UN Peacekeeping and Peacebuilding: Progress and Paradox in Local Ownership

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The maintenance of international peace and security is the core purpose of the United Nations. Established in the aftermath of World War II, the United Nations and its Security Council sought to prevent the scourge of interstate war from affecting states and their people. Over time, the UN's peace and security mandate evolved to focus on intrastate wars involving a state engaged in war against its own people. The UN Security Council's seismic shift following the end of the Cold War in the 1990s—from resolving interstate disputes to intervening in a member state's sovereign territory in order to stop a civil war and rebuild the state and society in its aftermath—has led the UN to save even more lives than it arguably would have otherwise.[1] At the same time, this shift in focus has created a seemingly unsolvable paradox: the UN is "owned" by the national governments of its member states and yet it seeks to create peace that is owned by the often disenfranchised populations most affected by intrastate war. In this respect, this essay focuses not so much on peacekeeping and peacebuilding more generally, but on what might be called the "peace-kept," or the people who actually live in the war-affected country and experience the consequences of the war and the effectiveness and ineffectiveness of the UN peace operation on a daily basis. The UN Security Council has increasingly mandated peace operations to serve the "peace-kept" by creating "local ownership," where the term "local" refers to the citizens, civil society, private sector actors, state authorities, and even armed actors in the war-affected country. In the section that follows, I provide a brief overview of the evolution of UN peacekeeping. In the next section, I look back at past research and discuss its findings about the barriers and enablers

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to local ownership of UN peace operations. I conclude by looking ahead, identifying potential areas for future reform related to local ownership in UN peacekeeping and peacebuilding.

The Evolution of UN Peacekeeping

UN peacekeeping has become "one of the most visible symbols of the UN role in international peace and security."[2] UN peacekeeping operations are one type of UN peace operation, which encompass both the political missions that do not have peacekeepers and the peacekeeping operations that are mandated by the UN Security Council and managed by the UN Secretariat.[3] Since the UN deployed its first peacekeeping operation in 1948 to monitor a truce between Israel and Palestine and, subsequently, the Armistice Agreements between Israel and its Arab neighbors (Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, and the Syrian Arab Republic), the UN has deployed over seventy peacekeeping operations in over 120 countries.[4] Of these operations, the vast majority—over sixty—have been deployed since the end of the Cold War.

In the past thirty years, UN peacekeeping operations have evolved from traditional peacekeeping missions, which interpose forces between warring parties to support the implementation of a peace agreement or ceasefire, to peace enforcement missions, which aim to "enforce" peace and protect civilians by potentially engaging in war-fighting with parties to the conflict. In addition to the expansion in the way that peacekeepers are permitted to use force, UN peacekeeping operations have also become more multidimensional. Multidimensional peace operations use nonmilitary personnel to accomplish many of the tasks necessary to support the implementation of a comprehensive peace agreement, including governance reform, demobilization and reintegration of ex-combatants, security sector reform, and human rights monitoring.[5] In addition to these peacekeeping missions, the UN also increasingly deploys political missions that lack peacekeeping troops but still aim to accomplish many of these multidimensional tasks that are often described as post-conflict peacebuilding.[6] Peacebuilding also encompasses a much broader set of activities that occur before, during, and after the outbreak of war and are carried out by a wide range of UN agencies, funds, programs, departments, and offices, as well as other international and national actors. Because of the breadth of these efforts, the UN often refers to them as efforts to "sustain peace."[7]

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Scholarship on international peacekeeping and peacebuilding has increasingly emphasized the importance of true local ownership for the short- and long-term success of UN peace operations.[8] Local ownership does not just refer to ownership by members of a local community; it also refers to the buy-in, support, and strong involvement of domestic stakeholders that represent the diverse social, economic, racial and/or ethnic, religious, and gender groups in the host country, including but also going beyond the host government. Scholars argue that local ownership is necessary because without it, the UN will just reinforce the authority of an often violent, discriminatory state.[9] UN policy documents have also repeatedly emphasized the importance of focusing on the interests and needs of the conflict-affected people, not just the state. According to the *Report of the Advisory Group of Experts for the 2015 Review of the United Nations Peacebuilding Architecture*:

> Sustaining peace is, in essence, about individuals and different groups learning to live together without resorting to violence to resolve conflicts and disputes. It must be people-centered and inclusive in approach, and provide a vision of a common future to domestic stakeholders, public and private. External actors, including the UN, can accompany and facilitate, but they cannot impose peace. To this end, the UN's approach to sustaining peace, in all phases, must be underpinned by a deep commitment to broadening inclusion and ownership on the part of all stakeholders across the societies where it works. Neither peace agreements nor the implementation processes that follow them will likely prosper unless they look beyond the narrow interests of belligerents to a framework that can engage in a society's broad and emergent vision of itself.[10]

To accommodate this focus on local ownership and relevance, one of the four essential shifts called for in the 2015 *High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations on Uniting Our Strengths for Peace* report (hereafter the "HIPPO report") is to increase the UN's accountability to the people most affected by violence and war. Specifically, the report states: "There must be an awakening of United Nations Headquarters to the distinct and important needs of field missions, and a renewed resolve on the part of United Nations peace operations personnel to engage with, serve and protect the people they have been mandated to assist."[11]

In spite of the widespread agreement among UN member states that UN peacekeeping and peacebuilding efforts should be more accountable and responsive to the populations they are "mandated to assist," there remains a high degree of uncertainty as to whether the UN can achieve this goal. Studies of UN

peacebuilding and peacekeeping effectiveness have revealed numerous barriers to local ownership: accountability to state authority, difficulty in identifying and trusting local stakeholders, incompatibility between UN mandates and local preferences and needs, lack of capacity within UN missions and the UN Country Team, and the pressure to deliver quick results that sidelines more time-intensive local ownership.[12] But studies have also identified cases of successful local ownership, including two projects implemented by the United Nations Integrated Office in Burundi.[13] One of these projects, the Cadre de Dialogue, is a multiparty dialogue initiative that was run and monitored by Burundian negotiators and participants in the dialogue process.[14] Another project, which aimed to help reform the Burundian intelligence service, contracted a local human rights organization to evaluate the effectiveness of the reform efforts.[15] In the section that follows, I look back at past research and discuss what it tells us about the barriers and enablers to local ownership within the UN. In the conclusion, I look ahead, identifying potential areas for future reform related to local ownership in UN peacekeeping and peacebuilding.

What Is Known about the UN and Local Ownership?

Some of the most compelling critiques of the UN's capacity to engage in local ownership come from the UN's own reports. The 2015 report of the Advisory Group of Experts comments that the focus on peacebuilding and inclusion often happens at the headquarters in New York and in other grand convening halls in Europe but that, in practice, UN missions on the ground forget to include nongovernmental stakeholders in their processes.[16] The 2015 HIPPO report identifies the numerous challenges that UN peace operations face when engaging with local communities and civil society actors, resulting from a lack of training and a template-driven mindset that eschews the importance of community preferences and relationship building. It says, for example:

> Several local community actors and civil society representatives expressed the view to the Panel that they found it difficult to interact with United Nations personnel, who appeared remote and aloof. They noted that peacekeepers often lacked training on how to deal with traumatized people and that communication challenges were often compounded by language barriers. Some expressed concern that peace operations did not spend enough time understanding existing capacities for peace and protection or conflict mitigation mechanisms and simply replaced local structures with exogenous ones.[17]

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The scholarly literature, discussed below, has echoed these critiques, pointing to the challenges facing a global organization attempting to gain increasing local relevance.

The Challenge of National Ownership

One of the main barriers facing local ownership is national ownership. The UN is a member state organization and is governed by states. These states include any state in which UN peacekeeping and peacebuilding interventions operate. To maintain its presence in a host country, even under a Chapter VII peacekeeping/enforcement mission, the UN must regularly seek and sustain the consent of the host government.[18] If the host government no longer wishes for a UN mission to operate in its country, it can declare the head of the mission *persona non grata* and force him or her to leave the country, as has recently taken place in Burundi, the Central African Republic, South Sudan, and Sudan. The host government can also apply more subtle pressure by refusing to approve the country program that permits UN development agencies to work in the host country and collaborate with UN peacekeeping missions in the implementation of peacebuilding tasks, or by refusing to grant UN staff access to visit conflict-affected areas.

The host government, not the population, is the UN's main partner and interlocutor on the ground.[19] The UN focuses daily on managing and sustaining its relationships with host governments, reinforcing their sovereignty and authority.[20] When the host government is supportive of local ownership, then it is feasible for the UN to engage with a much broader group of domestic actors, including those opposed to the ruling political party. But when the host government is not supportive of broader local ownership, it can be extremely difficult for the UN to create local ownership with opposition political parties, civil society, or disenfranchised community members.[21] If UN staff dare to bend or break rules in order to create local ownership in these contexts, they risk losing their jobs or being forced to leave the country, as occurred with the UN peace operations in Burundi in 2006 and 2009.[22]

UN Peacekeeping Is Not Built for Local Ownership

Much of the research on UN peacekeeping focuses on the problems with the UN's bureaucracy and organizational structure. Scholars argue that the UN is often unable to focus on local stakeholders because it is preoccupied with the power struggles within the international community.[23] Furthermore, peace operations staff are accountable to UN member states and the Secretariat back in New York, not to the conflict-affected people that they purport to help. As a result,

the UN is focused on supplying goods to the conflict-affected people, not on responding to their needs or preferences. To achieve the societal change outlined in many of the more recent peacekeeping and peacebuilding mandates, the UN requires regular feedback, buy-in, and support of people within the conflict-affected country.[24] In the push to defend its relevance to its member states, to draw down as quickly as possible, and to demonstrate its contribution to conflict-affected populations, the UN often pushes for quick "peace dividends" at the expense of the relationships and local knowledge necessary to create local ownership.[25]

Who Are "Legitimate" Domestic Stakeholders?

Another barrier to local ownership is the difficulty that many UN staff face when asked to identify the local stakeholders with whom they should consult, engage, and facilitate ownership. As the HIPPO report puts it, "It can be challenging to identify representatives who genuinely speak on behalf of the local population. There is thus a tendency to engage with a small network of people who speak English or French and use jargon familiar to the international community but who may lack a local base."[26] Conflict polarizes people, leaving them mistrustful of one another and often wary of trusting foreigners. When UN staff arrive in a village in several large white 4×4 trucks and expect immediate trust and access to members of the community with diverse perspectives, community members may be reluctant to engage honestly.[27] Furthermore, different groups in society have their own interests in UN peacekeeping and peacebuilding missions. For many, the missions create new economic opportunities—offering jobs in the "national" UN staff or housing and service-delivery opportunities (both licit and illicit).[28] From this "peacekeeping as enterprise" perspective, a UN peacekeeping mission creates new winners and losers in the domestic economy, further complicating a domestic population's perception of its effectiveness and its willingness to offer a true assessment.[29]

Global Norms Are Misaligned with Local Institutions

Much of the scholarship on international peacebuilding and peacekeeping has focused on the gulf between the UN's vision of the post-conflict state that it wants to create and the reality of the post-conflict state that exists. The critique is not just that the UN's peacebuilding aims are too ambitious but that they are misguided because they ignore deep and strong institutions of state and society that already exist.[30] Instead, the UN, the World Bank, and Western donors

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have put forward an image of post-conflict success that is manifest in the immediate creation of liberal democratic states grounded in rule of law and a market-based economy, which largely ignores the long-term and often violent process—fueled by colonialism and slavery—that was required to create these institutions in developed countries.[31]

Other scholars contend that the problem is not the UN's norms or vision of post-conflict success but the fact that it does not abide by the norms that it espouses, particularly those of local ownership.[32] The UN uses local ownership as a discursive tool of self-legitimation, but its behavior focuses on national, not local, ownership. Local people, in turn, see this contradiction between the UN's discourse and its behavior, which leads its efforts at local ownership to reduce, rather than augment, the UN's legitimacy.[33]

Conclusion

As the literature and policy reports summarized here reveal, the UN has made a significant commitment to local ownership and, yet, has often fallen short of this commitment because of its focus on national ownership (rather than local ownership); the challenge of identifying and creating trust with local actors who represent diverse perspectives; the supply-driven nature of UN intervention; and the potential misalignment between global peacebuilding ideals and the institutional reality of conflict-affected countries.

My own experience as a UN staff person and evaluator of the UN Peacebuilding Fund supports these conclusions. When I first worked for UNICEF in Burundi during the civil war, I was amazed by the number of difficult decisions we faced on a daily basis—decisions that often did not have a clear or easy answer. In an impoverished, war-torn country, we had to figure out how and where to allocate our limited resources, often with highly inadequate information about the real needs of the local population. We had to navigate the difficult task of simultaneously trying to appease the Burundian government so that they would allow us to operate in the country and pressuring this same government to protect the rights of its citizens. We struggled to figure out how to strengthen the government's capacity to deliver goods and services while still ensuring that these goods and services reached the children most in need. We lived with the daily contradiction that one of the parties to the civil war, the Burundian military, was responsible for ensuring our security at the same time as we were responsible for

protecting the rights of vulnerable children, many of whom lived in communities run by rebel groups. It was a huge challenge to build local ownership with a diverse group of Burundian civil society, military and rebel leaders, government officials, and communities at a time when the Burundian population viewed the UN with mistrust and international and national UN staff feared for their own safety.

Assessments of UN peacekeeping and peacebuilding success and failure often fail to capture the complexity of the task. Scholars have found that, on average, UN peacekeeping operations reduce the incidence of violence.[34] But we still do not fully understand how UN peace operations actually contribute to these outcomes.[35] My experience and research points to a more nuanced story of how individual staff and leadership navigate difficult decisions such as the ones that I describe above. Improved local ownership aids this decision-making process because it means that UN staff are better informed about the potential costs and benefits of their decisions.

Improving local ownership requires empowering peace operation staff to be locally accountable, not simply accountable to the headquarters in New York. Local accountability does not just refer to conversations with community members. It can involve contracting local NGOs to evaluate UN projects; creating monitoring units made up of a representative group of participants in a dialogue workshop; establishing an independent research unit of local scholars who can monitor and evaluate UN interventions; or integrating local stakeholders throughout the preparation, implementation, evaluation, and duration of the intervention.[36]

For UN staff to engage more effectively with diverse local stakeholders and use the information they receive to make difficult decisions, the UN will also most likely need to empower its staff to innovate and take risks in response to feedback from the context. This will require a shift from a bureaucratic approach that focuses on implementing a set of activities that are agreed upon in advance to a focus on entrepreneurial engagement with the complex problems that UN peacekeeping and peacebuilding missions face on a daily basis. The UN has created local accountability and fostered innovation in the past, but these efforts often took place in spite of, rather than because of, existing UN incentives. For the UN to continue improving the local ownership of its peacekeeping and peacebuilding missions, and thus their rates of success, it needs to see its staff as its greatest asset. Future reforms should consider how to create real incentives for local accountability and risk-taking by these staff.

NOTES

[1] Barbara F. Walter, *Committing to Peace: The Successful Settlement of Civil Wars* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2002); and Virginia Page Fortna, *Does Peacekeeping Work? Shaping Belligerents' Choices after Civil War* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2008).
[2] Ramesh Thakur, *The United Nations, Peace, and Security* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 37.
[3] High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations, *Report of the High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations on Uniting Our Strengths for Peace: Politics, Partnership and People*, A/70/95-S/2015/446 (New York: United Nations, 2015), p. 20.
[4] For further information on the evolution of UN peacekeeping operations, see "Our History," United Nations Peacekeeping, n.d., peacekeeping.un.org/en/our-history.
[5] Ibid.
[6] UN, *Report of the High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations on Uniting Our Strengths for Peace*, p. 20.
[7] See, for example, Advisory Group of Experts, *The Challenge of Sustaining Peace: Report of the Advisory Group of Experts for the 2015 Review of the United Nations Peacebuilding Architecture*, A/69/968–S/2015/490 (New York: United Nations, June 29, 2015).
[8] Béatrice Pouligny, *Peace Operations Seen from Below: UN Missions and Local People* (London: Hurst, 2006); Séverine Autesserre, "Hobbes and the Congo: Frames, Local Violence, and International Intervention," *International Organization* 63, no. 2 (2009), pp. 249–80; and Susanna Campbell, David Chandler, and Meera Sabaratnam, *A Liberal Peace? The Problems and Practices of Peacebuilding* (Zed, 2011).
[9] See, in particular, Séverine Autesserre, *Peaceland: Conflict Resolution and the Everyday Politics of International Intervention* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018); and Susanna P. Campbell, *Global Governance and Local Peace: Accountability and Performance in International Peacebuilding* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2018).
[10] United Nations General Assembly, *Challenge of Sustaining Peace*, p. 47.
[11] UN, *Report of the High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations on Uniting Our Strengths for Peace*, p. 10.
[12] Pouligny, *Peace Operations Seen from Below*; Autesserre, "Hobbes and the Congo"; Campbell et al., *A Liberal Peace?*; and Meera Sabaratnam, *Decolonising Intervention: International Statebuilding in Mozambique* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017).
[13] See, for example, Campbell, *Global Governance and Local Peace*, pp. 147–73.
[14] Ibid., pp. 159–164.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Advisory Group of Experts, *The Challenge of Sustaining Peace: Report of the Advisory Group of Experts for the 2015 Review of the United Nations Peacebuilding Architecture*, A/69/968–S/2015/490 (New York: United Nations, June 29, 2015).
[17] UN, *Report of the High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations on Uniting Our Strengths for Peace*, p. 78.
[18] United Nations Department of Peacekeeping Operations and Department of Field Support, "United Nations Peacekeeping Operations: Principles and Guidelines," (New York: United Nations, 2008), p. 32.
[19] Campbell, *Global Governance and Local Peace*.
[20] Sarah von Billerbeck and Oisin Tansey, "Enabling Autocracy? Peacebuilding and Post-Conflict Authoritarianism in the Democratic Republic of Congo," *European Journal of International Relations* 25, no. 3 (September 2019), pp. 698–722.
[21] Giulia Piccolino, "Local Peacebuilding in a Victor's Peace: Why Local Peace Fails without National Reconciliation," *International Peacekeeping* 26, no. 3 (March 2019), pp. 354–79.
[22] Campbell, *Global Governance and Local Peace*.
[23] Niels Nagelhus Schia and John Karlsrud, "'Where the Rubber Meets the Road': Friction Sites and Local-Level Peacebuilding in Haiti, Liberia and South Sudan," *International Peacekeeping* 20, no. 2 (June 2013), pp. 233–248.
[24] On this point, see Campbell, "International Organizations in Peacebuilding—Internationally Accountable, Locally Constrained," chap. 4 in *Global Governance and Local Peace*, pp. 142–200.
[25] Pouligny, *Peace Operations Seen from Below*; and Niels Schia, Ingvild Magnæs Gjelsvik, and John Karlsrud, "Connections and Disconnections: Understanding and Integrating Local Perceptions in United Nations Peacekeeping," *Conflict Trends* (April 2014).
[26] UN, *Report of the High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations on Uniting Our Strengths for Peace*, p. 77.

[27] Andrea Kathryn Talentino, "Perceptions of Peacebuilding: The Dynamic of Imposer and Imposed Upon," *International Studies Perspectives* 8, no. 2 (May 2007), pp. 152–71.
[28] Kathleen M. Jennings, "Life in a 'Peace-Kept' City: Encounters with the Peacekeeping Economy," *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 9, no. 3 (July 2015), pp. 296–315.
[29] Ibid.
[30] Dipali Mukhopadhyay, *Warlords, Strongman Governors, and the State in Afghanistan* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014).
[31] World Bank Group and United Nations, *Pathways for Peace: Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Conflict* (Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 2018); Campbell et al., A Liberal Peace?; Astri Suhrke, *When More Is Less: The International Project in Afghanistan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011); and Christine Cheng, *Extralegal Groups in Post-Conflict Liberia: How Trade Makes the State* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).
[32] Sarah B. K. von Billerbeck, *Whose Peace? Local Ownership and United Nations Peacekeeping* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).
[33] Ibid.
[34] Fortna, *Does Peacekeeping Work?*
[35] Lise Morjé Howard, *Power in Peacekeeping* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2019).
[36] Campbell, *Global Governance and Local Peace*.

Abstract: UN peace operations have increasingly focused on the importance of "local ownership." The logic is simple. For peace operations to succeed in helping war-torn states to create accountable, democratic institutions grounded in the rule of law, peace operations need to internalize democratic principles by making UN missions accountable to different domestic constituencies—crossing ethnic, religious, racial, social, and gender lines—within the war-torn country. As part of a special issue on "The United Nations at Seventy-Five: Looking Back to Look Forward," this essay argues that while there is widespread consensus among UN member states and UN bureaucrats that local ownership is necessary, UN peace operations have faced significant obstacles to creating true local ownership. These obstacles include the UN's focus on host-government ownership; the challenge of creating trust with different domestic constituencies that represent diverse perspectives; the supply-driven nature of UN intervention; and the mismatch between the UN's ideal post-conflict state and the preferences of post-conflict societies. To make UN peace operations more responsive to post-conflict societies, UN staff often have to bend or break rules established only to hold them accountable to their member states.

Keywords: United Nations, peacekeeping, local ownership, peacebuilding, accountability