Advancing Community-Centred Protection in African Union Peace Support Operations: An Expert Dialogue on Strengthening the AU's Protection of Civilians (PoC) Framework in PSOs

Event Report
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Purpose and Rationale

On 20-21 November, 2025, Nonviolent Peaceforce, the Institute for Security Studies, the African Union (AU) and the United Nations Office to the African Union convened a pivotal workshop, in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, to examine how the AU's Protection of Civilians (PoC) policy framework is being translated into practice across African Peace Support Operations (PSOs). This workshop brought together diverse stakeholders including representatives from the AU, Regional Economic Communities (RECs), Regional Mechanism (RMs), peace operation practitioners, civil society actors, and policy experts. The dialogue aimed to move beyond descriptive accounts of field-level challenges to interrogate the system-level barriers limiting effective, civilian-centred protection outcomes. The primary objectives included taking stock of current practices and exploring innovative approaches for advancing civilian protection.

Participants broadly agreed that whilst the AU has developed a robust and increasingly civilian-centred[1] protection framework - emphasising prevention, governance, political engagement, and community resilience - implementation gaps persist, particularly in high-intensity conflict and peace-enforcement contexts. However, the challenges to operationalising PoC are not explained by operating environments alone. Rather, they reflect structural, political, and institutional constraints that shape how AU missions are authorised, funded, staffed, and deployed. The event therefore moved beyond descriptive accounts of field-level challenges to interrogate the system-level barriers limiting effective, civilian-centred protection outcomes and explore ideas to overcome this and advance civilian-led protection on the continent.

Beyond these immediate objectives, participants underscored that the dialogue was also timely in light of the broader evolution of the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA). Over the past decades, the AU has expanded its engagement from traditional peacekeeping towards peace-enforcement, counter-terrorism support, and stabilisation mandates, often in environments where

[1] "Civilian-centred" refers to the meaningful engagement of civilians and communities in discussions and activities that affect their protection.
"Civilian-led" goes further, recognising civilians as the primary drivers of the work in its entirety.

state authority is contested and civilians are both direct targets and bargaining chips. This shift has generated a protection paradox: while the AU has adopted increasingly sophisticated PoC norms, the missions tasked to implement them often operate with limited civilian capacity, fragmented political backing, and high levels of operational risk. The dialogue therefore sought not only to "take stock" of PoC, but to interrogate whether AU missions are structurally equipped, politically, institutionally, and financially, to deliver on the protection promise made to communities.

The core conclusion was the shared recognition that effective protection requires a multidimensional, adaptive, and community-centred approach.

1. From Strong Policy to Weak Practice: The Persistent Implementation Gap

The AU has developed an increasingly robust and civilian- centred PoC policy framework. The AU's robust PoC framework is based on four core pillars: support to the political process, physical protection from violence, a rights-based approach, and the establishment of a protective environment. Protection is understood as both a legal obligation (rooted in international humanitarian law and international human rights law) and an operational imperative.

Over time, this framework has moved beyond a narrow focus on civilian harm mitigation to encompass prevention, political engagement, governance, community resilience, and national ownership. In principle, PoC is understood as a multidimensional endeavour requiring coordinated military, police, and civilian action.

Participants highlighted that the AU's PoC framework has, in many respects, outpaced the institutional and operational capabilities of its peace missions. While doctrine increasingly emphasises prevention, political engagement and community resilience, mission planning and force generation remain dominated by uniformed components. As a result, PoC is frequently interpreted through a stabilisation or counter-terrorism lens, where territorial control and support to host-state forces overshadow the less visible but critical work of community engagement, human rights monitoring, and long-term social cohesion. This "doctrine–practice divergence" was described as a recurring pattern across AU and REC/RM-led operations.

Yet across AU PSOs, a consistent gap remains between policy ambition and operational practice. Participants repeatedly highlighted that this gap is not the result of conceptual weakness, but rather reflects how protection priorities are interpreted, resourced, and implemented once missions are mandated or authorised and deployed. PoC frequently becomes narrowed in practice - particularly in volatile environments - where immediate security concerns take precedence over longer-term, civilian-centred protection objectives.

Several contributors referred to this pattern as a form of "protection inflation," where increasingly ambitious PoC language is added to mandates without corresponding capabilities, political backing, or mechanisms to ensure accountability. In practice, mission leadership is often forced to prioritise what is most visible and immediately measurable, such as escort operations, static protection of sites, or support to national forces, over more preventive, people-centred strategies. This contributes to a narrowing of PoC to short-term harm mitigation, rather than the broader transformation of security relationships envisaged in AU policy.

2. High-Risk Environments and Peace-Enforcement Mandates

High-intensity conflict environments and peace-enforcement mandates present genuine constraints on civilian protection. Active hostilities, asymmetric threats, fragmented armed groups, and shifting frontlines significantly reduce operational space for civilian engagement and prevention-oriented approaches. In such contexts, missions tend to prioritise force protection, stabilisation, and territorial control.

Peace-enforcement mandates given the AU PSOs and regional peace arrangements were identified as particularly challenging. Participants noted that these mandates often encourage a militarised interpretation of protection, where PoC is implicitly reduced to avoiding or responding to civilian harm rather than addressing broader political, social, and governance drivers of violence. Command structures, rules of engagement, and risk-averse postures further limit the extent to which missions can sustain engagement with communities, especially where missions are perceived as parties to the conflict.

The discussions also underscored that peace-enforcement mandates place particular strain on core protection principles such as distinction, proportionality and impartiality. Once a mission is perceived as aligned with a particular faction or with abusive state actors, civilians may withhold information, avoid contact with patrols, or relocate away from mission bases, thereby weakening early warning and undermining the very conditions necessary for effective PoC. Participants noted that in theatres such as Somalia and parts of the Sahel, the combination of asymmetric threats, improvised explosive devices (IEDs), and complex urban or rural terrain has made it increasingly difficult to maintain sustained, safe and trusted contact with communities, even where missions have the intent to do so.

However, the discussion strongly emphasised that context alone does not explain persistent PoC shortcomings. High-risk environments magnify existing weaknesses, but they do not absolve institutions of responsibility. Where missions lack civilian capacity, political backing, or institutional readiness, peace-enforcement contexts almost inevitably default toward militarised protection approaches.

3. Structural Constraints within AU Peace Operations: Politics, Capacity, and Financing

A central theme of the discussion was the extent to which structural constraints within the AU peace and security architecture systematically undermine the operationalisation of PoC. Participants emphasised that these constraints are mutually reinforcing and rooted in political prioritisation, institutional design, and chronic financing gaps, rather than in policy deficits.

Several speakers stressed that these constraints are embedded in the political economy of AU peace operations. Decisions about when and where to deploy, which partners to prioritise, and how to frame responses to crises are often driven by geopolitical considerations and member state interests rather than by assessed protection needs. This can lead to mandates that are clear on paper but under-specified in terms of political strategy, leaving missions to navigate sensitive relationships with host governments, regional actors, and non-state armed groups without a coherent, protection-centred political roadmap.

Although AU PSOs are formally conceived as multidimensional, their design and deployment remain heavily skewed toward military and police components. Uniformed capacities benefit from clearer political backing, established contribution models, and predictable if limited funding streams through troop- and police-contributing countries. By contrast, civilian components – essential for governance, human rights, civil affairs, political engagement, and community liaison – are consistently under-prioritised, both politically and financially.

Financing emerged as a core structural constraint affecting all stages of mission planning and implementation. Participants noted that AU missions are often designed and mandated without secured, predictable funding for civilian roles, resulting in delayed recruitment, partial staffing, or the complete absence of civilian functions. Where civilian expertise is deployed, it is frequently dependent on donor-earmarked or short-term project funding, rather than integrated into the AU's core mission financing model. This creates fragmentation, undermines continuity, and limits the sustainability of protection activities.

The under-utilisation of existing AU mechanisms further illustrates these challenges. The African Standby Force (ASF) was designed as a multidimensional rapid-deployment framework integrating military, police, and civilian components and was declared fully operational in 2016. However, it has never been deployed through its intended framework. Most AU- and REC/RM-led peace support operations have instead relied on ad hoc, REC/RM-led, or coalition-based

arrangements, reflecting political preferences but also funding realities, as such arrangements often attract faster or more flexible external financial support.

Similarly, the African Standby Capacity (ASC) roster was established to enable the rapid deployment of civilian expertise and to professionalise the civilian dimension of AU missions. In practice, its use has been severely constrained by chronic under-financing. Training pipelines, roster maintenance, deployment readiness, and retention of qualified civilians all require sustained investment that has not been consistently provided. As a result, civilian deployment remains intermittent, delayed, or reactive, rather than planned and mission-driven.

The cumulative effect is an institutional design that is structurally biased towards militarised forms of protection. Military and police contingents benefit from established contribution models, predictable reimbursement mechanisms, and clearer chains of command. By contrast, civilian components depend heavily on short-term, donor-driven project funding that seldom covers core functions such as civil affairs, political analysis, community liaison, or human rights work. Participants noted that this "projectisation" of civilian roles leads to fragmented initiatives, high turnover among staff, and fragile relationships with communities, none of which are conducive to sustained, community-centred protection.

Participants stressed that funding gaps are not politically neutral. Choices about what is funded – and what is not – shape how protection is interpreted in practice. The relative ease of financing military and police components, compared to civilian protection roles, reinforces a militarised model of protection, particularly in high-risk and peace-enforcement contexts. This dynamic narrows POC to civilian harm mitigation and force protection, side-lining the political, preventive, and community-centred aspects of protection envisaged in AU policy.

It was further observed that institutional fragmentation within the AU and between the AU and RECs/RMs reinforces these trends. Overlapping mandates, unclear division of labour, and parallel planning processes have often produced inconsistent protection approaches across different theatres. In some cases, AU missions, regional mechanisms, and bilateral security initiatives operate side by side in the same context without a shared protection framework, leading to mixed messaging for communities and missed opportunities for coordinated action.

In combination, weak political commitment, fragmented AU–REC/RM–member state coordination, and inadequate, unpredictable financing produce a structural environment in which multidimensional protection is consistently deprioritised, despite strong normative commitments.

4. Mission-Level Evidence: Recurring Patterns Across Contexts

Experiences from diverse mission settings reinforced the systemic nature of these challenges. Coalition-led operations such as the MNJTF demonstrate the advantages of rapid mobilisation and strong political buy-in, but also reveal the limits of overwhelmingly militarised approaches to protection. In the absence of meaningful civilian components, engagement with communities remains informal and inconsistent, and protection outcomes are largely indirect and difficult to sustain.

AU-led peace-enforcement missions such as AUSSOM show similar tensions. While incremental progress has been made on civilian harm mitigation and thematic protection areas, multidimensional protection remains constrained by the absence of deployable civilian capacity and predictable financing. Protection initiatives are therefore fragmented and secondary to military priorities.

At the same time, participants acknowledged that mission experiences also point to promising practices. In contexts where even modest civilian capacity has been deployed, such as protection advisors, human rights officers or community liaison teams, missions have been able to develop more nuanced threat assessments, identify protection "hotspots" in advance, and support local protection initiatives in ways that are more responsive to community priorities. However, such examples were characterised as the exception rather than the norm, highlighting how much protection outcomes depend less on mandate language and more on whether missions have the institutional architecture and political space to consistently engage with civilians.

Comparative experience from UN missions such as MONUSCO highlights the added value of robust civilian structures for protection – through human rights monitoring, civil affairs engagement, and community liaison mechanisms – while also illustrating their fragility in the absence of sustained political support, particularly during transition and drawdown phases.
Across these diverse contexts, a consistent pattern emerges: protection outcomes are shaped less by mandate language than by institutional design, resourcing decisions, and the availability of civilian capacity.

5. Civilian-Led Protection and the Role of Civil Society

The discussion underscored that civilian-led protection is not a supplementary or informal practice, but a core component of protection in many conflict-affected contexts. In settings characterised by weak state presence, limited mission reach, or high political and security volatility, civilians and local organisations are often the first, most consistent, and sometimes the only actors engaged in day-to-day protection.

Participants emphasised that civilian-led protection encompasses unarmed, non-violent, and community-driven strategies aimed at preventing violence, reducing harm, and strengthening local resilience, and are directly led by communities themselves. These strategies include early warning and early response mechanisms, protective presence and accompaniment, mediation and local dialogue, community-based monitoring, negotiation with armed actors, and collective protection measures grounded in social cohesion and local norms. Such approaches draw directly on proximity, trust, and contextual knowledge, allowing civilians to operate in spaces where armed actors, including peace operations, may lack legitimacy, access, or acceptance.

Panellists noted that these forms of civilian-led protection align with broader global trends toward localisation and recognition of community agency, but that AU PSOs have yet to systematically integrate them into mission-wide protection strategies. In many contexts, community protection committees, women's groups, youth networks, faith-based actors, and local peace committees already operate as de facto protection providers, mediating disputes, organising safe passage, and ensuring continuity of services. Yet their work is seldom reflected in mission reporting, tasking, or performance assessment, and there are few structured mechanisms for AU missions to support, scale, or learn from such initiatives.

Despite these realities, civilian-led protection remains insufficiently recognised and institutionalised within AU peace support operations. Engagement with civil society organisations (CSOs) is often ad hoc, reactive, or dependent on individual relationships rather than embedded in mission-wide protection strategies, threat analysis, or political engagement. Where formal engagement does occur, it is frequently framed as information-sharing or consultation, rather than as a partnership centred on shared protective outcomes and mutual risk management.

Participants highlighted that this gap is closely linked to the weakness of civilian components within AU missions. Without adequately staffed and resourced civilian functions - such as civil affairs, political affairs, protection advisors, and community liaison roles - missions lack both the institutional mandate and the practical entry points to engage systematically with CSOs and community-based protection networks. As a result, civilian-led initiatives often operate in parallel to peace operations rather than in coordination with them, limiting both their reach and their sustainability.

The session also surfaced important risk dynamics associated with civilian-led engagement. In many contexts, civilians who engage with missions or international actors face intimidation, targeting, or retaliation from armed groups or local authorities. Participants stressed that poorly designed engagement - particularly in the absence of reliable protection guarantees or follow-up - can exacerbate risks for communities rather than reduce them. This reinforces the need for risk-

aware, principled engagement, where partnerships with civilians are grounded in informed consent, do-no-harm principles, and sustained presence rather than episodic interaction.

In this regard, participants warned that poorly designed partnerships can inadvertently increase community exposure to harm. When civilians share sensitive information or visibly engage with missions without corresponding protection guarantees, they may be labelled as collaborators or spies by armed actors. Several civil society representatives emphasised the need for AU and UN missions to co-design engagement protocols with communities that include clear red lines, contingency plans, and agreed channels for sensitive communication. This is particularly important in contexts where armed groups have a history of targeting community leaders and human rights defenders.

Crucially, participants warned against the instrumentalisation of civilian-led protection. Civilian initiatives should not be framed as a low-cost substitute for institutional responsibility, nor used to compensate for under-resourced missions or gaps in political will. When civilian-led protection is treated as a workaround rather than a complementary pillar, it risks shifting responsibility and danger onto communities without addressing the structural drivers of harm.

A strong message from civil society actors was that civilian-led protection must be recognised as a complementary pillar, not a substitute, for institutional responsibility. Communities may be best placed to anticipate and mitigate threats in their immediate environment, but they cannot reform abusive security institutions, negotiate ceasefires, or address systematic patterns of marginalisation and exclusion that drive violence. Participants therefore called for a more honest division of labour in which community initiatives are supported, not exploited, and where institutional actors shoulder their obligations to address structural and political drivers of harm.

At the same time, the discussion affirmed that civilian-led protection offers strategic value for peace operations when approached deliberately. By strengthening early warning, enabling more nuanced political analysis, and anchoring protection efforts in local realities, civilian-led approaches can enhance the effectiveness, legitimacy, and legitimacy of mission-level protection strategies - particularly in complex, high-risk environments

Key Messages and Recommendations

The dialogue concluded that while the AU possesses a robust normative framework, success hinges on translating legal obligations into consistent, context-sensitive, and sustained action.

The dialogue established three overarching imperatives:

1. **Community leadership is indispensable:** Civilian-led and community-centred approaches are essential strategies for effective and sustainable protection outcomes.
2. **Localisation must be structurally embedded:** This requires early engagement (ideally before mission deployment), participatory planning, regularised liaison mechanisms, and AU investment in community-driven protection initiatives.
3. **Protection is a shared endeavour:** Effective PoC requires alignment and complementarity across AU institutions, PSO components, host governments, civil society, and affected communities.

Participants further highlighted that these imperatives should be translated into concrete operational benchmarks. For AU PSOs, this could include: the systematic inclusion of community engagement and civilian-led protection indicators in mission results frameworks; the appointment of dedicated PoC and civil society liaison officers within mission structures; and the requirement that mission planning and mandate renewal processes report on progress and setbacks in community-centred protection. The dialogue also suggested that the AU Peace and Security Council could request regular briefings from civil society and community representatives when considering mission authorisation, renewal, or transition, ensuring that local voices inform strategic decision-making.

Priority Recommendations to Operationalise Community-Centred Protection:

- **Address Structural Constraints:** Require sustained investment in predictable funding for civilian roles to ensure multidimensional protection is operational, not just conceptual.
- **Establish Clear Political Frameworks:** Mandates and the use of force must be embedded within a broader political strategy rather than being treated as a default response.
- **Integrate Community Engagement:** Community engagement must be integrated into mission training and doctrine, ensuring personnel deploy with the relational skills required for community-centred protection.
- **Enhance Communication Technology:** Missions must utilise continuous channels of communication with civilians, leveraging mobile communication channels, WhatsApp groups, or locally embedded focal points to enable timely and context-specific early warning alerts.
- **Strengthen Sustainability and Ownership:** Explore new funding models to ensure sustainability and strengthen African ownership of PSOs. Protection strategies must focus on empowering local institutions and authorities to maintain security independently of mission presence.

- Finally, participants stressed the importance of documenting both successes and failures in protection practice. Establishing a continental repository of PoC lessons learned, drawing from AU, REC/RM, UN and civil society experiences, could help avoid repetition of known pitfalls, strengthen institutional memory, and provide practical guidance to future missions. Such a repository would be particularly valuable in capturing innovations in civilian-led and community-centred protection that often remain invisible in formal evaluations and after-action reviews.

Conclusion

Advancing protection of civilians in AU peace support operations requires more than refinements to mandate language or tactical adjustments in high-risk contexts. It demands deliberate political choices to operationalise the AU's multidimensional protection vision: sustained investment in civilian capacity, meaningful use of continental mechanisms already in place, and structured partnerships with civil society and affected communities. Without addressing these systemic barriers, the gap between the AU's PoC policy and protection outcomes on the ground is likely to persist.

The discussions also made clear that protection can no longer be understood as a purely technical or tactical issue. It is inherently political, shaped by who is recognised as a legitimate protection actor, whose security is prioritised, and which risks powerful stakeholders are willing to accept on behalf of themselves and of communities. Bridging the gap between the AU's strong PoC policy framework and weak practice therefore requires a recalibration of incentives within the AU, RECs/RMs and member states - rewarding missions that invest in community-centred approaches, uphold human rights standards, and engage honestly with the limitations of what they can deliver, rather than those that simply project force.