term, particularly in the areas of development most crucial to them. Five to ten years from now, even under a positive scenario, the network of paved roads is unlikely to extend much further beyond the major urban areas, and other peace dividends will be slow to reach the most vulnerable communities across the country. Here, UNMISS has essentially no mandate and few resources to undertake the kind of development projects that would offer a peace dividend, and arguably should not be expected to undertake this kind of work. At the same time, there are huge expectations among many South Sudanese communities that the UN will play a central role in bettering their lives and providing protection if the situation again worsens, or indeed within the current peace process. How can UNMISS create a positive narrative about its impact in South Sudan without unrealistically raising expectations?

### Dilemmas of devolution

One of the key priorities of the UN reform agenda has been to devolve greater authority over resources from New York to the field missions. However, the trend within the Council has been to micromanage, adding more and more tasks to the UNMISS mandate. There are 207 separate tasks in UNMISS' current resolution. The above dilemmas underscore how important it is for SRSGs and their staff to have flexibility in their use of resources, responding to the needs on the ground in a people-centric and pragmatic manner. UNMISS' approach of further decentralising authority to the field offices has

already demonstrated what can be achieved by allowing those closest to the people to make decisions about UN responses, driving some of the strongest examples of impact in this study. Providing UNMISS with broad scope and strong support to work through these dilemmas is likely the most effective step the Security Council and the Secretariat could take.

## Operational Level

### Physical vs other constraints

The operating environment in South Sudan is extremely challenging for a peacekeeping mission tasked with maintaining operational awareness and a protective presence in large, often difficult to access areas. This, combined with an array of obstructions by the Government and other forces across the country, has often constrained the ability of the Mission to implement its protection mandate. At the same time, there is a constant sense that the Mission can do more, reach more places, and better protect civilians with more resources. This study is of the view that the way in which the UN system across peacekeeping gathers and treats data does not allow missions like UNMISS to make evidence-based decisions about the allocation and prioritisation of resources across the Mission area. Where is the Mission effectively responding to protection threats? What evidence exists to evaluate the deterrent effect of patrols in conflict-prone areas? The lack of data allowing the kind of mapping that would answer these questions leads to a blurring of the actual versus hypothetical constraints. This is not a criticism of UNMISS per se, but one of the UN peace operations system more generally.

There was a quite clear sense that some troops had a reputation for effectiveness while others did not.

### Troop posture and performance

Many prior reports have pointed to the shortcomings of UNMISS in the past, highlighting the lack of robust posture and an unwillingness of some troops to respond quickly and strongly to threats. During this study's field visit, these views were reiterated by a range of interlocutors within and outside the mission; there was a quite clear sense that some troops had a reputation for effectiveness while others did not. The message in the SRSG's strategy is clear on the need to adopt an effects-based approach to all activities, but does not appear to be entering the bloodstream of the Mission. The push to do more foot patrols and engage more visibly with the communities is certainly a good initiative. The SRSG's call to push harder at roadblocks and camp overnight if needed to get through

could also send a good message about the willingness of the Mission to access all areas. However, it may be difficult for UNMISS to shake the reputation of some of its troops with the population, a concern based on the strong perceptions gathered from South Sudanese.

## **Decentralisation**

The Mission's approach to decentralise authority and resources to the field offices is generally described as an enabler for UNMISS, giving it greater flexibility and responsiveness at the local level. Over time, however, there has been a reduction in the number of civilian staff in field offices, in part due to the closure of some bases. Maintaining well-resourced field offices – and indeed looking to increase the civilian alert network capacities of those offices – would almost certainly bear dividends for the early warning and protection work of the Mission in particular.

## **The Regional Protection Force (RPF)**

The RPF has been the subject of intense negotiations and is considered by some to be an important aspect of regional buy-in for the peace process. From an operational standpoint, however, it does not appear to be performing a crucial function in the delivery of UNMISS' mandate, though it could allow more troops to expand beyond Juba. In fact, its original purpose – to secure key parts of Juba to reassure the opposition and allow Machar's return – now may not feed the peace talks in such a direct manner, while discussions about the possible deployment of Sudanese and other troops on South Sudanese soil are a very serious distraction from the core issues of the RARCSS. As the Security Council deliberates the future mandate of UNMISS, a frank discussion of the downsides of the RPF appears warranted.







# About EPON

Peace operations are among the most important international mechanisms for contemporary conflict management. However, their effectiveness remains the subject of confusion and debate in both the policy and academic communities. Various international organizations conducting peace operations, including the United Nations (UN), the African Union (AU), and the European Union (EU), have come under increasing pressure to justify their effectiveness and impact. Although various initiatives are underway to improve the ability to assess the performance of peace operations, there remains a distinct lack of independent, research-based information about the effectiveness of such operations.

To address this gap, the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI), together with over 40 partners from across the globe, have established an international network to jointly undertake research into the effectiveness of peace operations. This network has developed a shared methodology to enable the members to undertake research on this topic. This will ensure coherence across cases and facilitate comparative research. The network will produce a series of reports that will be shared with stakeholders including the UN, AU, and EU, interested national government representatives, researchers, and the general public. Over time, this project will produce a substantial amount of mission-specific assessments, which can be used to identify the key factors that influence the effectiveness of peace operations. This data will be made available via a dedicated web-based dataset that will be a publicly available repository of knowledge on this topic.

In 2018, four pilot case studies were undertaken – in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO), Mali (MINUSMA), Somalia (AMISOM) and South Sudan (UNMISS). The results of these initial research studies are being shared at international

seminars in Addis Ababa (African Union HQ), Brussels (European Union HQ) and in New York (United Nations HQ). The network partners have reviewed the pilot experiences and refined their research methodology, and the missions identified for the 2019 studies are: the UN mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA), the joint AU-UN hybrid mission in Darfur (UNAMID), the UN Verification Mission in Colombia and the EU and OSCE missions in Ukraine.

The network is coordinated by NUPI. Many of the partners fund their own participation. NUPI has also received funding from the Norwegian Research Council and the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs to support the Network and its research, including via the UN Peace Operations project (UNPOP) and the Training for Peace (TfP) programme. For more information, please contact:

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This report assesses the extent to which the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) is achieving its current strategic objectives and what impact the Mission has had on the political and security situation in South Sudan. As a large, multidimensional peacekeeping operation – with 17,000 troops, 2,000 police and 2,000 civilians – UNMISS has been provided with significant resources and an extraordinarily ambitious mandate. Examining the four key mandate areas—protection of civilians, facilitation of humanitarian delivery, human rights, and the political process—this report finds clear evidence of the significant impact of the mission on the everyday lives of South Sudanese citizens, but also many of the ways in which the effectiveness of the mission has been limited. It explores some of the key dilemmas facing UNMISS today as the UN struggles to protect against immediate risks while also helping to put in place the conditions for long-term peace.