Expanding the protection toolbox

Community partnership in African-led peace operations

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African-led peace operations are playing an increasingly prominent role in continental peace and security. At the African Union, commitment to protecting civilians is growing through new policies and frameworks, including the 2023 Protection of Civilians policy. This report presents the challenges limiting the policy's implementation and proposes expanding the African Union's protection tools by recognising communities as protection actors and linking mission capacity to community-based approaches.

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Key findings

- The African Union's (AU's) 2023 Protection of Civilians (POC) policy is a major normative advance, but the gap between ambition and operational reality is embedded in mandate design, financing architecture and protection practice, not only in difficult environments.
- African-led missions are mostly military heavy and operate in asymmetric conflict contexts. Limited investment in civilian components has constrained effective community engagement.
- While African-led missions have developed important tools such as civil-military coordination, liaison mechanisms and civilian harm mitigation systems, these rarely shift meaningful decision-making power or implementation capacity to communities.
- The main limitation in current practice is not the absence of engagement, but the limited agency communities have in shaping protection priorities, responses and transitions.
- In many African-led missions, POC is included in mandates but remains under-resourced compared to coercive, stabilisation and counter-terrorism tasks, narrowing its implementation in practice.
- The AU's financing architecture systematically favours uniformed and measurable outputs over civilian protection functions such as liaison officers, early warning systems and civil affairs capacity, undermining sustained implementation.
- State-centric protection frameworks and host-state consent requirements limit how far missions can act, especially where state or state-affiliated actors contribute to civilian harm.
- Community-based protection is both durable and credible, and where missions engage communities as partners, protection efforts become more adaptive, enhance mission legitimacy and support sustainable outcomes.

Recommendations

- The Peace and Security Council and AU missions should formally recognise communities as drivers of protection, ensuring their perspectives are included in mandate design, mission planning and transition processes.
- Missions should strengthen responsiveness by linking community-based early warning systems to timely operational responses, supported by clear protocols, effective communication channels, contingency planning where mission response is limited and institutionalised community engagement.
- The AU, member states and partners should ensure predictable funding for civilian protection roles, including liaison, civil affairs and early warning systems, and leverage instruments such as United Nations Security Council Resolution 2719 to prioritise these investments.
- The AU should expand training on community-based protection, do-no-harm principles and civilian engagement across countries contributing troop and police personnel and establish a continental repository of lessons learnt to support consistent, long-term improvement in POC practice.
- There is a need to dedicate greater financial and technical resources to the civilian capabilities of peace support operations to effectively implement POC mandates. Without these resources, the implementation of POC mandates will be limited.

Introduction

In May 2023, the African Union (AU) adopted its policy on the Protection of Civilians (POC) in Peace Support Operations (PSOs). Building on the United Nations (UN) Department of Peace Operations' POC policy and handbook and over two decades of AU field practice in Burundi, Darfur, Somalia, the Lake Chad Basin and beyond, the policy articulates a four-pillar model. This includes political process support, physical protection, rights-based protection and the creation of a protective environment.[1] It reaffirms that civilian protection cannot be reduced to the mere mitigation of battlefield harm. It requires political engagement, institutional reform, human rights promotion, accountability mechanisms and sustained relationships with affected communities.

The POC mandate has been central to most missions, with varying degrees of success in meeting this objective. While important progress has been made in developing normative frameworks for the protection of civilians and advancing implementation, significant challenges remain. A critical reflection on experiences across these missions indicates that the challenge is not one of policy ambition but of implementation under constraint. Operational constraints alone do not fully explain the persistence of civilian harm. Equally significant is the limited ability of communities to shape mission protection priorities, influence mission responses and maintain protection strategies beyond the duration and reach of missions.

The operating environment of AU-led peace operations has evolved. Over the last two decades, AU missions have expanded from traditional peacekeeping functions – such as the AU Mission in Burundi[2] and the AU Mission in Sudan in Darfur[3] – towards peace enforcement, counterterrorism support and stabilisation mandates. This shift is most clearly seen with the establishment of the AU Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) in 2007.[4] These environments matter and influence how civilians can and should be protected. As conflicts in Sudan, the Sahel, eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo, Somalia and the Lake Chad Basin show, civilian harm is shaped not only by doctrinal and institutional gaps but also by asymmetric threats, fragmented armed actors, contested state authority and restricted humanitarian and mission access.

These dynamics unfold at a moment of wider transition in multilateral peace operations. Multilateral organisations, particularly the AU, are becoming increasingly central to the future of peace operations in Africa and hold untapped potential to protect civilians. This reflects a broader shift in global peace and security dynamics in which African-led operations are playing a more prominent role in responding to complex, protracted conflicts on the continent.[5] At the same time, the UN system is facing acute and growing political, financial and operational constraints,[6] contributing to a period of uncertainty and transition in multilateral peace operations. Given that many of the world's most complex conflicts are in Africa, the UN–AU partnership is widely seen as central to the future of multilateral peace operations and a critical pillar of international peace and security.[7]

African-led operations are playing a more prominent role in responding to complex, protracted conflicts on the continent

In this context, the report focuses on the role of community agency in civilian protection. Here, 'community agency' refers to the capacity of civilians and local actors to share information with missions, identify threats, set priorities, influence responses and implement locally grounded protection strategies. It is crucial to distinguish this from simply consulting communities, which does not necessarily grant them influence.

As the AU assumes a more central role in peace operations on the continent, the effectiveness of its POC Framework increasingly depends on how it adapts its tools and approaches to these realities. This report asks how, given the AU's expanding security role, kinetic operating environments and persistent constraints, it can improve implementation of its POC policy by better integrating community agency into protection design and delivery. It does not propose that the AU adopt an external framework or abandon its existing approach. Rather, it must expand its protection toolbox by supporting and collaborating more with these existing community-based protection mechanisms.[8]

AU-led missions such as AMISOM, the AU Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS) and the AU Support and

Stabilisation Mission in Somalia (AUSSOM) have developed important community-facing mechanisms, including liaison structures and quick-impact projects. These approaches have often remained limited in their ability to support community-based protection capacities.[9] By connecting the institutional capacity that missions bring with the community capacity already in place, the AU can extend the reach and durability of the protection its policy calls for, especially in challenging environments.

Research[10] on community self-protection, civilian agency and unarmed civilian protection (UCP) shows that communities often establish their own safety mechanisms in the absence of the state.[11] These include early warning systems,[12] women's protection groups,[13] local mediation bodies, protective accompaniment and community dialogue programmes.

Communities often establish their own safety mechanisms in the absence of the state

The main challenge is how AU-led missions can move beyond collecting community input towards fostering genuine partnerships that enhance protection efforts. The idea is to shift the debate from why missions fail to what protection systems are structurally possible within current AU operational realities and how to extend protection beyond deployable forces. More than viewing communities primarily as information and beneficiaries of protection, they should be conceptualised as protection partners capable of shaping protection priorities and sustaining localised protection systems.

Missions' community engagement models and their challenges

Crucially, while engagement with frontline communities on their own protection needs is an important pathway through which peace operations protect civilians, it is not sufficient on its own. Two key overlapping challenges for AU PSOs limit civilian resources and capacities: institutional structure limits community influence, and operational environments constrain engagement.

Methodology

The report is a cumulation of desktop research, interviews and a workshop that took place in November 2025 in Addis Ababa. At this workshop, Nonviolent Peaceforce, the Institute for Security Studies, the AU and the UN Office to the AU brought together AU officials, regional economic community and regional mechanism representatives, mission practitioners and civil society organisations. The workshop helped this study in examining how African multilateral peace arrangements are approaching protection modalities and the challenges they face. Rather than merely cataloguing field challenges, the workshop aimed to better understand the barriers to POC and explore innovative approaches to strengthening POC. It also provided an opportunity to take stock of current practices and identify new approaches for advancing protection efforts.

At an institutional level, the AU's engagement with civilian protection predates the 2023 policy and evolved[14] progressively through operational experiences, Peace and Security Council (PSC) deliberations, policy workshops and the gradual development of guidelines and standards on protection. Influenced by the UN's emerging POC agenda and the 2005 World Summit's responsibility to protect principle, the AU drew on its own field experience to define a clearer approach to civilian protection.[15]

In subsequent years, the AU PSC affirmed that civilian protection must form an integral part of all future AU PSO mandates. During its 326th[16] meeting in June 2012, the PSC 'stressed that, in addition to mainstreaming the Protection of Civilians (POC) in standard operating procedures of PSOs, POC must form part of the mandate of future AU missions.' This pledge was reinforced in subsequent AU PSC communiqués, such as the 775th meeting in May 2018,[17] which deepened the doctrine, recognised constraints and began to move towards multidimensional implementation. The communiqué further underscored the need for 'multifaceted protection strategies involving a

combination of policing, civilian and military functions' reflecting an emerging recognition that civilian protection needs more than military approaches alone.

It also approved progress on draft POC guidelines, including 'an aide-mémoire for the consideration of issues relating to the Protection of Civilians in Africa' and 'Integrated Protection of Civilians Training Standards' intended to guide actors across the continent. The draft guidelines progressively articulated a multidimensional understanding of protection incorporating dialogue, physical safeguarding, rights-based approaches and protective environment building, which potentially open the space for community-based approaches to POC.

The 2023 POC policy is the culmination of this trajectory. Adopted by the Specialized Technical Committee on Defense, Safety and Security, it consolidates this evolution into a single applicable framework for all AU-led missions, with guidance extending to regional arrangements and ad hoc coalitions.[18] Organised around the four pillars, this policy establishes a comprehensive, multifaceted framework for civilian protection. It emphasises that effective protection requires meaningful engagement with civilian populations and coordination with local actors.

This framing implies that protection is relational and context-specific, relying on ongoing engagement with affected communities through liaison and collaboration (paras 10, 17, 26). It also demands that missions understand local threat patterns, adapt to the operating environment, tailor strategies to context and mandate and use timely, widely sourced information to assess threats and vulnerabilities (paras 4, 18, 24, 28).

At the same time, the policy stops short of explicitly framing protection as community-centred. It indicates a model in which communities are fundamental to protection outcomes through engagement, participation, inclusive decision making and support for population resilience (paras 16e, 16k, 27, 23). The translation of participation into decision making is likely to vary across missions and must be localised and adapted to specific mandates, threat environments and political constraints. This flexibility also creates variability in how and to what extent, community perspectives shape protection outcomes. It remains unclear how these interactions translate into sustained influence over mission priorities, response choices and protection trade-offs.

The challenge is not the absence of engagement mechanisms, but their limited influence over protection priorities and responses and the lack of consistent pathways for integrating community input into mission planning and response.[19] While recent AU protection and peace support operation frameworks increasingly emphasise prevention, political engagement, multidimensional responses and protective environments, mission planning and operational responses are still centred on uniformed components and mission-driven decision making.[20]

The persistent terrorism threat in Somalia has encouraged fortified bases, vehicle patrols and limited community engagement

Operationally, these limitations are reinforced by structural, political and institutional constraints, including financing uncertainties, state-centric mandates and limited civilian deployment capacity, which continue to shape and constrain AU protection efforts in high-intensity contexts. In high-intensity and peace-enforcement contexts, these dynamics often produce a militarised interpretation of protection, where stabilisation priorities overshadow preventive, political and community-based approaches.

For example, various scholars argue that operational environments significantly shape how missions engage civilian populations and implement protection mandates. Counterterrorism settings such as Somalia, asymmetric threats, improvised explosive devices, fragmented armed actors and movement restrictions often push missions towards force protection, stabilisation and intelligence-driven operations,[21] including challenges distinguishing civilians from armed actors.

Research on AU missions in Somalia has shown that the persistent threat from al-Shabaab, including suicide attacks, ambushes and improvised explosive devices, has encouraged fortified bases, vehicle patrols and limited community engagement, constraining sustained civilian interaction and trust-building.[22] Similar dynamics have been documented in Mali and the Sahel, where

insecurity and counterterrorism pressures have contributed to the securitisation of civilian engagement and narrowed the operational space for community-based protection approaches.[23]

Additionally, even when engagement mechanisms are in place, they often do not significantly influence protection decisions. The problem is therefore twofold: constraints on engagement and the limited agency of communities in protection decision making, mission planning and response processes. As a result, even where engagement mechanisms exist, they are filtered through mission-centric structures that limit the extent to which community perspectives can influence protection priorities and responses.[24]

Given the above, this section examines how current models are changing from consulting communities to working with them as equal partners. This is important not only for understanding how missions engage communities, but also for identifying where existing approaches move towards more meaningful forms of community partnership and agency.

Civil-military interface as an expanding practice

In practice, most AU-led and supported missions implement community engagement through civil-military cooperation (CIMIC) – structured mechanisms for dialogue among security forces, civilian authorities, humanitarian actors and communities. In Somalia, for example, successive missions expanded CIMIC structures to support community outreach and engagement during operations, alongside joint patrols and human rights training with the Somali Police Force.

In the Lake Chad Basin, the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) established a joint CIMIC cell with the Lake Chad Basin Commission in 2020, facilitating community consultations that informed non-kinetic operations and supported dialogue between soldiers and affected populations.[25] The mission complemented this with quick-impact projects, including food distribution, boreholes and basic medical support in areas inaccessible to humanitarian actors, while engaging religious leaders, local authorities and community representatives through human rights and POC training.[26]

These mechanisms produced real gains. In the Lake Chad Basin, CIMIC-facilitated engagements helped build trust between security forces and communities[27] where armed groups had eroded confidence in state institutions. In Somalia, the introduction of Child Protection and Gender Officers and the establishment of the Civilian Casualty Tracking, Analysis and Response Cell (CCTARC) reflected a growing recognition of civilian harm as an operational concern rather than a by-product of military action. These are not trivial achievements in peace enforcement-heavy operating environments.

Beyond physical protection and harm mitigation, the mission in Somalia has undertaken significant work across the AU's other three pillars, which is often overlooked in external assessments. At the political level, the mission has consistently engaged the Federal Government of Somalia and Federal Member States, with the senior leadership team involved in sustained political reconciliation efforts, sometimes daily.[28] On rights-based protection, AMISOM and ATMIS trained Somali citizens in human rights, international humanitarian law, and gender, child and civilian protection, with trainees subsequently deployed across government ministries, the military, police and intelligence services, embedding protection awareness in national institutions.[29]

> Most AU-led and supported missions implement community engagement through civil-military cooperation

The mission also played a significant role, alongside UN and Somali authorities, in supporting the drafting of some of the country's most progressive legislation, including the Somalia Human Rights Commission Act, which has since been implemented. These efforts represent sustained, multi-year investment in the political, rights-based and protective environment pillars formalised in the 2023 policy and show that the AU's protection approach in Somalia has never been reducible to its military dimension, despite its greater public visibility.[30]

Within such militarised missions, community engagement in CIMIC structures reveals a structural ceiling. Engagement is initiated and controlled by mission leadership, shaped by intelligence priorities

and evaluated against military objectives.[31] Even in engagement, the posture remains armed. For instance, in Somalia, patrols remain predominantly vehicle-based (armed personnel protection vehicles) with limited interaction before or during operations, sometimes reinforcing fear rather than building trust. While the community perspective clearly informs non-kinetic activities, it does not have such influence on operational decisions. Additionally, civilian engagement was reactive rather than preventive, intensifying primarily after incidents. Thus, CIMIC expands interaction but does not fundamentally redistribute authority over protection decisions.

Community liaison mechanisms – a significant step forward

The Community Liaison Assistants (CLAs) at the UN's Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) show the impact of investing in non-military capacity. They come from the local area and work closely with community members. Serving as a bridge between the communities and peacekeepers, these assistants monitor potential issues, assess risks to individuals and facilitate communication among residents.

The Community Protection Committees and Community Protection Plans ensure coordination and organisation. The Joint Protection Teams collaborate to respond quickly upon learning of a threat. The CLAs at MONUSCO play a crucial role in making these efforts effective. This represents a meaningful departure from the CIMIC framework by positioning community members as active contributors to protection analysis rather than passive recipients of help. CLAs generated granular, real-time threat assessments that mission-level intelligence could not replicate. In several cases, the CLAs enabled the mission to anticipate a protection crisis rather than simply respond to it.[32] The model has since been recognised as a significant innovation in how missions engage with communities, activating them in their own protection, and this influence has begun to spread beyond MONUSCO itself.[33]

The difficulties that emerged do not invalidate the model; rather, they highlight important institutional and operational limitations that need to be addressed. Responses to CLA-generated alerts required mission approval, introducing delays that communities sometimes experienced as failures of follow-through. In some areas, CLAs observed that they shared information and analysis without receiving meaningful responses from missions, leading to frustration and eroding trust. These challenges point to the mission system's design and responsiveness rather than to a problem with the principle of sustained community-based engagement itself.

Community members are positioned as active contributors to protection analysis rather than passive recipients of help

When community engagement is designed to feed information upward into mission structures rather than support communities in acting on their own assessments, agency remains with the mission. The constraint is therefore not informational, but institutional. The lesson is not to abandon the CLA model but to invest in the response infrastructure that makes it credible.

The consultation–agency gap

Missions have invested in creating consultation channels through which community perspectives can reach mission leadership. The remaining gap is one of agency: the extent to which communities can shape protection priorities, operational responses and act on their own analysis. Consultation without agency produces communities that are visible to missions as information sources but not yet engaged as protection actors in their own right.

More participatory approaches have nevertheless emerged in some contexts. For example, in MONUSCO,[34] CLAs and Community Protection Plans helped communities identify threats, evaluate risks and guide mission actions, such as unarmed patrols and protection deployments. Likewise, Joint Protection Teams formalised field engagement by bringing together civilian, military and police personnel with local actors to collaboratively assess risks and develop context-specific responses. While these mechanisms did not transfer

decision-making authority away from the mission, they moved beyond one-directional consultation by creating more sustained channels through which community perspectives could shape operational analysis and protection planning.

However, the challenge comes during a mission's transition and drawdown. In the context of MONUSCO, gradual transition planning and provincial drawdown plans raised concerns about the long-term sustainability of community-based early warning and liaison mechanisms once responsibility shifted away from mission structures. Without the mission, protection risks increase rapidly, and without deliberate transition support to ensure the long-term sustainability of local community-based protection mechanisms, the achievements of the CLA system may be lost.[35]

Outside traditional peacekeeping frameworks, methods such as UCP,[36] practised by groups such as Nonviolent Peaceforce, have gone further by helping communities develop their own protection strategies, early warning systems and self-organised responses. These examples show that, where institutional structures allow, community agency can influence both information sharing and operational priorities, though in most missions this influence remains limited by existing command structures. In essence, most AU and UN missions operate between consultation and participation, while only a limited set of mechanisms, such as CLAs, Joint Protection Teams and UCP approaches, approximate genuine community agency.[37]

Barriers to implementation: mandates, financing and consent

The previous section shows that AU and UN missions have progressively enhanced their mechanisms to involve communities and incorporate civilian perspectives into protection activities. However, many of these mechanisms are still limited. This section examines the mission-focused decision-making processes that constrain the extent to which communities can influence protection priorities and actions.

As mentioned, high-intensity conflict environments present genuine constraints on civilian protection. However, it is important not to overstate what the operating environment can explain. While high-risk contexts magnify existing institutional weaknesses, they do not create them. Mechanisms to put the AU's POC framework into practice exist and have produced measurable gains. Innovations such as CCTARC, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance, geographic information systems and community engagement mechanisms have strengthened and tested the implementation of POC mandates.

Only a limited set of mechanisms in AU and UN missions approximate genuine community agency

The barriers to implementing the AU's multidimensional POC framework run deeper than difficult operational environments. They are embedded in political and institutional architectures including mandate design, force composition, financing structures and sovereignty frameworks. These factors play a major role in determining which forms of protection are acceptable, prioritised and operationally feasible.

Mandate design and the limits of force

Many contemporary African-led peace missions operate under robust and enforcement-oriented mandates authorised by the PSC and, in most cases, endorsed by the UN Security Council under Chapter VII.

In Somalia, for example, successive mandates for the AMISOM, later ATMIS and AUSSOM, have prioritised degrading al-Shabaab and supporting the federal government, reflecting the genuine immediacy of threats facing civilians in one of the continent's most protracted conflicts.[38] The logic is not without merit: in environments where armed groups target civilians and state authority has collapsed across large swathes of territory, a degree of stability is a precondition for any protection activity.

Such peace enforcement operations must navigate competing imperatives – protecting civilians, maintaining institutional stability and responding to politically sensitive developments in which host-state interests and protection interests do not always align.

Yet in practice, missions often privilege territorial stabilisation and support to host-state forces over preventive, community-oriented protection, reducing

POC to minimising civilian casualties rather than addressing the political and social drivers of harm (AU POC policy, paras 18, 23).

The deeper challenge lies in how protection is conceptualised at the mandate level. Protection has too often been equated with deterrence through force,[39] producing mandates that prioritise counter-insurgency or host-state security support over civilian-centred activity.[40] This reflects a narrow interpretation of protection as harm mitigation – minimising casualties caused by or in proximity to mission forces – rather than proactive efforts to anticipate and prevent threats in the first place.[41]

The Somalia case illustrates this tension. Successive AU and UN resolutions framed the mission's core tasks around weakening al-Shabaab, securing population hubs, stabilising recovered territory and supporting Somali security forces, including the military and police. Although civilian protection is mentioned, it is generally embedded within broader stabilisation language rather than articulated as a distinct operational priority[42] with dedicated implementation benchmarks.

Protection has too often been equated with deterrence through force, producing mandates that prioritise counter-insurgency over civilian-centred activity

Resolution 2093[43] (2013) reflected the increasingly dual nature of AMISOM's mandate architecture. While the Security Council authorised the mission to 'reduce the threat posed by al-Shabaab and other armed opposition groups' and expand its operational presence in support of the Federal Government of Somalia, the resolution also progressively incorporated civilian protection obligations. These included efforts 'to prevent civilian casualties,' facilitate humanitarian corridors, address gender-related protection concerns, mostly those affecting women and children, and establish the CCTARC within AMISOM. As a result, the resolution broadened the mission's protection roles while maintaining a focus on counter-insurgency, territorial stabilisation and strengthening Somali security institutions.

This tension became even more visible in Resolution 2628[44] (2022), which saw the transition of AMISOM to ATMIS. Recognising the limits of military-focused strategies, the resolution stated that 'military action alone will not be sufficient to resolve threats to peace and security in Somalia' and stressed that 'the protection of civilians is critical to building sustainable peace and security.'

Despite this, the main operational tasks in the same resolution continued to focus heavily on weakening al-Shabaab, supporting Somali security forces, securing key population centres and maintaining territorial gains. ATMIS was tasked with 'degrading al-Shabaab and other armed opposition groups,' assisting in 'the handover of security responsibilities' to Somali

PRIORITISING MILITARY APPROACHES OVER CIVILIAN-CENTRED ACTIVITY IS A NARROW INTERPRETATION OF PROTECTION

forces and providing operational support for stabilisation initiatives. Consequently, while the normative approach to protection expanded within the mandate, the mission's operational focus remained largely on coercive stabilisation and state security objectives.

Recent AU PSC communiqués on AUSSOM show that this logic continues to shape the implementation of protection. The PSC's 1287th communiqué of July 2025[45] emphasised 'rapid force generation,' deployment logistics, aviation needs, troop rotations, funding gaps and the execution of the 'clear, hold and build strategy' to maintain territorial gains against al-Shabaab. It repeatedly called for efforts to 'deter, degrade and eliminate al-Shabaab,' increase force deployments and ensure consistent funding.

However, less attention was given to civilian-focused protection systems, community engagement, civilian harm reduction or local preventative measures. Even discussions on reconstruction and stabilisation are mainly framed within wider state-building and security goals. This highlights how, despite the AU's broader POC framework, protection remains largely tied to stabilisation and counterterrorism strategies focused on territorial control, military force and operational effectiveness.

This challenge is not unique to Somalia. The AU PSC-mandated MNJTF focuses on creating a 'safe and secure environment' by eradicating Boko Haram, viewing humanitarian and civilian protection as secondary tasks to be carried out 'within the limits of its capabilities.' Its operational approach has primarily been based on the sequential clear, hold and build model, in which military offensives are conducted first. Ground realities often show that this approach adversely affects operations.

Although the MNJTF established CIMIC units and carried out 'hearts and minds' activities such as medical outreach, quick-impact projects, local radio broadcasts and community consultations, many of these efforts remained largely top-down and were never fully integrated into local civilian institutions. While some trust was built and access improved, these gains rarely persisted beyond the military presence that enabled them. A related issue is the lack of a deployable police component. Military units that clear and hold territory often have no intermediary force to transfer authority to, leading them to either stay beyond their mandate or leave. When they depart, the space is frequently filled by the same armed groups they displaced.[46]

Lessons highlight a broader structural issue in African-led stabilisation initiatives. The use of force has limitations, particularly where missions face resource constraints, political pressures or severe access limitations. The issue is less about the lack of political engagement, human rights efforts or civilian protection in mandates and more about the recurring tendency to prioritise coercive and security-centric tasks operationally. These tasks are typically more measurable, easier to fund and easier to assess within institutions. While military forces can diminish violence and retake territory, maintaining these advances is challenging. Without robust civilian protection infrastructure, effective policing and systems rooted in local communities, military victories often fail to endure.

Enforcement capacity is treated as the ceiling of protection when it is only one tool within a broader strategy

While there is no doubt that enforcement capacity matters, the question is whether it is treated as the ceiling of protection when, in reality, it is only one tool within a broader strategy. This has contributed to the gradual development of a more multidimensional approach to protection within the AU. The eventual establishment of the CCTARC, illustrates both the progress made and the continuing limitations of this shift.

In Somalia, the CCTARC[47] was operational in 2015 and was tasked with monitoring civilian harm caused by AMISOM, including deaths, injuries, sexual exploitation, abuse and damage to property or livestock. Physical protection remains the most visible and resource-intensive function. Demonstrating the development of the AU missions involves political reconciliation processes, human rights training, CIMIC initiatives, police reform, legal institution-building and accountability mechanisms. For the first time, civilian harm was regarded as an operational issue requiring data collection, analysis and response, rather than merely a reputational concern.

The establishment of CCTARC marked a significant institutional change, integrating measures to reduce

civilian harm and promote accountability within mission frameworks. Its creation was prompted by reports of civilian casualties related to AMISOM operations, such as incidents involving indirect fire and documented allegations by Human Rights Watch and other oversight bodies. It should be noted, however, that the cell was not a product of careful mission planning, but rather a reaction to documented failures,[48] reflecting a broader pattern in peace operations of developing protection tools only after crises reveal their absence, rather than integrating them from the beginning.[49]

These activities are still less visible and lack political prominence compared to coercive security operations, which creates a perception of an ongoing imbalance in the understanding and funding of protection. The risk is that this imbalance perpetuates the idea that protection is primarily militarised, potentially shaping future mandates and allocations. The result is what might be called 'protection inflation': mandate language becomes increasingly ambitious while operational reality narrows. Mission leadership defaults to what is most visible and measurable – escort operations, static site protection, support to host-state forces – while the preventive, political and community-centred dimensions of protection are set aside.[50]

AU mission financing

One of the consequential structural drivers of the doctrine-practice gap is financing. However, understanding why requires looking beyond resource shortfalls to the financing architecture that determines what can be prioritised, sustained and delivered in practice. Crucially, this architecture systematically shapes which dimensions of protection, particularly civilian and community-facing functions, are funded and which are not.

The defining feature of the AU PSO architecture is the institutional separation between authorisation and financing. AU PSOs are authorised by the PSC or, in cases of greater geopolitical weight, by the Assembly of Heads of State. Once authorised, the AU Commission's PSO Division is responsible for planning, launching, sustaining and liquidating missions.

However, there is no single, predictable funding mechanism for AU PSOs. Instead, budgets are assembled from a combination of member-state contributions, the AU Peace Fund, and bilateral and multilateral donor arrangements. The Peace Fund, established in 1993, was designed to finance peace and security activities, including mediation and PSOs.[51] At the 2016 Kigali Summit, the AU committed to endow the Fund with US$400 million and to cover 25% of its peace operations budget[52] – a significant political commitment, though implementation has been uneven.

Many missions depend on emergency donor negotiations and short-term bridge financing to sustain operations

As a result, missions are often financed on an ad hoc basis and remain subject to shifting donor priorities, political conditions and aid cycles that rarely align with the operational timelines of complex protection environments. In practice, many missions depend on temporary pledging conferences, emergency donor negotiations and short-term bridge financing to sustain operations.[53] This disconnect means that mandates can be politically ambitious at the point of authorisation while remaining operationally constrained in practice, with direct consequences for what missions can realistically prioritise and sustain.

The Somalia experience illustrates how structurally damaging this dependence can be. When the AU deployed at the request and authorisation of the UN Security Council in the mid-2000s, the expectation was that the UN would assume responsibility for deploying its peace operations within six months. That transition never materialised.

The goalposts shifted repeatedly in 2017 when the AU was directed to hand over responsibility not to the UN, but to the Federal Government of Somalia, following EU plans to withdraw financial support for the mission. As a result, the mission developed a transition plan to exit in 2021 – and again to ATMIS and AUSSOM – each a different proposition that left it without the financing support a UN transition would have provided. What began as a short-term bridging deployment, funded largely by European Union contributions, became a nearly 20-year operation,

carrying structural underfunding from the start. The chronic financial constraints have shaped all ground operations of the AMISOM.[54]

Within this already constrained environment, civilian protection functions bear a disproportionate cost. Civilian positions were heavily capped, even at the height of AMISOM deployment. While the mission had a troop and police ceiling of 26 000 personnel, its mandate provided for only 85 civilian staff. In addition, there was limited interest among partners in funding civilian positions.[55]

Military and police components are mobilised through established frameworks for countries contributing troops and police personnel, with relatively predictable reimbursement mechanisms and clearer chains of institutional accountability. Civilian capacities, by contrast, need sustained recruitment systems, contractual arrangements and long-term institutional investment that do not fit neatly into donor project cycles. Where civilian expertise is eventually deployed, earmarked or short-term funding typically determines its use rather than integration into core mission budgets.

Civilian capacities need sustained recruitment systems, contractual arrangements and long-term institutional investment that do not fit neatly into donor project cycles

This 'projectisation' of civilian roles has predictable consequences: high staff turnover, fragmented programming and fragile community relationships, none of which support sustained protection. In practice, this financing structure privileges deployable, measurable security outputs over relational and community-based protection functions, limiting missions' ability to sustain engagement in ways that enable meaningful community agency.

The AU's own continental mechanisms illustrate the cumulative effect of this imbalance. The African Standby Force was declared fully operational in 2016 as a multidimensional rapid-deployment framework integrating military, police and civilian components.[56] Full operational capability was declared at the 2nd Extraordinary Meeting of the Specialized Technical Committee on Defense, Safety and Security in Addis Ababa in January 2016, following the completion of AMANI AFRICA II (the AU's second continental peace support operation readiness exercise) in late 2015.

Its civilian dimension remains significantly underdeveloped in practice. The civilian roster, established to enable rapid deployment of expertise, is severely constrained by chronic underfunding, leaving deployments intermittent and reactive.[57] These are not failures of design. They are failures of sustained political investment in the civilian components needed to put the AU's multidimensional protection doctrine into practice as well as broader challenges of securing adequate, predictable and sustainable African-owned funding and effective burden-sharing for AU peace and security activities.

AMISOM HAD A TROOP AND POLICE CEILING OF

26 000

BUT PROVIDED FOR ONLY

85

CIVILIAN STAFF

The adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 2719 in 2023 represented a significant step towards addressing these structural gaps, aiming to secure predictable, sustainable funding for UN-authorised AU-led PSOs through UN-assessed contributions.[58] But implementation remains uncertain. The resolution caps UN funding at 75%, requiring the AU and its partners to cover the remaining 25%, leaving unresolved what viable options would exist should that gap go unmet.[59] The remaining issues are the changing global environment, US resistance to its application in Somalia and, recently, the UN liquidity crisis.[60]

While proposals are being advanced as part of the reform and revitalisation of the AU peace, security and governance frameworks, the financing architecture underpinning AU missions will remain fragile until these uncertainties are addressed, with direct consequences and constraints not only on the scale but also on the nature of the protection activities that missions can sustain.

Sovereignty, consent and the limits of state-centric protection

The primary responsibility for civilian protection rests with the host state, while missions are mandated to support national authorities where they are unable to fulfil this responsibility. For the AU, this reflects the principles of sovereignty, non-interference and non-indifference, including the right to intervene in grave circumstances under Article 4(h) of the AU Constitutive Act, while maintaining its foundational commitment to state sovereignty.[61] It also produces a notably different approach to protection than UN peacekeeping doctrine, which recognises that missions may act independently to protect civilians when a host state is unable or unwilling to do so.[62] The AU framework is more cautious: intervention is justified where the state is unable, not unwilling, to fulfil its protection obligations. This distinction has significant operational implications for how protection is interpreted and implemented in practice.[63]

Labelling a state as 'unwilling to protect its own population' could be seen as a confrontational act that could potentially destabilise diplomatic relations, mandate access and operational presence. AU missions are thus normatively disincentivised from challenging host-state behaviour, even in contexts where state actors themselves may be responsible for civilian harm. The framework instead prioritises political engagement, rights-based approaches and institutional reform – deliberate strategic choices aimed at preserving cooperation and long-term stability. This, however, creates a persistent tension in which protection imperatives are subordinated to diplomacy, limiting responses to state-perpetrated violence and prioritising consent at times over civilian safety.

State-centric systems offer limited opportunity for communities to influence protection priorities or responses

This tension is not unique to the AU. UN missions have consistently struggled to act against state or state-affiliated violence. This has been seen by the constraints facing the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali and MONUSCO, where challenging host-state behaviour risked mission expulsion, restricted access or the collapse of the broader political process. What distinguishes the AU is that its constraint is structural and doctrinal rather than merely political. The distinction between the unable and the unwilling is written into the framework itself, not simply a product of diplomatic caution in implementation.

This state-centrism, which conceptualises protection primarily through the restoration and extension of state authority, extends beyond the sovereignty question to the broader logic of AU mission design. The AU mission's underlying logic is to stabilise the state, strengthen national security mechanisms and ultimately transfer responsibility to the state apparatus.[64] While this approach can enhance formal security structures, it limits engagement with community-based protection needs that fall outside the state's reach or, in some cases, arise from state perpetration.

Consequently, protection remains controlled by state-centric systems, offering limited opportunity for communities to influence protection priorities or responses. The result is a continued gap: while state institutions may be reinforced, mandates may be

officially met and transitions follow their course, civilians still do not perceive meaningful improvements in their everyday safety.

Communities as protection partners: connecting mission capacity to local knowledge

Where AU missions face structural constraints, communities are not waiting for protection. Protection in these settings is already being organised, negotiated and sustained by the people most directly exposed to conflict and violence. Community protection committees, women's groups, youth networks, faith-based actors and local peace structures mediate disputes, monitor threats, negotiate with armed actors and sustain social cohesion under conditions of extreme pressure.[65] This is not informal or supplementary work. It is often the primary means through which civilians manage their own safety, before missions arrive, while they are present and long after they leave.

Recognising this reframes the strategic question: communities are not protection recipients but protection actors.[66] Community protection strategies, including protective presence, early warning, local mediation and community monitoring, operate through proximity, trust and contextual legitimacy that armed actors cannot replicate.[67] They function in spaces where missions lack access or acceptance. They provide the relational continuity that makes protection long-term rather than episodic.[68]

Communities mediate disputes, monitor threats, negotiate with armed actors and sustain social cohesion under conditions of extreme pressure

This recognition carries important limits. Community protection approaches cannot reform abusive security institutions, deliver political settlements or address the structural drivers of violence. However, communities can anticipate and mitigate threats in their immediate environment. Reshaping the conditions that generate those threats requires engagement at a different level entirely.[69] Engagement nevertheless carries risk. Civilians who visibly associate with peace operations may be perceived as collaborators by armed groups. In contexts where community leaders and human rights defenders have been targeted, poorly designed engagement can increase rather than reduce exposure to harm.

Trust is equally fragile. Where a mission is perceived as aligned with a particular faction or with host-state forces known to abuse civilians, communities withdraw. They withhold information, avoid contact with patrols and relocate away from mission bases. This is a rational response, not passive disengagement. When it occurs, early warning and community-liaison functions become operationally hollow.[70]

CIVILIANS WHO VISIBLY ASSOCIATE WITH PEACE OPERATIONS MAY BE PERCEIVED AS COLLABORATORS BY ARMED GROUPS

The AU's own four-pillar protection framework already points towards this space. Its fourth pillar, the creation of a protective environment, cannot be delivered unilaterally. It is produced through sustained relationships, local governance and community resilience. These are capacities that communities hold and that missions, constrained by rotation cycles and institutional response times, cannot consistently provide alone.[71]

The opportunity is not to move beyond AU-led protection but to extend its reach. Treating community protection mechanisms as partners rather than beneficiaries and linking mission early warning and response systems to community networks would strengthen operational reach and legitimacy. Ensuring adequate support for civilian-led strategies would also allow AU missions to deliver mandated protection more effectively, across more territory and with greater durability.

Conclusion

The AU's 2023 POC policy represents a genuine normative achievement, reflecting hard-won operational experience and a strong understanding of what protection requires in complex conflict environments. Its four pillars describe a vision of protection that is political, relational and community oriented. The central challenge has never been the framework itself,[73] but the persistent gap between policy and what the mission mandates, resources and operational practices can consistently deliver.

This gap will not close through incremental adaptation alone. The operational environments in which AU missions deploy are not becoming easier, and the structural conditions that shape mission behaviour – including mandate design, financing architecture and

Thinking about 'terrorism' in community-based protection and engagement

Community-based protection challenges dominant counterterrorism and violent extremism frameworks by centring community agency, nonviolence and human rights rather than securitisation and coercion. As multilateral peace arrangements engage communities affected by high-intensity violence, it is critical to recognise that terms such as 'terrorism' and 'violent extremism' lack internationally agreed on definitions and are often shaped by state interests.[72] Ambiguous or expansive use of this language can reinforce polarisation, justify rights-violating practices and undermine trust with communities, particularly where host states are party to violence or where entire populations are implicitly stigmatised.

From a community-based protection perspective, the question is not how to categorise actors, but how to reduce harm, mitigate risk and enable communities to protect themselves from the threats posed by these actors. Community-based approaches prioritise behaviour over labels, focusing on what violence is occurring, who is being targeted and how communities experience and respond to those threats. This shifts engagement away from extractive intelligence-gathering or securitised control towards trust-based dialogue, early warning and locally driven prevention strategies. By naming specific forms of harm, such as targeted violence, polarising violence or attacks against particular populations, rather than attributing violence to broad ideological or religious identities, protection actors can avoid reinforcing exclusionary narratives.

Importantly, community-based engagement recognises that communities often remain in place long after missions withdraw and must navigate relationships with a range of armed actors to survive. Dialogue, mediation and protective accompaniment do not legitimise violence; rather, they acknowledge the realities civilians face and prioritise immediate safety, dignity and resilience. As such, humanitarian and protection actors should resist assuming responsibility for 'countering' terrorism itself and instead focus on reducing risk and supporting community-defined protection outcomes. Framing engagement around social cohesion, local leadership and nonviolent protection enables missions to uphold human rights, preserve impartiality and strengthen legitimacy while avoiding the harms associated with rigid or politicised terrorism narratives.

host-state dynamics – are not resolving themselves between deployments. Bridging the doctrine-practice gap therefore requires deliberate choices about what counts as a protection tool, who counts as a protection actor and what missions are resourced and designed to do.[74]

This report has argued that the most consequential and underused of those choices is recognising and supporting the protection capacity that communities themselves have already built. Communities are not gaps to be filled by mission activity. They are protection actors in their own right, with local knowledge, sustained presence and contextual legitimacy that institutional missions cannot replicate. Where missions engage them as partners rather than beneficiaries and where community-based protection strategies are resourced and connected to mission planning and response, protection becomes more effective, more durable and more legitimate.[75]

This is not a departure from the AU's existing trajectory. The 2023 POC policy explicitly recognises the importance of community engagement, participation and the creation of a protective environment grounded in local resilience and inclusive processes (paras 16, 23, 27). The recommendations in this report argue for taking that call seriously. This requires investing in the tools, relationships and institutional structures that enable AU missions to fulfil their mandates where it matters most. In doing so, AU missions can extend their reach beyond what is physically deployable, delivering protection that is not only present but sustained, credible and locally owned.

Recommendations: expanding the protection toolbox

The following recommendations are directed at the AU, its member states, regional economic communities and mission partners. They are organised around five interconnected imperatives that together constitute a shift from a predominantly military protection logic towards a people-centred, community-partnered approach.

Recognise communities as both protection actors and beneficiaries

The foundational shift required across AU PSOs is conceptual: communities must be understood as co-producers of protection, not passive recipients of it. Across the continent, communities are already developing and sustaining their own protection mechanisms – women's protection teams, youth patrols, early warning networks, religious mediation structures and local negotiation committees. These are not informal workarounds; they are sophisticated, contextually grounded systems built on local knowledge, trust and sustained presence that institutional missions cannot replicate. AU missions should formally recognise community-owned protection strategies in planning frameworks and ensure community voices inform mandate development, renewal and transition planning. They should also support the PSC in establishing structured mechanisms through which civil society and community representatives can provide input into mission authorisation and review processes.

Embed community engagement structurally before, during and after deployment

Community engagement cannot be treated as an afterthought. It needs to run through every phase of mission planning, execution and transition. This starts before deployment: missions that begin without prior community relationships rarely take root on solid ground. Trust is harder to recover than to build, and legitimacy that is not established early tends to remain out of reach. In practice, this means appointing dedicated POC and civil society liaison officers and conducting joint risk analysis with communities before designing patrol routes and operational responses. It also means incorporating community-defined protection indicators into mission results frameworks and requiring mandate renewal processes to report on progress and setbacks in community-based protection. Inclusive community involvement should reach women, youth and marginalised groups as a matter of standard practice, not exceptional effort.

Close the early warning–early response gap

The gap between early warning and early response is one of the most consistently identified failures across AU and regional missions and one of the most damaging to community trust. Communities provide detailed, timely warnings through liaison structures, messaging systems and community committees. Missions respond too slowly or not at all. Closing this gap requires more agile, mobile response models that can act quickly on

community-generated information, alongside continuous communication channels, such as locally embedded focal points, mobile platforms and community messaging systems for timely, context-specific alerts. It also requires joint risk analysis and response mechanisms that clarify in advance who responds to identified threats, how quickly and what happens when mission response is not possible. Where missions cannot respond, community-owned contingency strategies must be supported and resourced.

Reform financing to underwrite civilian protection

The current financing architecture systematically underinvests in the civilian enablers of protection. Reimbursement structures reward uniformed deployment; civilian roles, community liaison capacity, interpretation, civil affairs functions and early warning systems are consistently underfunded and deprioritised when resources are constrained. Addressing this requires sustained, predictable funding for civilian protection roles as a baseline requirement for all AU-led PSOs, not a discretionary add-on. Mandates and financing frameworks should explicitly resource community engagement functions, and the AU's engagement with Resolution 2719 should be used as an opportunity to make the case that the 25% contribution requirement includes investment in community-based protection. New funding models that strengthen African ownership and reduce dependence on external donor cycles should be explored with a focus on ensuring that nonviolent community protection mechanisms are resourced through transition and beyond mission exit.

Strengthen doctrine, training and institutional memory

Expanding the protection toolbox requires institutional investment that outlasts individual missions. This means strengthening the understanding of the AU's POC doctrine and training pipelines across countries contributing troops and police personnel, including:

- Scenario-based training on community engagement, do-no-harm principles and the relational skills required for civilian-centred protection
- Standardised roles and responsibilities across military, police and civilian personnel to prevent gaps and overlaps
- Investment in community policing models, rights-based policing and police-community dialogue platforms that build the local security institutions on which long-term civilian safety depends
- A continental repository of POC lessons drawing from AU, regional economic communities, UN and civil society experience to capture community-based protection innovations and strengthen institutional learning

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Nonviolent Peaceforce (NP) is a non-profit organisation that protects civilians in conflict zones through unarmed civilian protection. NP deploys trained teams to work with local communities to reduce violence and improve safety. It operates in several fragile contexts across Africa, Asia, Europe and the Middle East. Through fieldwork and advocacy, NP promotes nonviolent approaches as a practical tool for civilian protection and peacebuilding.

Development partners

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