HPG REPORT

Protection of civilians in transition contexts

Reducing protection risks post peacekeeping-mission drawdowns in the Democratic Republic of Congo, South Sudan and Sudan

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Photo: View of Mohongoza center from Kaboneke village, Kalehe Territory, South Kivu Province, DRC, April 2026 © Nonviolent Peaceforce

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Acronyms

AFC/M23	Alliance fleuve Congo/Mouvement du 23 mars
CIVIC	Center for Civilians in Conflict
CAN	community alert network
CLA	Community Liaison Assistant
CPP	community protection plan
CSO	civil society organisation
DDR	demobilisation, disarmament and reintegration
DPPA	(United Nations) Department for Political and Peacekeeping Affairs
DRC	Democratic Republic of Congo
DSRSG	Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary-General
FARDC	Armed Forces of DRC (Forces armées de la République Démocratique du Congo)
HC	Humanitarian Coordinator
IDP	internally displaced person
IHL	International Humanitarian Law
INGO	international non-governmental organisation
LPC	local protection committee
MONUSCO	United Nations Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo
PITT	Provincial Integrated Transition Team
PoC	protection of civilians
RC	Resident Coordinator
RSF	Rapid Support Forces
SLF	State Liaison Function
SSR	security sector reform
UCP	Unarmed Civilian Protection
UN	United Nations
UNAMID	African Union–United Nations Hybrid Operation in Darfur
UNICEF	UN Children's Fund
UNHCR	UN High Commission for Refugees
UNITAMS	UN Integrated Transition Assistance Mission in Sudan
UNMISS	UN Mission in South Sudan
UNSC	UN Security Council

Executive summary

Introduction

When peacekeeping missions draw down or exit, this carries significant implications for the protection of civilians (PoC) due to the significance of peacekeeping missions for PoC. In recent years, a number of peacekeeping missions have drawn down and exited, driven by decisions outside of their control, even as conflict dynamics continue to fuel violence against civilians. Whether driven by politics in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), politics at national level or the liquidity crisis, a reduction in the presence, footprint and activities of peacekeeping missions can lead to critical PoC gaps and require significant adaptation of the wider ecosystem of actors that could contribute to reducing risks to civilians' safety.

This report focuses on PoC in transition contexts in South Kivu (the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)), South Sudan and Darfur (Sudan). For the purpose of this study, transition contexts are defined as those affected by conflict and violence where there is a significant shift in the presence, footprint and capacities of a significant PoC actor, affecting PoC capacities and the way protection is experienced by civilians. The study examines PoC gaps in transition contexts and explores how different actors try to mitigate these PoC gaps. This report is not strictly focused on UN peacekeeping transitions and UN transitions as outlined in UN policy frameworks. Instead, the study considers transitional states more broadly, including the role that peacekeeping missions and their drawdown play in shaping PoC in transition contexts. This study argues that a more holistic understanding of protection actors, actions and relationships throughout the cycle of a conflict can help pre-empt and manage the changing protection landscapes in transition contexts. As such, this study adopts a protection ecosystem approach, focusing on the diversity of actors contributing to PoC, their actions and interactions.

The significance of peacekeeping-mission drawdowns for PoC in transition contexts

Peacekeeping-mission drawdowns are significant for how PoC is experienced in transition contexts. Peacekeeping missions are a significant actor in PoC primarily because of their UNSC mandate, and corresponding size, resources and operational modalities. Where they are present, they represent a large proportion of PoC capacities. As a result, their presence shapes the PoC landscape in transition contexts. When peacekeeping missions draw down and exit in contexts where violence and conflict continue to result in significant risks to civilians, this leads to significantly fewer PoC capacities, and the need to reinvest and gear up PoC capacities through other means and other actors. Ultimately, the way peacekeeping missions withdraw can create significant PoC gaps that are often challenging to mitigate (see Gorur, 2025).

The presence of peacekeeping missions can have an unintentional substitution effect on the role and capacities of other actors. Peacebuilding and humanitarian actors that can contribute to PoC may

rely directly or indirectly on the logistical capacities of peacekeeping missions for their own operations. This carries implications for maintaining and gearing up PoC capacities when peacekeeping missions draw down and exit. While some actors had varied reliance on the logistical and operational support of the United Nations Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO), interviewees systematically highlighted that their capacity to intervene in South Kivu was greatly affected by the loss of logistical and security capacities that MONUSCO used to provide (also see DRC Conflict Sensitivity Hub, 2024). In South Sudan, the presence of the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) has also shaped where humanitarian organisations establish their presence. UNMISS's withdrawal from managing the PoC sites led to a withdrawal of humanitarian operations that were reportedly encouraged by the Mission and the Government of South Sudan to move outside of sites so people would not stay in them.

How PoC capacities are resourced before, during and after mission drawdowns affects the ability of other actors to gear up their operational and PoC capacities in transition contexts. The literature on peacekeeping-mission drawdown refers to this as the financial cliff (Lilly, 2021; Levine-Spound and MacClinchy, 2022a). In DRC, the transition context suffered a chronic lack of funding. Financial planning to support transfer of responsibilities from MONUSCO to the government and the rest of the UN Country Team was absent and unclear (see also DRC Conflict Sensitivity Hub, 2026). Across the three transition contexts, there have been some attempts at mitigating this funding cliff. While these efforts have supported some intentional handover of protection activities, evidence suggests they have failed to prevent the feared financial cliff edge.

The transitional nature of the contexts is significantly shaped by peacekeeping missions' own processes as these processes tend to take up significant political capital from national governments as well as occupy the limited resources of UN Country Teams, INGOs and to a certain extent national and local civil society. A major finding from MONUSCO's exit from South Kivu was how much space, time and resources were dedicated by all actors to MONUSCO's own exit process, leaving little space for alternative forums or approaches to engage on the implications of MONUSCO's exit for PoC in South Kivu. As a result, peacekeeping missions' drawdown and exit forced a predominantly UN- and state-centric approach to transition with little space, time and capital dedicated to a wider discussion on what PoC could look like without a peacekeeping mission with a more diverse set of actors.

Transition contexts experience rising PoC needs due to the security cliff. The common characteristic of transition contexts in South Kivu, Darfur and South Sudan is that peacekeeping-mission drawdowns and exit were not linked to a reduction of PoC needs. In fact, these contexts were all characterised by a continued, and often escalating, need for PoC capacities. The drivers of these peacekeeping drawdowns and exits were diverse, characterised by their political nature and most often leading to timeframes that were out of the control of peacekeeping missions in-country. In the three contexts, they tended to result from a mix of funding pressures from member states, politics in the UNSC and dwindling host country consent. The drawdown of missions from entire areas inevitably affects conflict dynamics and the PoC capacities to respond, which is often referred to as the security cliff (see Lilly, 2021; Gorur, 2025). It can change the behaviours of armed actors, and sometimes

embolden them (Druet, 2026), as it inadvertently suggests to them that the international community has fewer stakes in the conflict, in addition to the loss of deterrent effect, visibility and monitoring of the conduct of armed actors.

Approaches in transition contexts lack adaptability. Across DRC, Sudan and South Sudan, peacekeeping transitions were faced with rapidly changing political situations and conflict dynamics and lacked the capacity to adapt and account for them (see Mamiya et al., 2020 on the African Union–UN Hybrid Operation in Darfur (UNAMID)). In DRC, while planning for MONUSCO's exit from other provinces had been paused, the South Kivu withdrawal went ahead with little shift in spite of changing conflict dynamics. The security situation in South Kivu deteriorated as early as June 2024 with renewed armed group activities in low-level conflict and violence, in part due to the security vacuum left by MONUSCO's departure. In Sudan, UNAMID's transition failed to prepare the UN Integrated Transition Assistance Mission in Sudan (UNITAMS) for radical change, including the military coup in 2021. In South Sudan, respondents highlighted that the closure of UNMISS bases had been taking place precisely when UNMISS capacities could be required as the security situation was significantly deteriorating. There is a general dearth of contingency planning around worst-case scenarios in transition contexts and measures that should be put in place by a range of actors.. This is driven by political dynamics in the UNSC and with host states, which stymie the ability of peacekeeping missions to shift gear when such scenarios materialise during drawdown.

Implications of the current approach to peacekeeping-mission drawdowns

Over-reliance on states taking over responsibility for PoC. Transitions traditionally took place as contexts progressed towards peace, with the expectation for host states to assume responsibility for protecting its civilians with continued support from UN funds, programmes and agencies. This assumption continues to drive transition planning today. However, the nature of transition contexts in South Kivu, Darfur and South Sudan would require a significant step up by host states due to escalations in violence and the continued high PoC needs. In the three contexts in this study, this is made more challenging for three main reasons resulting in PoC gaps: host states continuing to be a significant perpetrator of violence against civilians; linked to this, the lack of trust that civilians have in host governments' capacities and willingness to protect them; and the loss of territorial control that too often ensues in rapidly changing conflict dynamics, which undermines host governments' ability to protect civilians in areas not under their control.

Lack of inclusion of diverse actors in peacekeeping-mission drawdowns. With PoC capacities and needs in transition contexts being significantly shaped by how peacekeeping missions draw down, the ability of a wide range of actors to influence and shape this process matters for its outcomes. While mission drawdown policies focus on a reconfiguration of UN presence and handing over functions to host governments and other UN entities, they also recognise the importance of involving a wider set of actors including local and national civil society. Indeed, evidence shows that 'peacekeeping transition processes that include civil society organisations will be more responsive to the context and better

capitalize on local protection capacities' (Levine-Spound and MacClinchy, 2022b: 1). Yet even with the best intentions, peacekeeping-mission drawdowns still face challenges in involving a wider set of actors (CIVIC, 2023), as seen in DRC, South Sudan and Sudan.

Inadequate preparedness across all actors. Given that PoC needs remain high due to continued conflict and violence in DRC, Sudan and South Sudan, there was a proportionally low level of preparedness or inadequate planning across all contexts. As one protection actor interviewed in DRC highlighted, 'everyone was taken by surprise by the speed [of the drawdown] but they had not thought of the possibility of this happening'. There are challenges with preparing and planning for the impact of peacekeeping-mission drawdowns including that the exact timetable for their exit is often confirmed at short notice, which makes planning challenging. This is compounded by the challenge of, yet the necessity for, planning in fast-changing contexts. Finally, constrained resources make it difficult to prepare for the implications for PoC of peacekeeping-mission drawdowns.

Opportunities and challenges of a more ecosystem and civilian-centred approach to PoC: examining roles of diverse actors, complementarity and leadership

Communities play a significant role but are limited in their scope. As PoC capacities reduce in the transition contexts studied and are not easily mitigated by state authorities or other actors, communities and community-level actors such as traditional authorities or local civil society play a significant role in their own protection and that of their communities. While these actors can mitigate protection risks and contribute to protection outcomes, they cannot replace the duty of state authorities or the role of peacekeeping missions, or fill all protection gaps linked to transitions. In DRC, the role that communities and community level actors play remains limited and they face constraints and high risks. Capacity-strengthening from peacekeeping missions and other actors enable the role of communities in transition contexts. However, respondents in DRC also felt that where a legacy of impact remained, it was fragile and required further support to leverage the investments made by MONUSCO as well as other actors. The limitations faced by communities can be mitigated by more linking up to external support in transition contexts.

Lack of systematic support by external actors in community-based protection. There is increasing recognition by all actors involved, including peacekeeping missions, that the protection of civilians requires complementary efforts of a wide range of actors and interventions that link up and build on communities' own actions as well as subnational, national, regional and global diplomatic and advocacy actions. This consensus, however, is undermined by the focus on state authorities assuming protective responsibilities and shaped by an optimistic view of conflict dynamics. This is further compounded by the reluctance of certain actors to shift approaches towards more proactive and preventative protection approaches. As a result, when PoC capacities reduce in transition settings due to peacekeeping missions drawing down, humanitarian organisations are not necessarily there to pick up these functions and mitigate PoC gaps. In both Darfur and South Kivu, there was an attempt at

gearing up capacities to mitigate PoC gaps, including by funding Nonviolent Peaceforce to implement programming to prevent and reduce violence against civilians, through work with communities and other direct protection strategies.

Transition contexts need greater complementarity, collaboration and coordination through a more diverse ecosystem for PoC. With limited PoC capacities in transition contexts, there is an urgency to bring together these limited capacities through more collaborative, complementary and coordinated approaches to mitigate PoC gaps. The transition contexts studied showed that it was not always clear who was best placed to carry out specific elements of PoC, and different actors had conflicting perceptions of what peacekeeping missions contributed to safety and security. Challenges with peacekeeping missions' ability to support community-based and civilian-centred protection approaches highlight the opportunity that PoC partnerships with non-mission actors, especially local and national civil society and specialised international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), could bring to PoC in transition contexts. While coordination forums existed they did not automatically lead to more strategic collaboration prior to and after peacekeeping-mission drawdowns. Unsurprisingly given their mandate, large multi-dimensional peacekeeping missions were repeatedly perceived as carrying extensive political clout with host governments and to a certain extent with other parties to the conflict. As peacekeeping missions draw down, they not only lose individual staff capacities and technical expertise for engaging politically on PoC issues, they also lose this political clout (see Gorur, 2025). This should inform how the UN repositions itself post-transition to ensure it retains capacity to engage on the political dimensions of PoC, with considerations given to options to reassert this role and maintain political capital, including through its relationship to the UNSC.

Conclusion and recommendations

Transition contexts present opportunities and challenges to mitigate PoC gaps as seen in South Kivu, Darfur and South Sudan. In the three contexts studied, the UN Country Teams, including the peacekeeping missions, approached transition contexts as opportunities to hand back and reassert the duty of national state authorities to protect their civilians. This in itself has been an obstacle to mitigate PoC gaps.

The three transition contexts studied also demonstrate that actors that could contribute to mitigating the PoC gaps are not always prepared to gear up and take on additional roles, as PoC capacities diminish when peacekeeping missions draw down. This includes state authorities as well as humanitarian, protection and peacebuilding actors.

Collaboration across actors working to mitigate PoC gaps in transition contexts is not always effective. While PoC partnerships, including with peacekeeping missions, are becoming more common, peacekeeping missions should consider their power and approach to ensure these partnerships lead to greater complementarity and the right division of roles and collaboration to lead to better protection outcomes.

Ultimately, challenges will only be addressed and opportunities will only be capitalised upon if all actors and institutions involved are honest about the nature of these transition contexts. Current narratives, policies and frameworks that exist around transitions are premised on the basis of a normatively positive process, one that constitutes a reduction in international support and engagement because of an improvement in the context and an increase in the will and capacities of national actors to take over. Without reconfiguring transition planning and preparedness away from normatively positive processes and accounting for the reality of challenges and needs, transition contexts will continue to suffer critical gaps and fail to engage the right partners to mitigate these.

This study highlights the potential to turn opportunities into realities and tackle the challenges and obstacles to better mitigate PoC gaps in transition contexts. To do so, the diversity of actors working to prevent and reduce violence and mitigate PoC gaps should consider the following recommendations:

- Transition contexts call for better preparedness and planning including planning for worst-case scenarios and having clearer and more collective PoC strategies.
- Such strategies should consider where opportunities to leverage existing capacities exist.
- More powerful actors such as peacekeeping missions and UN funds, programmes and agencies should consider carefully how they account for power dynamics enabling more equal collaboration, complementarity and partnerships through rethinking how they interact and work with others.
- Transition contexts call for the humanitarian sector, including UN funds, programmes and agencies, to rebalance protection work towards the prevention and reduction of violence against civilians, engaging with protection threats actively, and proactively seeking to reduce protection risks.
- Investment in better practice on community-based and civilian-centred protection is needed, including to ensure more sustainable interventions that build on the agency, strategies and ownership of communities for their own protection.
- The UN Country Teams including the Resident and Humanitarian Coordinators in transition contexts must consider how to make the most use of their political capital to engage on the more political side of PoC and complement the efforts of other actors to mitigate PoC gaps.

1 Introduction

1.1 Background and rationale

When peacekeeping missions draw down or exit, this carries significant implications for PoC due to the significance of peacekeeping missions for PoC. In recent years, a number of peacekeeping missions have drawn down and exited, driven by decisions outside of their control, even as conflict dynamics continue to fuel violence against civilians. Whether driven by politics in the UNSC, politics at national level or the liquidity crisis, a reduction in the presence, footprint and activities of peacekeeping missions can lead to critical PoC gaps and require significant adaptation of the wider ecosystem of actors that could contribute to reducing risks to civilians' safety. Recent drawdowns in South Kivu, DRC, and in South Sudan, as well as the historical exit from Darfur, Sudan, provide opportunities to examine these issues.

Transition contexts in South Kivu (DRC), South Sudan and Darfur (Sudan) are characterised by increases in the intensity and complexity of conflicts and violence. They are also characterised by systematic breaches of International Humanitarian Law (IHL) by those conducting hostilities, including state actors, raising significant questions over who is willing and able to protect civilians in conflict. Transition contexts are also affected by a sharp decline in humanitarian and peacebuilding funding, reducing available resources for these actors, and affecting their presence and ability to adapt and shift their practice during transition (see Davies et al., 2025; Global Protection Cluster, 2026).

This report focuses on PoC in transition contexts. It examines PoC gaps in transition contexts and explores how different actors try to mitigate these gaps. This report is not strictly focused on UN peacekeeping transitions and UN transitions, as outlined in UN policy frameworks and on which extensive research exists (Forti, 2019; 2020; 2021; Lilly, 2021; Levine-Spound and MacClinchy, 2022b; CIVIC, 2023 Kahombo et al., 2024; Gorur, 2025; DRC Conflict Sensitivity Hub, 2026; Druet, 2026). Instead, it considers transitional states more broadly, including the role that peacekeeping missions and their drawdown plays in shaping PoC in transition contexts. This reflects the fact that peacekeeping missions occupy a significant space in protection ecosystems. When peacekeeping missions draw down or exit in situations of ongoing conflict and violence against civilians, the vacuum they leave exacerbates protection risks to civilians. This study argues that a more holistic understanding of protection actors, actions and relationships throughout the cycle of a conflict can help pre-empt and manage the changing protection landscapes in transition contexts. As such, this study adopts a protection ecosystem approach, focusing on the diversity of actors contributing to PoC, their actions and interactions. The report focuses on the implications for PoC of peacekeeping-mission drawdowns and the role of a diverse range of actors seeking to prevent and reduce risks of violence in transition contexts.

1.2 Scope, terminology and methodological approach

1.2.1 Scope and terminology

The study focuses on three transition contexts: South Kivu (DRC) following the UN Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo's (MONUSCO) exit in June 2024; South Sudan, as a result of the UN Mission in South Sudan's (UNMISS) redesignating PoC sites, drawing down troops and transferring control over to the national government from 2020 until the present, as well as the rapid drawdown in 2026 due to the liquidity crisis; and Darfur (Sudan) following the exit of the African Union–UN Hybrid Operation in Darfur (UNAMID) in 2020.

This study specifically examines transition contexts resulting from peacekeeping missions drawing down or exiting. The terminology of peacekeeping missions drawing down or exiting is used intentionally as not all of the transition contexts would be formally defined as UN transitions (e.g. PoC site redesignation in South Sudan). This also reflects the intention to complement existing studies that focus on the formal process of UN transitions by stepping away from the formal process and policy frameworks that define UN transitions to focus on the wider ecosystem of actors and PoC capacities.

Box 1 Transition contexts defined

For the purpose of this study, transition contexts are defined as:

> a context affected by conflict and violence where there is a significant shift in the presence, footprint and capacities of a significant PoC actor affecting PoC capacities and the way protection is experienced by civilians.

As such, the study will discuss how the PoC ecosystem evolves and adapts in relation to the presence of and subsequent withdrawal of a peacekeeping mission. The PoC ecosystem is defined by the diverse actors contributing to reducing and preventing violence against civilians as well as the ways in which they complement, collaborate and coordinate with one another. These actors can be communities, community-level actors (e.g. traditional and religious authorities, community structures such as women's trading networks), local and national civil society actors, state authorities, international non-governmental organisations (NGOs), or UN funds, programmes and agencies. These actors may define themselves as humanitarian actors, peacebuilding actors, human rights actors or protection actors. The focus here is mainly on actors who define themselves as humanitarian, protection or peacebuilding actors.

The study focuses on transition contexts resulting from peacekeeping missions drawing down or exiting where conflict dynamics and violence against civilians persist. Not included are instances where peacekeeping missions have drawn down and exited driven by improvements in the overall protection

environment and conflict dynamics, and contexts that are transitioning out of violent conflict. As such, this study looks at transition contexts where PoC actions remain critical post peacekeeping missions drawing down or exiting.

The study examines how a diverse set of actors seeks to mitigate PoC gaps in transition contexts. Recognising that state authorities hold the ultimate responsibility for the protection of civilians, PoC as a term is used in the most literal sense of the protection of civilians as set out in IHL, as well as to refer to the desired outcomes of specific practices that aim to reduce violence against civilians. Such practices, while they should, may not always be included in what actors may understand to be humanitarian protection activities, which have tended to respond to the consequences of violence, rather than seeking to reduce immediate threats of violence towards civilians (see Davies et al., 2025). This is further compounded by the concept of PoC too often being perceived as the remit of peacekeeping missions, where state authorities are unwilling or unable to protect civilians. While peacekeeping missions play a unique role in PoC (due to the mandate that they may use force to protect civilians),[1] a wide range of actors including national and local civil society, human rights, peacebuilding and humanitarian organisations all have a role to play (see Davies et al., 2025).

1.2.2 Methodological approach

The study focuses primarily on South Kivu as the main transition context examined. In DRC, eight focus group discussions were conducted with 80 conflict-affected individuals in Kalehe territory, South Kivu, alongside 42 key informant interviews with MONUSCO staff, protection, peacebuilding actors (local, national and international) and community-based actors (including local and traditional authorities). More than 50 research reports and documents on MONUSCO's drawdown and DRC's protection environment were also reviewed.

South Sudan is the second main transition context examined in this study. In South Sudan, nine interviews were carried out with 12 humanitarian, protection and peacebuilding actors, researchers, UNMISS staff and the UN Department for Political and Peacekeeping Affairs (DPPA), as well as a review of over 10 reports and documents.

Darfur was used as a smaller legacy case study of a transition context; five key informant interviews with six individuals were conducted with humanitarian and protection actors, researchers and former UNAMID staff, as well as a review of more than 10 research reports on UNAMID's exit and the protection context. In addition to country-specific data collection, seven interviews were conducted with key organisations and researchers at the global level, alongside a review of more than 30 key documents and relevant literature.

1 The PoC mandate in UN peacekeeping is defined as: 'Without prejudice to the primary responsibility of the host state, integrated and coordinated activities by all civilian and uniformed mission components to prevent, deter or respond to threats of physical violence against civilians, within the mission's capabilities and areas of deployment, through the use of all necessary means, up to and including deadly force' (UN DPO, 2020).

1.3 Limitations

The study experienced a number of limitations and challenges:

- The impact of MONUSCO's exit from South Kivu was challenging to assess due to differences across locations in South Kivu in line with its presence and deployment pattern.
- Multiple significant events shifted the protection environment in South Kivu making it hard to distinguish cause and effect across them, including MONUSCO's exit in 2024, the loss of United States Agency for International Development (USAID) funding in 2025, and the take-over of Alliance Fleuve Congo/Mouvement du 23 mars (AFC/M23) of parts of South Kivu's territory in 2025.
- The effectiveness of Unarmed Civilian Protection (UCP)[2] in transition settings was difficult to assess given that UCP interventions have only recently been implemented in South Kivu. In Sudan, where UCP interventions have existed for a longer time, the limited resources dedicated to the initiative negatively affected our ability to collect sufficient data.
- The study does not include government or institutional donor perspectives due to resource limitations.
- In South Sudan and Sudan, while primary data collection was conducted with peacebuilding and humanitarian actors as well as mission staff, the study predominantly relied on secondary data to relay the experience of affected communities. The study was therefore reliant on what existed in reports and documentation as well as related through interviews with other actors.
- Research in South Sudan was made challenging due to targeted respondents being overwhelmed by multiple crises and therefore unavailable for interviews: escalating violence in the country; a funding crisis for UNMISS; climate-change related flooding in the north-eastern part of the country, in the Greater Upper Nile region; and the ongoing funding crisis in the aid sector more broadly.

2 UCP is defined as 'a method of civilian-to-civilian protection and civilian self-protection that seeks to reduce physical violence in areas of armed conflict by creating space(s) for peace' (Ridden and Bliesemann de Guevara, 2023: 62). UCP is 'the practice of civilians protecting other civilians in situations of imminent, ongoing, or recent violent conflict. It involves international civilians protecting local civilians, local civilians protecting each other, and even local civilians protecting international or non-local civilians. The practice of UCP is nonviolent and generally nonpartisan' (Oldenhuis et al., 2021).

2 The characteristics of transition contexts in South Kivu, South Sudan and Darfur

2.1 The significance of peacekeeping-mission drawdowns for how PoC is experienced in transition contexts

There are several facets that make the drawdown of peacekeeping missions particularly significant to PoC in transition contexts.

2.1.1 Peacekeeping-mission drawdowns mean less PoC capacity

Peacekeeping missions are a significant actor in PoC primarily because of their UNSC mandate, and corresponding size, resources and operational modalities. Where they are present, they represent a large proportion of PoC capacities. As a result, their presence shapes the PoC landscape in transition contexts. For example, in South Kivu, as MONUSCO exited at the end of June 2024, seven military bases and 15 facilities either transferred to national authorities or closed, with those transferred to national authorities lacking resources required to make these operational (MONUSCO, 2024a). At its peak, MONUSCO had 5,000 UN peacekeepers across 32 military bases and 550 civilian staff in South Kivu (MONUSCO, 2024b). While not solely for South Kivu or its PoC mandate, MONUSCO's budget in 2023/2024 amounted to more than $1 billion (UNGA, 2023). The same year, the DRC Humanitarian Response Plan required $2.25 billion, but the humanitarian response received less than US$1 billion or 42.5% of this requirement, of which $72.2 million was allocated to protection (OCHA, 2023). At the time of MONUSCO's departure, 13 protection organisations were formally active in the protection sector in South Kivu (OCHA, 2024).[3] Similar comparisons can be made in South Sudan and in Darfur when UNAMID drew down.

When peacekeeping missions draw down and exit in contexts where violence and conflict continue to result in significant risks to civilians, this leads to significantly less PoC capacity, and the need to reinvest and gear up PoC capacity through other means and other actors. Ultimately, the way peacekeeping missions are present and withdraw creates significant PoC gaps that are often challenging to mitigate.

3 In addition to organisations working specifically on protection, there are organisations actively working on peacebuilding in South Kivu. This is important to note as peacebuilding efforts can also contribute to PoC. However, there is a lack of data on the size of peacebuilding capacities and funding in DRC. The UN reports the Peacebuilding Fund has invested around $97 million in DRC between 2009 and February 2026, which could indicate a sizable peacebuilding effort in DRC overall, although not necessarily in South Kivu (Peacebuilding Fund, 2026).

Peacekeeping missions are also unique in how they implement their PoC mandate given that they are the only actor with national armies and police that are legally mandated to use force to protect civilians.[4] Their presence is often equated with low national capacities to protect civilians including through the use of force. While other protection actors such as local, national and international NGOs at times provide unarmed physical protection, including through protection by presence and protective accompaniment, these modes of action tend to be adopted by a minority of organisations and are not standard practice.

2.1.2 Operational implications of peacekeeping-mission drawdown

The presence of peacekeeping missions can have an unintentional substitution effect on the role and capacities of other actors, including operational capacities and protection focus. When peacekeeping missions draw down, they can leave behind significant capacity gaps including operational and logistical ones (see Gorur, 2025). Peacebuilding and humanitarian actors that can contribute to PoC may rely directly or indirectly on the logistical capacities of peacekeeping missions for their own operations. This carries implications for maintaining and gearing up PoC capacities when peacekeeping missions draw down and exit.

While some actors had varied reliance on MONUSCO's logistical and operational support, interviewees systematically highlighted that their capacity to intervene in South Kivu was greatly affected by the loss of logistical and security capacities that MONUSCO used to provide (also see DRC Conflict Sensitivity Hub, 2024). Indeed, interviews in DRC highlighted that organisations deprioritised certain operational capacities, such as medical evacuations, that had been facilitated by MONUSCO. When MONUSCO left South Kivu, this affected the ability of certain organisations to be operationally present in areas affected by violence. Similarly, given MONUSCO's extensive capacity to work on demobilisation, disarmament and reintegration (DDR), interviewees related that organisations that would typically be involved in this work– such as the UN Children's Fund, UNICEF – arguably had less standing capacity in-country on DDR as a result.

Some interviewees mentioned the loss of physical protection for local civil society actors, human rights defenders and journalists as a result of MONUSCO's exit from South Kivu. Indeed, MONUSCO played a significant role in protecting these actors, including facilitating their relocation when necessary. Without MONUSCO present in South Kivu, these actors felt less able to engage in monitoring, reporting and advocacy, including during the period after MONUSCO's exit and before the AFC/M23 arrival. The DRC Conflict Sensitivity Hub in South Kivu had noted in 2024 before the arrival of AFC/M23 that local authorities, civil society actors and human rights defenders had become increasingly hesitant in

4 Despite this mandate, the most frequent grievance of communities has been found to be peacekeepers' inaction and ineffectiveness in a moment of crisis where civilians are faced with violence (Mura and Saade, 2025).

addressing security actors and asking them for accountability in the absence of MONUSCO; at the same time, security actors reportedly became more defensive and reticent to accept responsibility for their actions (DRC Conflict Sensitivity Hub, 2024:13).

In South Sudan, UNMISS's presence has also guided where humanitarian organisations establish their presence. As one interviewee highlighted, 'humanitarian actors have over-relied on mission support'; according to interviewees, humanitarian organisations have tended to concentrate on easily accessible areas due to the presence of UNMISS. Additionally, UNMISS's withdrawal from managing the PoC sites led to a withdrawal of humanitarian operations that were reportedly encouraged to move away so that people would not stay in the sites. Given the protection gap that UNMISS's withdrawal potentially created within the sites, the presence of humanitarian and protection actors would have been warranted.

Finally, peacekeeping missions have tended to view PoC as within their remit in contexts where state authorities are unwilling or unable to protect civilians (see Lilly, 2021). This is a view shared by some humanitarian protection actors who focus on other elements of protection as a result (Davies et al., 2025). While not specific to DRC, South Sudan or Sudan, these views have led to PoC capacity too often being held mainly by peacekeeping missions, with limited PoC capacity outside of peacekeeping missions, making it harder to gear up PoC capacity as peacekeeping missions draw down.

2.1.3 The financial cliff in transition contexts

How PoC capacities are resourced before, during and after missions draw down affects the ability of other actors to gear up their operational and PoC capacities in transition contexts. The literature on peacekeeping-mission drawdown refers to this as the financial cliff (Lilly, 2021; Levine-Spound and MacClinchy, 2022a).[5] Peacekeeping missions are funded through assessed contributions that are mandatory payments set by the UN General Assembly, that member states must pay based on their national wealth. In theory, this means that the PoC capacities of peacekeeping missions benefit from predictable funding. When peacekeeping missions draw down and exit, this funding cannot be transferred to non-mission actors, leaving a significant gap in available funding to resource alternative PoC capacities. While national governments have other avenues to finance their increasing PoC responsibilities as part of peacekeeping missions drawing down, UN funds, programmes and agencies as well as NGOs and civil society actors rely on voluntary funding streams.[6]

5 UNAMID's exit exposed the financial cliff, as Romen explains that finding ways to sustain investments both material and in people is one of the main challenges with mission transitions, reflecting that humanitarian and development actors cannot match peacekeeping operations' extensive annual budgets (Romen, 2025). For Romen, this not only calls for more innovative financing but also requires the systematic inclusion of all actors including civil society, INGOs and academia alongside the more usual suspects (ibid.).

6 According to Levine-Spound and MacClinchy, 'as has been demonstrated in other contexts, voluntary funding from member states for UNCT [UN Country Team], INGO, and civil society actors does not necessarily increase when peacekeeping missions end and may in fact decrease, or cease altogether. This challenge, referred to as "the financial cliff" in peacekeeping transitions, requires integrated, longer-term financing strategies based on identified gaps developed by missions and other partners, including international financial institutions' (2022a: 25).

In DRC, the transition context suffered a chronic lack of funding. Financial planning to support transfer of responsibilities from MONUSCO to the government and the rest of the UN Country Team was absent and unclear (see also DRC Conflict Sensitivity Hub, 2026). As one interviewee put it, 'the government was waiting for funding to come from international actors; international actors were waiting for funding to come from donors; and none came'. Indeed, there were significant delays and only very partial disbursement of government budget to support new protection responsibilities in South Kivu.[7]

Across the three transition contexts, there have been some attempts at mitigating this funding cliff. In Sudan, the State Liaison Function (SLF) was a mechanism to deploy staff and financial resources, among others, from UNAMID to UN funds, programmes and agencies, to try to mitigate capacity gaps on protection. In addition, the Sudan Financing Platform's Multi-Partner Trust Fund also acted as a strategic framework to raise funding and guide cooperation at the programmatic level with protection as one focus area (Gregory, 2024). In DRC, the Peacebuilding Fund[8] and the country-based pooled funds made specific allocations to support protection actors to increase their capacity. In South Kivu, this was specifically geared towards supporting community-based protection work including but not uniquely through funding Nonviolent Peaceforce (NP) as an organisation that focuses on PoC. The Peacebuilding Fund is also seen as a key enabler of maintaining and supporting MONUSCO's early-warning and early-response system in the Tanganyika province following MONUSCO's exit (also see CIVIC, 2023).[9]

While these efforts have supported some intentional handover of protection activities, evidence suggests they have failed to prevent the feared financial cliff edge. Moreover, in recent years the issue of funding for PoC in transition contexts has taken on new dimensions. First, peacekeeping missions have themselves experienced a liquidity crisis,[10] forcing them to rapidly draw down and reduce their footprint. In South Sudan, this has translated to UNMISS drawing down from 28 to 18 sites in early 2026, with significant implications for its ability to carry out its PoC mandate (see Camelli, 2026). Second, the peacebuilding and humanitarian sectors have been greatly affected by institutional donors' budget

7 With the taking over of Bukavu, the provincial capital of South Kivu and the ongoing war with AFC/M23, government attention to financially supporting its new PoC responsibilities, transferred back from MONUSCO, were further undermined in South Kivu. This was compounded by the provincial government having to displace to Uvira, given the occupation of Bukavu by AFC/M23.

8 According to CIVIC, 'the 2013 Policy advises UN leadership to leverage possible funding sources such as the World Bank and the PBF [Peacebuilding Fund] to fill potential gaps' while recognising that 'a decade of implementation has not been without significant challenges' (2023: 10).

9 Although CIVIC (2023) notes that the Peacebuilding Fund is unable to meet demands for funding.

10 The failure of some large financial contributors to make their mandatory payments to the UN, in particular the United States and China, has led to a liquidity crisis for peacekeeping missions. See Camelli (2026) for more on the consequences of the liquidity crisis for peacekeeping missions.

cuts.[11] For example, in DRC, USAID represented almost 65% of the funding for the Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan in 2024 (FTS, 2024). This has greatly affected humanitarian actors and their ability to reduce, prevent and respond to protection risks in DRC.

2.1.4 Limited space, capital and incentive to drive a wider and parallel engagement on the PoC implications of peacekeeping-mission drawdown

Transition contexts experiencing the drawdown of peacekeeping missions tend to be significantly shaped by how the drawdown happens. In these instances, the transitional nature of the contexts is significantly shaped by peacekeeping missions' own processes, which tend to take up significant political capital from national governments, and occupy the limited resources of UN Country Teams, INGOs and, to a certain extent, national and local civil society. Generally speaking, peacekeeping missions approach their drawdown and exit within the responsibilities of their mandates and internal policies, focusing on handing over and transferring functions and responsibilities back to state authorities, which they are there to support, as well as UN funds, programmes and agencies where state authorities continue to need support. This is the case even when the capacity of state authorities to meet PoC needs might not be there and where states are known to be a threat to PoC.

A major finding from MONUSCO's exit from South Kivu was how much space, time and resources were dedicated by all actors to MONUSCO's own exit process, leaving little space for alternative forums or approaches to engage on the implications of this exit for PoC. While there were some criticisms of MONUSCO approaching its exit in a top-down manner, including by unilaterally setting the agenda, this is also a reflection of how other actors in the wider response decided to dedicate their resources. Interviews indicate that actors prioritised engaging with MONUSCO's own exit process, which they saw as leading to potential opportunities to access funding. As a result, non-mission actors tried to fit within and influence MONUSCO's own process rather than driving their own parallel or potentially alternative ways to approach PoC without MONUSCO. Similarly, as UNAMID drew down from Darfur, it shaped the agenda in ways that focused heavily on UNAMID's own responsibilities to hand over and transfer PoC responsibilities with a focus on UN funds, programmes and agencies as, well as informing the UN Integrated Transition Assistance Mission in Sudan (UNITAMS)'s[12] future role vis-à-vis the newly drafted government national protection plan.

As a result, peacekeeping missions' drawdown and exit forced a predominantly UN- and state-centric approach to transition with little space, time and capital dedicated to a wider discussion on what PoC could look like without a peacekeeping mission with a more diverse set of actors.

11 A report from the Global Protection Cluster outlines how significant funding cuts have affected protection work in the last year with the protection sector experiencing a drop of 28% in funding (Global Protection Cluster, 2026).

12 UNITAMS followed from UNAMID as a UN political special mission in Sudan and was the way the UN redefined its presence and role in Sudan post-UNAMID. UNITAMS had mainly a peacebuilding and development focus, with a mandate to support the national government's own PoC strategy through capacity-strengthening.

2.2 The continued need for PoC in transition contexts in South Kivu, Darfur and South Sudan

The common characteristic of transition contexts in South Kivu, Darfur and South Sudan is that peacekeeping-mission drawdowns and exit were not linked to a reduction of PoC needs, a trend across all peacekeeping missions drawing down in recent years.[13] All were informed in some ways by significant turning points, which increased expectations from the international community that improvement in the overall context could come about: democratic elections in DRC; the signing of the Juba Peace Agreement and the change of political regime in Sudan; and the signing of the 2018 peace agreement in South Sudan, which saw the establishment of joint security forces.[14] Unfortunately, while these significant turning points had raised expectations to prevent further conflict and reduce violence against civilians, each context experienced worsening conflict dynamics and an increase in attacks against civilians. As a result, transition contexts in South Kivu, Darfur and South Sudan were all characterised by a continued, and often escalating, need for PoC capacities.

2.2.1 Political and financial drivers of peacekeeping-mission drawdown

Drivers of peacekeeping drawdown and exit in South Kivu, Darfur and South Sudan are diverse, characterised by their political nature, and most often lead to timeframes that are out of the control of peacekeeping missions in country. In the three contexts, they tended to result from a mix of funding pressures from UN member states, politics in the UNSC and dwindling host country consent. Indeed, according to Levine-Spound and MacClinchy, 'transition decisions in the UNSC are often the result of intensely political processes and driven by many considerations, including budgetary concerns, that are disconnected from threats against civilians' (2022a: 9). Globally, geopolitical tensions and a crisis of multilateralism have eroded political, financial and operational support for the UN peace and security architecture as a whole, including peacekeeping operations. This has included pressures from some UNSC member states to reduce the peacekeeping budget (Security Council Report, 2026; also see Lilly, 2021). Since 2025 the UN liquidity crisis and ensuing funding cuts have resulted in a rapid drawdown in the presence and footprint of peacekeeping missions. UNMISS was one of the worst affected missions. From February 2026, funding cuts led to the rapid closure of UNMISS operating bases and field offices, reducing its operational footprint by roughly a third from 28 to 18 sites, without the political or transitional support that usually accompany planned drawdown.

UNAMID's transition started being discussed in UNSC as early as 2014 (see Forti, 2019: 6) with renewed attention in 2017 as pressure to cut UN peacekeeping budget increased (Forti, 2019; Kleinfeld, 2021;

13 This is referred to as peacekeeping transitions during crisis or transitions in crisis by Druet (2026).

14 The Joint Forces were established under the 2018 Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS), which sought to combine troops from both the South Sudan People's Defence Forces (SSPDF) and the Sudan People's Liberation Army–in Opposition (SPLA-IO), many of whom belong to South Sudan's largest ethnic groups, the Dinka and Nuer respectively. Decades-long rivalry between the leadership of the groups was the main trigger for the 2013 conflict and the ensuing ethnopolitical violence. The objective of the Joint Forces was to create a unified military force with the view to prevent further civil war.

Gregory, 2024). Pressure on UNAMID to exit Darfur also came from Sudan's successive governments, which resulted in the end of its mandate in December 2020 and ultimate exit in July 2021 (Kleinfeld, 2021). Kumar argues that 'UNAMID's exit did not emerge from a context of peace or progress towards conflict resolution in Darfur [...] [but] was essentially the outcome of the reflection that keeping the mission on the ground would not change the situation' (Kumar, 2021).

In DRC, political pressures came from member states in the UNSC that pushed for a reduction in peacekeeping budgets over the years, as well as from the DRC government as part of a popular election campaign promising MONUSCO's departure from the country. According to Kahombo et al.: 'it was the anti-MONUSCO demonstrations that prompted the DRC to request a revision of [the Joint Transition Plan]' (2024: 19).[15] This revision ultimately led to an accelerated exit from South Kivu in the first six months of 2024 (since MONUSCO's exit from South Kivu, the DRC government has paused plans for further drawdowns).

2.2.2 Shifting conflict dynamics and the resulting security vacuum

Partly due to the financial and political drivers of drawdowns but also due to worsening conflict dynamics, transition contexts in South Kivu, Darfur and South Sudan are characterised by high PoC needs, and often worsening security vacuums driving PoC gaps. According to Center for Civilians in Conflict (CIVIC), accelerated exits 'can compound risks of insecurity and governance challenges in acute ways, driving overlapping humanitarian and protection crises, which can reverse years of progress towards peace consolidation' as illustrated by the withdrawal of UNAMID in 2020 and UNITAMs in 2023 (2023: 1) (also see Lilly, 2021). Levine-Spound and MacClinchy (2022a) point to the 'human costs of poorly managed or premature departures or reconfigurations', referring to UNAMID's withdrawal from Darfur, warning against 'transitions [...] driven by political imperatives rather than the successful completion of benchmarks that measure evolutions in the protection of civilians [...] context' (2022a: 1). Similarly, the redesignation and transfer of responsibility of the last PoC site in Malakal in South Sudan in 2026, as well as the rapid drawdown of offices and bases, has taken place amid escalating violence, which some predict is at the brink of relapsing into civil war (Gaston and Nickel, 2026).

In Darfur, communities protected by UNAMID expressed their fear of the security vacuum to come following the drawdown, protesting against UNAMID's closure (Mamiya et al., 2020; Forti, 2021; Kleinfeld, 2021; Gregory, 2024). Similarly, civil society sent a petition to Sudan's Prime Minister Hamdok in May 2020 requesting an extension of UNAMID's mandate (Forti, 2021). The risk of a security vacuum as UNAMID withdrew was known, as African Union–UN reports at the time indicated 'the absence of an adequate presence of protective mechanisms and the inability of the Government of Sudan to ensure its protection function' (quoted in Forti, 2019: 14; see also Kleinfeld, 2021).

15 For more on DRC's growing anti-MONUSCO sentiment, see Bauma and Miviri (2025) and Levine-Spound and Jorgensen (2023).

The drawdown of missions from entire areas inevitably affects conflict dynamics and the PoC capacities to respond, which is often referred to as the security cliff (see Lilly, 2021; Gorur, 2025). It can change the behaviours of armed actors, and sometimes embolden them (Druet, 2026), as it inadvertently suggests to them that the international community has less stake in the conflict, in addition to the loss of the deterrent effect, visibility, and monitoring of the conduct of armed actors. In South Kivu, the departure of MONUSCO led to an almost immediate increase in the presence and activity of armed groups and self-defence groups. Communities interviewed in Kalehe reported that armed actors used the opportunity of MONUSCO's exit to leave the forest and establish themselves within communities. Interviews with local civil society actors in South Kivu also pointed out that many communities felt unsafe and reorganised themselves in self-defence groups. Local civil society actors and communities reported increased mobilisation of youth and recruitment of children, as well as increased circulation of small arms as a result. At the same time, the government failed to step in to fill the security vacuum left by MONUSCO's exit. This initial security vacuum in the first six months was further compounded by the worsening conflict with AFC/M23, with the armed group eventually taking control of large parts of South Kivu from early 2025.

In Darfur, for one interviewee, UNAMID's exit further contributed to a security vacuum and worsening security situation by taking away 'a concrete tangible symbol of the interest of the broader international community and powerful countries wanting to see peace in Sudan'. In other words, UNAMID leaving (arguably prematurely) may have sent the signal that the international community and member states no longer had a stake in peace in Darfur. Violence increased rapidly following UNAMID's departure with a major attack on internally displaced people (IDPs) in Krinding camp in West Darfur only two weeks later, marking the beginning of a new chapter of conflict in Darfur.[16] According to analysis conducted by a humanitarian organisation in 2023, over 575,000 people were forced to flee escalating violence across Darfur between January 2021 and December 2022, with over a thousand people killed and close to 700 injured. Interviews and reports highlight that this turning point in the conflict dynamics in Darfur was partly missed by the UN Country Team and UNAMID during the transition, as UNAMID's withdrawal negatively affected the UN's capacity to monitor protection and human rights violations (see Forti, 2019).

In South Sudan, too, there were widespread and persistent concerns on the risks of handing control of PoC sites to national authorities in the absence of meaningful security sector reform (SSR) (Spink, 2021). Following the 2020 announcement of the closure of the sites, there were widespread protests from residents of PoC sites, many of whom perceived that critical components of the 2018 peace deal were not yet implemented, including security or governance arrangements and 'that the government was still killing its own civilians' (Craze and Pendle, 2020). These fears were understandable as the PoC sites were being handed back to authorities that had been responsible for widespread abuses against

16 According to Levine-Spound and MacClinchy, 'although this particular wave of violence cannot be directly attributed to UNAMID's withdrawal, analysts had warned that UNAMID's closure could lead to a deterioration in the security context and increased danger for civilians. A joint UN-African Union UNAMID special report in March 2020 asserted, for example, that "the fundamental conflict drivers remain unresolved and exacerbate intercommunal tensions." The report also warned that multiple actors in Darfur were continuing to commit serious human rights abuses' (2022a: 1).

civilians. UNMISS bases remained adjacent to the sites, with mobile patrols. The security situation remained tense but fragile, and while the Joint Forces did carry out arbitrary arrests and intimidation – particularly of youths perceived to be associated with gangs – fears that security services might carry out widespread abuses did not play out as they did in Darfur following UNAMID's exit.

2.2.3 Lack of planning for worst-case scenarios in transition contexts

Across DRC, Sudan and South Sudan, peacekeeping transitions were faced with rapidly changing political situations and conflict dynamics, and lacked the capacity to adapt to and account for rapidly changing contexts (see Mamiya et al., 2020, on UNAMID). In DRC, while planning for MONUSCO's exit from other provinces has been paused at the time of writing, the South Kivu withdrawal went ahead with little shift in spite of changing conflict dynamics. The security situation in South Kivu deteriorated as early as June 2024 with renewed armed group activities in low-level conflict and violence, in part due to the security vacuum left by MONUSCO's departure. In Sudan, UNAMID's transition failed to prepare UNITAMS for radical changes including the military coup in 2021. As Forti argues, 'rigid adherence to the June 2020 deadline would lead to heightened political tensions within the UNSC, limiting the body's flexibility to adapt the mission to changing conditions in Darfur and Sudan' (2019: 9; also see Forti, 2021). In South Sudan, respondents highlighted that the closure of UNMISS bases had been taking place precisely when UNMISS capacities might be required, as the security situation was significantly deteriorating.

There is a general dearth of contingency planning around worst-case scenarios in transition contexts and the roles that diverse actors should play in worst-case scenarios. This is driven by political dynamics in the UNSC and with host states, which stymy the ability of peacekeeping missions to shift gear when such scenarios materialise during drawdown. As Druet explains, 'this reflects an organisational culture that treats worst-case planning as politically uncomfortable or diplomatically counterproductive' (2026: 9). The loss of in-country political analysis and capacity that can, at the very least, act as an early-warning system for UNSC further compounds this situation in transition contexts. According to interviewees, this seems to influence the position of UN Country Teams, who too often seem reluctant to consider worst-case scenarios. Interviews in Sudan in particular report a culture of not wanting to hear and see the realities of a rapidly deteriorating security situation in Darfur, as reflected in protection actors' analysis and reports. For contingency planning to be feasible, these attitudes must shift to allow planning for worst-case scenarios.

3 Implications of the current approach to peacekeeping-mission drawdowns

3.1 The over-reliance on states taking over responsibility for PoC

As discussed, transitions traditionally took place as contexts progressed towards peace, with the expectation for host states to assume responsibility for protecting its civilians with continued support from remaining UN presence through funds, programmes and agencies. This assumption continues to drive transition planning today. However, the nature of transition contexts in South Kivu, Darfur and South Sudan would have required a significant step up by host states due to escalations in violence and the continued high PoC needs. In these three contexts, this is made more challenging for several reasons, resulting in PoC gaps.

The evidence from South Kivu, Darfur and South Sudan highlight three main challenges with relying on host states for PoC in transition contexts: their lack of capacity and lack of will to protect civilians; host states continuing to be a significant perpetrator of violence against civilians and the lack of trust civilians have in host governments' capacities and willingness to protect them; and the loss of territorial control that too often accompanies rapidly changing conflict dynamics, and which undermines host governments' ability to protect civilians in areas not under their control.

3.1.1 Lack of state capacity and will to protect civilians in transition contexts

Despite good intentions and efforts, peacekeeping missions in South Kivu, Sudan and South Sudan have struggled to shift state capacity and increase state willingness to fully take on their duty to protect their civilians. Peacekeeping missions' struggle ultimately results from the fact that states need to commit to taking these responsibilities and invest adequate resources for it. Unfortunately, and in spite of efforts, there is little that peacekeeping missions can do to incentivise them. In DRC, there were some successes in particular around SSR with regards to the professionalisation of the national army, demobilising and stopping the recruitment of children (with DRC eventually being removed from the UN list on child recruitment), as well as increasing the accountability of military commanders through due process.

While the language of a national government having the ultimate responsibility for protecting civilians is black and white in IHL, the articulation of how peacekeeping missions work towards this is not always clear beyond the transition out of armed conflict and neutralising armed groups through military support, as was the focus of MONUSCO. Less prioritisation was given, due to unwillingness on the side of the government and challenges faced by MONUSCO to do so, to work on more holistic SSR to support state authorities' duty to protect.

Peacekeeping missions can also make the mistake of prioritising efforts to increase their own capacity to protect civilians over working with state authorities to increase their capacity, especially where state authorities show a lack of willingness to invest in SSR. The short-term necessity of peacekeeping missions for protecting civilians can lead to the deprioritisation of the longer-term investment and work needed to build state capacity for PoC. As one mission staff interviewed reflected:

> Transition is not the mission's culture. [...] You are not accountable [for transition]. [...] If you work with government, you invite them to a workshop but not a real transfer of expertise. The mission is here for itself.

This is echoed in MONUSCO's 2019 *Independent Strategic Review*:

> So far MONUSCO has worked to perfect its own system, strategies and tools for the protection of civilians. This was essential to improve the response of peacekeepers to violence against local populations and save lives but has tended to diminish the primary role of State authorities in assuming their protection responsibilities and to reduce the Government's accountability as regards the protection of civilians. The innovative tools developed [...] were useful to serve and strengthen the internal functions of the Mission but have shown little success in terms of national ownership and buy-in (UNSC, 2019: 21).

Other mission staff interviewed reflected on the lack of resources and the need to prioritise the immediate physical protection of civilians over longer-term SSR and DDR work. Some agreed there was not enough of a long-term strategy, with engagement with the government being ad hoc. They also noted that SSR and DDR initiatives depend greatly on the political will of government. In the case of DRC, it was felt that the government had other priorities and little will. Mission staff agreed with these criticisms and challenges, highlighting the difficulty posed by the government's lack of capacity and political will to further invest in their own capacity (also see Nagel et al., 2021). Peacekeeping missions face a tension between securing state consent for their presence and holding states accountable for their duties to protect their citizens, including through better SSR, DDR and budget prioritisation, especially when wider pressures for drawdown are already in place.

MONUSCO had also aimed to increase the response capacity of Congolese security forces as part of its early-warning and early-response mechanisms. Through working with community security committees, MONUSCO attempted to strengthen linkages between communities, local authorities and security forces. However, the lack of systematic response by Congolese security forces meant that early response continued to rely on MONUSCO's own capacities.

As a result, armed physical protection capacities in DRC remained highly dependent on MONUSCO's own capacities rather than on an increased national capacity through longer-term protection environment-building and institutional capacity-strengthening. While recognising the complexity of its relationship with the government, one interviewee felt that MONUSCO lacked both the right culture to effectively strengthen government capacity and longer-term strategic engagement and strategy, partly

driven by annual mandate renewals. One interviewee pointed to the lack of national vision for PoC, necessary to underpin greater national responsibility and capacity for PoC, while others emphasised repeated failed SSR initiatives.

As MONUSCO drew down from South Kivu, it became clear that state authorities were not ready to take back their responsibility to protect civilians (see DRC Conflict Sensitivity Hub, 2026; Trithart, 2026). CIVIC research highlights that 'stakeholders CIVIC interviewed repeatedly raised concerns about the government's weak political commitment and anaemic institutional capacity to fulfil the state's primary responsibility to protect civilians following MONUSCO's departure' (2023: 18). Past CIVIC research and reports have also repeatedly highlighted that:

> political will for security sector reform (SSR) in the DRC is insufficient and that—alongside reinvigorated support for SSR from a variety of national and multinational stakeholders—a shift in political will is needed in order to avoid a physical protection gap post drawdown. (ibid.)

MONUSCO tried to mitigate this when drawing down by successfully identifying functions and plans to hand these to state authorities through the roadmap for South Kivu, also identifying where UN funds, programmes and agencies would continue to need to support state authorities. The handover was also costed with distinct plans and budgets for the state authorities and for UN funds, programmes and agencies. Through the exercise, it became apparent that the DRC government at both national and provincial levels had not fully comprehended the extent of MONUSCO's mandate and activities and, as interviewees related, had not fully grasped the tasks that would be handed over to national and provincial authorities as a result (also see DRC Conflict Sensitivity Hub, 2026). This points to a disconnect between the technocratic level and national political decision-making, which led to further delays in allocating and deploying budgets on time as MONUSCO left. This resulted in the government's failure to deploy the national security actors in ways that would enable them to fill the gaps left (see Kahombo et al., 2024).

MONUSCO bases transferred to the national police and army were defunct within months of the transition, due to the lack of government budget to maintain basic functions. According to some, the government lacked both financial capacities as well as the right policy framework to take over these functions (also see Levine-Spound, 2021). Similar challenges could be seen as MONUSCO exited Tanganyika in 2022; the Tanganyika provincial government took over responsibility for MONUSCO's early-warning and early-response system, renaming it the Alert Book. Although it was branded a success, the Alert Book continued to be dependent on external funding and actors to function, including relying on the UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) and the Protection Cluster. The Peacebuilding Fund was a key enabler in maintaining funding to the system but eventually the Alert Book needed to be funded through provincial or national budgets, which never came to pass (also see CIVIC, 2023).

There is a difficult tension in transition contexts between using shifting PoC capacities following peacekeeping-mission drawdown as an opportunity for state authorities to show their capacity, and

the actual willingness of states to reclaim their protective responsibilities. This was the case in Sudan as UNAMID exited Darfur: with a transitional government in place, the UNSC and to a larger extent the UN Country Team positioned themselves with the hope that the newly drafted national protection plan from the transitional government could be a shift to state responsibility for PoC. UNITAMS was then mandated by the UNSC to support the government to implement its national protection plan for the protection of civilians. However, as a humanitarian actor interviewed reflected, this national plan was 'poorly prepared, completely unrealistic and illusionary'. Similarly, Mamiya et al. point out that 'the strategy lacks key details [...] and raises concerns that the good intentions of its drafters may not be realised on the ground' (2020: 22). Unfortunately, as UNAMID withdrew from Darfur, the state effectively still lacked capacity to protect civilians and had yet to show its willingness to do so (Forti, 2019; 2021; Mamiya et al., 2020).

UNITAMS's mandate reflected a certain 'fatigue' from member states with the situation in Sudan. It also reflected a decision from member states to align with Sudan's new transition government's desires (see also Forti, 2021; Gregory, 2024). UNAMID's transition exposes a critical tension, namely 'a gray zone for the UN in protecting civilians in transition settings' (Forti, 2021: 12). As Forti (2021:12–13) argues, 'in mandating the mission's exit, the Security Council was implicitly tolerating a certain level of violence against civilians and increasing the risk of a security vacuum in Darfur after December 2020' in order 'to support the host state and encourage stronger national ownership over protection'.

As a result, UNITAMS also lacked the right investment in the right protection capacity with 'one P4 [low management role] doing protection of civilians among other responsibilities for the five Darfur states sitting in the provincial capital' (Interview with former mission staff) (also see Human Rights Watch, 2020). With a government that continued to refuse to engage on PoC issues, the departure of UNAMID led to the UN losing its leverage to engage politically on PoC (Forti, 2021). In the case of Sudan, unfortunately, the hope that transition contexts could be an opportunity to see more state responsibility for PoC diminished rapidly and eventually led to renewed violence against civilians.

3.1.2 State as perpetrator of violence against civilians and lack of trust by civilians in state protection

A second major challenge observed in South Kivu, Sudan and South Sudan was that national security actors and allied armed groups continue to be significant perpetrators of violence against civilians. As the UNSC reported in March 2024, the Armed Forces of the DRC (Forces armées de la République Démocratique du Congo; FARDC) were responsible for 152 violations in conflict-affected areas, and the Congolese National Police for 67 violations (2024).

This links closely with the second major challenge of relying on state authorities to mitigate the PoC gaps in transition contexts. The lack of capacity of national forces to protect civilians in transition contexts is further compounded by the lack of trust from communities. In DRC, communities from certain ethnic groups were vocal during discussions on MONUSCO's exit from South Kivu that their only option would be to re-arm as they saw national forces as a threat rather than a protective force.

Similarly, in Darfur, the plan from the peace agreement to establish 20,000 troops as a national protection unit was met with resistance from IDPs due to the inclusion of the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) – formed from the remnants of the Janjaweed militias – who carried out widespread abuses and caused the displacement of most IDPs in the region (IPI et al., 2021; Kleinfeld, 2021). These fears have materialised, with the RSF carrying out widespread targeted attacks and egregious abuses against civilians.

In South Sudan, too, there were widespread and persistent concerns about the risks of handing control of PoC sites to national authorities. Following the 2020 announcement of the closure of the sites, there were mass protests from site residents, many of whom perceived that critical components of the 2018 peace deal were not yet implemented, including security or governance arrangements and 'that the government was still killing its own civilians' (Craze and Pendle, 2020). These fears were understandable as the PoC sites were being handed back to authorities that had been responsible for widespread abuses against civilians. In Bentiu, the county commissioner appointed in the lead-up to the redesignation of the PoC sites was known to have participated, at the height of the conflict, in mass atrocities against the Nuer, the majority ethnic group residing in Bentiu PoC site. Joint Forces appointed to oversee security in the PoC sites also came from the same armed groups responsible for carrying out widespread atrocities.

3.1.3 State responsibility for PoC when states lose control over territories in transition contexts

Finally, relying on state authorities to mitigate PoC gaps in transition contexts can be ineffective when these transition contexts continue to be characterised by fast-changing conflict dynamics.

Indeed, in South Kivu, state authorities are no longer in control of parts of the territory. While this is beyond the control of peacekeeping missions, the rest of the UN Country Team and other protection and peacebuilding actors, this is not an unusual pattern in eastern DRC. As such, planning to mitigate PoC gaps in transition contexts should call for a more diverse approach, planning for the eventuality of seeing state authorities losing control over parts of their territory. In DRC, by focusing on handing over to government and integrating protection systems into government ones, the transition did not have contingency plans for an armed group take over.[17] Given the dynamics of armed group presence in eastern DRC, it seems wishful thinking to concentrate all efforts on government institutions in the transition process. As a result, when the AFC/M23 took over large parts of South Kivu, it left communities with few protection mechanisms. Concentrating efforts on state institutions and responsibilities in the transition undermined a more systematic investment in community structures that could potentially have worked to mitigate protection risks. This is particularly critical without MONUSCO's presence, and with a situation where a focus on state responsibility and accountability is not currently realistic. As one protection actor in DRC outlined:

17 While the planning assumption in the transition process did include considerations for an expansion of AFC/M23 presence into South Kivu, this was not reflected in the roadmap, which focused almost exclusively on the government taking over functions and responsibilities.

> Any structures linked to government and government being absent, it sounds harsh, but it is a waste of investment: the moment the government disappears, the community structures no longer work efficiently. To what extent should such structures be linked to government or be more independent? Community-based protection is more linked to customary systems of local leadership than to local politics. [...] Working directly with communities is a safer way and more sustainable way.

3.2 Diverse actors lack inclusion in peacekeeping-mission drawdowns

With PoC capacities and needs in transition contexts being significantly shaped by how peacekeeping missions draw down, the ability of a wide range of actors to influence and shape this process matters for its outcomes. While mission drawdown policies focus on a reconfiguration of UN presence translating to handing over functions to host governments and other UN entities, they also recognise the importance of involving a wider set of actors including local and national civil society. Indeed, evidence shows that 'peacekeeping transition processes that include [civil society organisations] will be more responsive to the context and better capitalize on local protection capacities' (Levine-Spound and MacClinchy, 2022b: 1). Yet, even with the best intentions, peacekeeping-mission drawdowns still face challenges in involving a wider set of actors (CIVIC, 2023).[18]

In DRC, MONUSCO continuously asked for civil society to be involved in transition planning, including at national level. There was a significant pushback from the government in Kinshasa to involve civil society at national level given the security focus.[19] At the same time, MONUSCO pushed for an early decentralised process focusing on engagement at provincial level in South Kivu, including with provincial government and provincial-level civil society. However, the government in Kinshasa paused this decentralised process to ensure control over planning, only allowing the formation of a Provincial Integrated Transitional Team (PITT) in early 2024 to support MONUSCO's exit from South Kivu in June that year (also see CIVIC, 2023: 2). The PITT became the main avenue for a more diverse group of actors to engage with MONUSCO's drawdown from South Kivu and was therefore perceived positively as an effective way that INGOs and civil society became involved, albeit too late. One protection actor interviewed referred to the PITT as an 'effort to coordinate and assess lessons and to correct what could be corrected', and highlighted that that this process was 'decentralised as opposed to previous experiences where everything had been discussed at ministerial level in Kinshasa and people on the ground were not aware it was happening'.

18 CIVIC highlights that 'although the [2021 DRC transition] process had been more PoC-focused, consultative, and inclusive than past transition discussions in both the DRC and other country contexts, it still failed to engage non-mission UN actors and civil society early enough and meaningfully enough' (2023: 9).

19 Research by Levine-Spound and MacClinchy also notes: 'In Kinshasa, the capital, working groups overseeing the Joint Transition Plan do not include civil society. Moreover, there has not been a sustained effort to share the plan with civil society in eastern DRC, leading to frustration and misunderstanding. Said one MONUSCO civilian official, "We treated the transition plan like something we dust off and reference every three months [prior to reporting against the plan's benchmarks to the UNSC]. But it should be a living document that is socialized to the Congolese public in general, and we have failed to do that"' (2022b: 1).

Mission staff interviewed for this study acknowledged that MONUSCO could have done more to engage NGOs and civil society actors on its drawdown beyond more formal processes involving the government (see also Levine-Spound and MacClinchy, 2022b).[20] They also raised the challenge of doing so meaningfully with a short timeline, referring in particular to the acceleration of MONUSCO's exit from December 2023. For mission staff interviewed, there was an imperative to prioritise engagement with the government in Kinshasa, given the primacy of handing over functions to state authorities as part of its exit from South Kivu.

While the PITT was welcome by non-mission actors as it gave them the opportunity to influence the process of MONSUCO's exit, there were criticisms. Shortcomings highlighted by some were that many decisions were still taken in Kinshasa. Another concern was that the PITT was convened late in the process (February 2024) leaving little space for civil society actors in particular to influence the transition (see also Gorur, 2025). Finally, the main outcome of the PITT – the roadmap – while a well-established plan, lacked funding and in the end was not systematically implemented. Importantly, while the roadmap was seen as a critical plan, it focused heavily on the roles of state authorities and UN entities over other actors that could contribute to reducing protection risks for civilians.

Criticisms of the PITT from non-mission actors were geared towards the lack of diversity of partners present and preferences for the 'usual suspects' with privileged relationships with MONUSCO, over a more representative group of actors. Some interviewees felt there was not enough thought given to the importance of investing in civil society as part of MONUSCO's drawdown. Civil society actors and NGOs interviewed emphasised power dynamics between MONUSCO and them, flagging that MONUSCO did not always engage in ways that support meaningful participation. As one peacebuilding actor explained:

> I think there is an intent to impose: we arrive with our big shoes and it is up to you to join our roadmap. Now, there was a consultation but with a tendency of 'we are MONUSCO, we arrive, we have done our thing'.

In DRC, the collaboration and engagement with the rest of the UN Country Team on MONUSCO's drawdowns, including specifically in South Kivu, were perceived to have benefited greatly from having a triple-hatted Deputy Special Representatives of the Secretary-General/Resident Coordinator/Humanitarian Coordinator (DSRSG/RC/HC) (Levine-Spound and MacClinchy, 2022a; CIVIC, 2023). In Sudan, as UNAMID was drawing down, the lack of integration between UNAMID and the rest of the UN Country Team meant that additional effort was required. The creation of the State Liaison Functions (SLFs) was a way to counteract this (see Forti, 2019; 2021; Mamiya et al., 2020 for more on the SLFs). However, UNAMID's exit offered very little room and lacked greater engagement with non-

20 Levine-Spound and Jorgensen (2023) also noted a reduction in terminology relating to civil society inclusion and community engagement in the last few years of MONUSCO mandate renewals, noting 'for example, from 2021 to 2022, the Council cut references to gender from 25 to 7, references to "civil society" and "community engagement" from 5 to 1, and references to early warning from 9 to 1' (2023: 1).

UN actors, with smaller initiatives trying to maintain some capacities across civil society networks through training and capacity-strengthening (see Romen, 2025). Instead, UNAMID's drawdown again prioritised engagement with Sudan's transitional government as well as reconfiguring its presence through UNAMID's successor, UNITAMS. This significantly shaped the way transition contexts and PoC were approached as a result: with UNITAMS focusing its protection work on longer-term protection environment-building, human rights and rule of law challenges over immediate PoC risks, and with a focus on enabling the transitional government's own protection strategy. By focusing on these elements, the UN Country Team fell short of efforts to reduce immediate violence against civilians resulting from the rapidly deteriorating security situation.

In South Sudan, the rapid drawdown of UNMISS at the time of writing was reported to 'be a big wakeup call for UNMISS'. While there were efforts to build engagement with civil society over the years, the urgent need to support – and give primacy – to the role of civil society became increasingly recognised by some in the mission. This included having regular senior mission leadership meetings with civil society.

3.3 Inadequate preparedness across all actors to shift PoC capacities in transition contexts

Given high PoC needs due to continued conflict and violence in DRC, Sudan and South Sudan, there was a proportionally low level of preparedness or inadequate planning across all contexts. As one protection actor interviewed in DRC highlighted, 'everyone was taken by surprise by the speed but they had not thought of the possibility of this happening'.

There are challenges with preparing and planning for the impact of peacekeeping-mission drawdowns, including that the exact timetable for their exit is often confirmed at short notice, which makes planning challenging. This is compounded by the challenge of, yet the necessity for, planning in fast-changing contexts. Finally, constrained resources make it difficult to prepare for the implications for PoC of peacekeeping-mission drawdowns.

In DRC, while the rest of the UN Country Team coordinated and worked closely with MONUSCO to identify which functions would be handed over, expectations of where resources would come from were misguided and the hope to see an increase in voluntary funding did not materialise. Overall, MONUSCO's exit from South Kivu was approached in terms of thinking about who would take over its functions, with little investment in rethinking what PoC should or would look like in the absence of a peacekeeping mission in South Kivu. As one interviewee argued, the challenge was that there was no vision or strategy for PoC post-MONUSCO.

This included a lack of wider strategy from the Protection Cluster. Efforts within the Protection Cluster to prepare for MONUSCO's exit from South Kivu focused instead on seeking to maintain the capacity and knowledge of MONUSCO's Community Liaison Assistants (CLAs), as they were seen as critical owners of relationships, networks and knowhow in South Kivu. The Protection Cluster advocated for

and called on donors and protection organisations to consider hiring CLAs to maintain these relations, networks and capacities in South Kivu. Unfortunately, due to the seismic impact of USAID's dismantling on humanitarian funding in DRC, only a few CLAs were integrated into protection organisations.

Integrating transition planning within peacekeeping missions' culture and practice is also challenging. As pointed out earlier, peacekeeping missions can struggle between investing in addressing immediate needs and investing in longer-term needs, including ensuring a responsible exit. This tension is inherent in all peacekeeping missions, as was the case for MONUSCO in DRC. Mission staff interviewed confirmed that while policies called for integrating transition planning as part of a mission's everyday activity, this is rarely if ever implemented until a calendar for transition is established.[21] The yearly mandate renewal was seen by mission staff as an obstacle to longer-term strategic thinking that could facilitate integrated transition planning. The culture of transition is also not present within peacekeeping missions, including in MONUSCO, to enable the strategic thinking needed to inform transition planning as an integral part of how the mission works. It is only in 2021 that MONUSCO integrated transition planning through a joint roadmap with the government. This was then shifted to an 'accelerated withdrawal' plan in 2023, following anti-MONUSCO demonstrations and political pressures because of upcoming elections (see Kahombo et al., 2024). As one Congolese researcher highlighted:

> There is a major lesson here. This lesson is not to be surprised by the transition. When I discuss this with international actors, they see the request to leave as a surprise rather than something you should programme from headquarters and from the start of the mission.

Similarly, in Darfur, as UNAMID was drawing down there were some initiatives to try to maintain certain capacities and networks. One initiative was to train national Sudanese protection actors on UCP with the support of NP (see Box 2). The training was a way of 'ensuring the mission's PoC achievements were sustained post mission exit' as well as an opportunity 'to set the stage for future protective engagement through the INGO [Nonviolent Peaceforce] once the UN mission's mandate had ended' (Romen, 2025: 161–162).

21 In the case of MONUSCO, the establishment of benchmarks to guide the transition process and calendar started much later in 2019 and 2020 rather than when the mission was established. Even then, activities to meet these benchmarks and support transitions were not prioritised until an 'end date' was decided, only giving six months to prioritise activities that require years to achieve.

Box 2 Unarmed civilian protection: a way to mitigate the protection gap post-transition?

In Darfur and South Kivu, UCP was seen as a way forward to mitigate the protection gap left by the drawdown of peacekeeping forces. UCP provides physical protection via presence, accompaniment and a wide range of complementarity activities. In South Kivu, NP was specifically funded through the Peacebuilding Fund to mitigate the protection gap following MONUSCO's departure, establishing permanent presence in Kalehe from March 2025.

Similarly, in Darfur, NP supported the transition by training civil society networks on UCP (see Romen, 2025) and eventually establishing its presence in 2021 (Humanitarian Programme Cycle, 2022). NP's physical presence was delayed due to challenges accessing funding as UNAMID drew down, a lesson learnt for South Kivu with the Peacebuilding Fund acting in support of the transition and mitigating protection gaps.

Note that in South Sudan, UCP had been established alongside, and in some cases before, mission presence and so is less perceived as complementary and more as carrying out a specific function. Given that full drawdown was only just taking place at the time of writing, the extent to which UCP will be perceived as filling in gaps remains to be seen.

Note: For a full account of the experience in Sudan, see Romen (2025).

Beyond this, there was little additional initiative to try to mitigate protection gaps emerging from UNAMID's exit. Recognising that the thinking was not as advanced on post-mission PoC at the time, this raised concerns over who was going to protect vulnerable populations against violence. As Forti explains, 'while transition planning for programmatic activities has advanced, there has not been comparable progress on planning for security issues (including the protection of IDP sites)' (2019: 14).

4 The opportunities and challenges of a more ecosystem and civilian-centred approach to PoC

4.1 Engaging with communities on PoC in transition contexts

There are significant challenges involved in PoC engagement between peacekeeping missions and communities in transition contexts, as well as opportunities to improve this engagement. This section explores these in more detail.

4.1.1 Communities play a significant yet constrained role in their protection

As PoC capacities reduce in the transition contexts studied and are not easily mitigated by state authorities or other actors, communities and community-level actors such as traditional authorities (see GTS, 2025) or local civil society play a significant role in their own protection and that of their communities.[22]

In DRC, focus group discussions with communities in Kalehe territory, South Kivu, highlighted that community capacity on protection tends to persist in transition settings. As a result, communities self-organise and try to define rules for themselves to mitigate protection risks including, for instance, limiting their movement, choosing certain hours of the day to move and resolving community conflicts amongst themselves. One focus group reported being able to successfully advocate to AFC/M23 to stop the forced recruitment of youth in their communities.[23] Peace and mediation committees[24] were repeatedly mentioned by communities as continuing to contribute to the resolution of community conflicts. Affected communities also mentioned the importance of local structures supporting micro-credit initiatives and village saving rounds, especially for women survivors of sexual violence, as remedial protection interventions preventing the social and economic marginalisation of women survivors.

While these actors can mitigate protection risks and contribute to protection outcomes, they cannot replace the duty of state authorities, the role of peacekeeping missions or fill all protection gaps linked to transitions. In DRC, the role that communities and community-level actors play remains limited and faces constraints and high risks. Communities and community-level actors carefully consider what they

22 In South Sudan, even with UNMISS still present, too often the lack of reactive response from the mission has left civilians having to fend for themselves and turn to local protection and conflict management mechanisms (see Mura and Saade, 2025).

23 This community was described as having more trusting relationships with AFC/M23 due to its historical opposition to the government in Kinshasa, which may have opened up an advocacy opportunity.

24 This is instead of local protection committees (LPCs), which were reported to be inactive.

can do and what is too risky, according to interviews in Kalehe. As a result, the focus of all these actors tends to be on day-to-day issues rather than wider conflict dynamics and root causes of violence (see also Davies et al., 2024). Community-level actors interviewed in Kalehe territory confirmed that since AFC/M23 took control of parts of South Kivu, numerous community security governance systems and community-level protection structures have stopped. This came with an acknowledgment that these mechanisms had already been undermined as MONUSCO left South Kivu, in particular through becoming co-opted by political actors.

4.1.2 Capacity-strengthening enables the role of communities

In South Kivu, when asked what legacy remained from MONUSCO's work, all actors interviewed unanimously mentioned community capacities, experience and knowledge on protection and human rights, all of which MONUSCO strengthened over time (see also Levine-Spound and MacClinchy, 2022a; Bauma and Miviri, 2025). This was particularly the case for capacity on monitoring and reporting of protection incidents. Some interviewees at community level also reflected that local civil society, communities, local authorities and traditional authorities have received significant capacity-strengthening and sensitisation from national and international NGOs, and continue to use this knowledge to sensitise communities, for instance on GBV and other protection risks, even without these NGOs present. Combined, these investments in community capacities to contribute to their own protection were seen as critical in transition settings to enable these actors to mitigate some of the PoC gaps resulting from MONUSCO's exit from South Kivu.

In South Sudan, capacity-strengthening of the traditional authorities, security services and youths was perceived to have reduced risks of violence. Capacity-strengthening of youths in particular, along with a range of protection and peacebuilding initiatives, is perceived to have reduced intercommunal violence (Mura and Saade, 2025; see also Davies et al., 2024).

4.1.3 The legacy of capacity-strengthening is fragile and highlights challenges with how communities are supported

However, respondents in DRC also felt that where a legacy of impact remained, it was fragile, requiring further support to leverage the investments made by MONUSCO as well as other actors. In Kalehe territory, communities (including members of LPCs) felt that while they had some capacities to contribute to the protection of their communities, capacity-strengthening should have been more systematic and more frequent, and that their knowledge and skills had not been fully invested in. Similarly, with UNAMID's withdrawal in Darfur, Rosenblum-Kumar argues that 'insufficient preparation, resources, and action to build protection capacities among local actors led to tragic protection gaps that were starkly seen in the aftermath of UNAMID's drawdown in Darfur' (2023: 1). Gregory also notes that 'UNITAMS personnel interviewed reported having to start their work from scratch', adding 'in the words of one mission personnel, there was "nothing to inherit" from UNAMID, outside of some contacts and select mission personnel that were able to transfer over' (2024: 21). Mamiya et al. also highlight 'many local conflict resolution committees that UNAMID supported for years falling apart as the Mission withdrew from their areas' (2020: 74).

Similarly, the study found little legacy left by MONUSCO in South Kivu in terms of LPCs. MONUSCO is known for creating a range of community structures (as well as supporting LPCs), including: community alert networks (CANs), community protection plans (CPPs) and other local structures including through MONUSCO's CLAs. These have generally been seen as good practice and a positive step towards working with communities, and such mechanisms and structures have been replicated in other missions. However, and despite heavily investing in these, the approach did not manage to create a feeling of community ownership and enable community agency (also see Carver, 2022). This and past research highlight that, despite efforts and the right intentions, these community structures were seen to be solely a tool for MONUSCO rather than a tool for communities as well. There is no question that peacekeeping missions informing their work through community consultation and working with communities make for better protection outcomes. However, there seems to be a challenge in turning these community structures into more self-sufficient mechanisms that the community feels are working for them directly. These structures lacked the right investment to ensure their sustainability and self-management (see also CIVIC, 2018).

Former mission actors acknowledge these gaps, pointing to the design of systems such as the early-warning and -response systems that were geared to serve MONUSCO's response rather than serving communities' own strategies and response. This was also noted by CIVIC during research in 2018, which found that civilians were frustrated by community meetings with CLAs and MONUSCO uniformed personnel, which they perceived more as a place for communities to provide information to MONUSCO with a lack of concrete protection outcomes for communities, as reported by an LPC community member in Masisi:

> No, the LPC is not effective... We should not have the role of counting the dead or incidents within our community. We should be the solution or be part of the solution, but so far, our committee has never tried to solve a problem. We are just reporting information. (CIVIC, 2018: 5)

Mission actors interviewed agreed that MONUSCO had overly focused on the LPCs as a source of information, without adequate investments in them to make them independent and self-sustaining, and to ensure stronger local security governance by supporting stronger relationships between communities and local security forces. This work was often done too late as part of MONUSCO closing permanent bases:

> In some ways, the initial idea to create community tools was good and MONUSCO let communities choose who was to join the LPC. The idea was to have information shared with government and MONUSCO but later I realised that all the Community Protection Plans were going to MONUSCO and not going to local authorities. [...] MONUSCO did not plan to give enough means to these local groups to become more independent and people got demotivated. (Interview with a former mission actor)

The extractive nature of these structures also led to them being perceived as the eyes and ears of Kinshasa and MONUSCO, therefore not neutral in the conflict. This led many community leaders and members of these structures to flee or hide when the AFC/M23 took over control of territories in Kalehe territory.

Communication with communities appeared extractive rather than a two-way dialogue. Peacekeeping missions know the importance of strategic communication with communities, including to manage misunderstandings and expectations that communities may place onto peacekeeping missions (see for example Trithart, 2026). CLAs were created with the hope that this would help communities better understand the mission's mandates and limitations. Yet this did not help mitigate expectations (also see Kullenberg, 2016). Communities interviewed in Kalehe highlighted a lack of communication on the mission's mandate and limitations. Two focus group discussions with women highlighted that they had very little knowledge of MONUSCO's impact on their safety and security. One participant explained that generally women stayed away from MONUSCO for fear of being sexually exploited and abused.[25] Respondents felt no proactive actions were taken to ensure women's participation in MONUSCO's activities, despite MONUSCO's investment in working with women community networks and structures (also see CIVIC, 2018). Communities highlighted that they often lacked feedback on alerts they raised and how the information they shared informed decision-making. Respondents rarely shared information that could help them make decisions about their protection.

In South Sudan, too, research has found that communities have high expectations and misperceptions of the role of UNMISS in providing protection to populations, resulting in a lack of ownership and low levels of trust but also a false sense of security. For example, research found 'a number of examples where communities did not implement their usual strategies to protect themselves because they understood that UNMISS would protect them, which cost lives' (Davies et al., 2024). This was particularly the case where UNMISS had a rotating, rather than permanent, presence.

Communication with communities and community-level actors also appears to have been patchy during MONUSCO's withdrawal from South Kivu. As one former mission staff reflected:

> On our side, we do everything with the UN and here maybe we should have as usual invested more on the localisation agenda, on local actors. [...] There was a lot of frustration. We tried what we could but not enough with communities and local actors. With communities, they were not even consulted. We only consulted traditional partners [government, UN, existing civil society partners].

25 According to Sengenya, 'MONUSCO and its predecessor mission have one of the worst records on sexual exploitation and abuse of any UN peacekeeping operation, with 272 allegations (some involving multiple perpetrators and survivors) against military personnel, according to a public database that tracks peacekeeper misconduct. Almost 190 paternity claims have been raised against the peacekeepers, though there are likely hundreds more women and girls who have not come forward to MONUSCO because of fear of retribution or because they didn't know the process' (Sengenya, 2024).

While some mission staff interviewed reported engaging and preparing communities for MONUSCO's departure through CLAs and LPCs, former LPC members describe a lack of engagement:

> They should have sensitised people to their exit. There was no information. The community woke up one morning and MONUSCO was no longer there. Even us, we knew they were going to leave two days before their departure when they asked for our telephones back. They left like thieves.

Local humanitarian actors were left with the feeling that MONUSCO had not prepared their exit and their exit 'appeared as an improvisation'. As one local civil society actor relates:

> Here, people were not informed of their departure. We noted an issue. Before their departure, they had not even prepared the protection committees that were in place.

One former mission staff reflected on whether the mission was well equipped to communicate with communities, explaining that the population was often informed only on the day the MONUSCO base closed. As another local protection actor explained, not even local civil society actors were informed:

> In the end, MONUSCO organised a few information-sharing missions but it was at the very last minute. These questions of transition should be based on community perceptions and instead we are convened to information sharing sessions.

Similarly in Darfur, as UNAMID withdrew, there was a lack of planned and systematised effort to communicate with communities that would be most affected by UNAMID's departure. As one interviewee explained, it was personal concerns and initiatives, rather than an institutional approach, that led to coordinated efforts from UNAMID's PoC staff with the Protection Cluster, relevant humanitarian actors and government to visit IDP sites and meet communities. Similarly, there was no coordinated approach between UNAMID and UNITAMS to engage communities on what their protection might look like with the handover to the government and the UN special political mission.

In South Sudan, forums to consult on transition planning in earlier redesignation of PoC sites (e.g. Juba, Bentiu, Wau) were perceived as tokenistic in an environment where decisions had already been taken. Indeed, Davies and Spencer (2022) explain that South Sudanese organisations expressed major misgivings about the closure of the PoC sites, especially where violence was extremely high such as in Bentiu, but there were limited platforms for them to voice these concerns effectively. In Bentiu, community engagement was set up through camp management, once decisions had already been taken to transition the site. Communities approached NP to facilitate dialogue with UNMISS. As one respondent said, this manner of engagement with communities was 'set up in reverse'.

4.1.4 Communities need a proactive approach to external support

While more could have been done by the peacekeeping missions to better support communities prior to MONUSCO's exit from South Kivu, there also appear to be challenges with the support from other

external actors present in South Kivu. As will be explored further below, community-based protection approaches have long been used in South Kivu and yet have not quite led to more than the sum of their parts. They have lacked a more proactive approach to collective outcomes and ensuring that external actors pick up where communities face constraints and limitations. The transition contexts studied highlight that while communities are agents of their own protection and continue to use their available capacities, they do so within a limited realm requiring other actors to build on and connect communities' efforts to those of others to ensure positive and sustained protection outcomes.

All actors interviewed felt that there were opportunities to leverage community structures and capacities already in place in South Kivu. Even if these were often no longer functioning, the knowledge and capacities on violence reduction, conflict mediation and protection remained present within communities and with a wide range of community-level actors. Similarly, local civil society actors and NGOs were perceived as still active and able to play some role in civilian protection. According to these local actors, more technical and financial support to navigate transition contexts as well as the presence of the AFC/M23 could enable these opportunities.

4.2 Mitigating PoC gaps through community-based protection in transition contexts

There is increasing recognition by all actors involved, including peacekeeping missions, that the protection of civilians requires complementary efforts of a wide range of actors and interventions that link up and build on communities' own actions as well as subnational, national, regional and global diplomatic and advocacy actions. Increasingly, protection practice is informed by the importance and necessity to work through community-based and civilian-centred protection approaches, where the capacities and strategies of civilians are built upon rather than replaced. Different approaches exist. They include Oxfam's or CIVIC's community-based protection, NP's UPC and the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC)'s Protection from Violence. These approaches include both violence-reduction efforts led by peacebuilding organisations and protection interventions led by humanitarian organisations. While these approaches are different in how they may be implemented, they have in common their approach to working with civilians in what they are already doing and to approach protection from an angle of prevention and reduction, focusing on addressing immediate threats of violence, among other things. For ease, this section will refer to these different approaches as community-based protection. In transition contexts, these approaches are seen as being a critical contributor and strategy to mitigate protection gaps. There are, however, some challenges.

4.2.1 Not always a consensus on what PoC capacities are needed in transition contexts

Transition contexts in Sudan, DRC and South Sudan were approached as opportunities to see state authorities assume their protective responsibilities, and were shaped by an optimistic view of political and conflict dynamics. As outlined above, this transfer of responsibilities did not always materialise, both due to the lack of both ability and willingness of state authorities to fully take on these responsibilities as

well as worsening security and conflict dynamics. The types of investment made in transition contexts can be shaped by these hopeful and optimistic views and as a result do not always align with the realities of protection needs. The case of Darfur and UNAMID's exit exemplifies this precisely. UNAMID's drawdown was conceptualised as a move from peacekeeping to peacebuilding based on the premise that conflict and violence in Darfur would cease because of formal peace agreements and political commitments. This shaped in many ways the mandate of UNITAMS and its focus on environment-building protection capacities, centred on human rights and the rule of law rather than on PoC and addressing immediate threats to civilians (Gregory, 2024: 9, see also IPI et al., 2021).

4.2.2 Reluctance to shift approaches from more traditional humanitarian protection towards PoC

In recent years, the protection sector has been challenged to consider shifting away from more traditional humanitarian approaches to protection that focuses on the consequences of violence, primarily through assistance and service provision (see Cocking et al., 2022; Davies et al., 2025). Though there have been developments in recent years, many humanitarian organisations too often fall short of systematically engaging with more proactive preventive approaches such as engaging with armed actors or supporting communities in their dialogue with armed actors, or adopting negotiation and mediation approaches to reducing protection risks (see Davies et al., 2025). Organisations such as CIVIC, NP and Geneva Call are often perceived as unique in using approaches that aim to reduce violence and harm against civilians holistically as the focus of their protection approaches. Other organisations such as NRC have also redefined their approach towards prevention of violence but remain an exception amongst international humanitarian NGOs (Sida et al., 2026). As a result, when PoC capacities reduce in transition settings due to peacekeeping missions drawing down, humanitarian organisations are not necessarily there to pick up these functions and mitigate PoC gaps.

This became apparent in Darfur as UNAMID drew down. While the SLF aimed to support the rest of the UN Country Team to increase their presence and protection capacities, it became clear the UN funds, programmes and agencies were not willing to pick up some protection activities. Mamiya et al. flag that UN agencies prioritised their ability to maintain access to deliver assistance and services instead of engaging in politically sensitive activities and advocacy required to strengthen the protection of civilians, focusing on a more 'apolitical approach' (2020: 95). This was evident in the aftermath of the December 2019–January 2020 violence in El Geneina:

> Some SLF staff expressed the view that, after the outbreak of conflict in which an estimated 65 people were killed and which reportedly involved government elements, their skills in mediation and fact-finding went unused by UN agency supervisors who forbade them from engaging (Mamiya et al., 2020: 96).

Similar tendencies can be seen in DRC where protection monitoring tends to be prioritised as a protection programmatic focus, alongside traditional approaches that respond to the consequences of violence by UN entities, including when working with local and national civil society actors, NGOs

and communities. With a drawdown process that focused heavily on handing over functions to state authorities and the rest of the UN Country Team, this shaped available protection capacities away from PoC. In DRC, this was further exacerbated as outlined in sub-section 2.1.2 by an unintended substitution effect, where organisations prioritised other elements of protection or programmes because MONUSCO's presence was seen as covering other protection activities such as, for instance, on DDR.

4.2.3 Gaps in capacities on community-based protection to mitigate PoC gaps

In both Darfur and South Kivu, there was an attempt at gearing up capacities to mitigate PoC gaps, including by funding NP to implement programming through work with communities and other direct protection strategies. This was partly based on positive experiences and complementarities of NP working alongside UNMISS in South Sudan (see Gray, 2023).

The same logic applied in Darfur and South Kivu. In both cases, NP was seen to mitigate some gaps, particularly at the community level. However, delays in funding meant that NP deployed in both contexts much later, after UNAMID's and MONUSCO's respective exits, making it more challenging to build on the missions' investment in community-based protection. In addition, community-based protection tends to require ultra-localised approaches, making it challenging to scale up. Instead, these approaches benefit from 'scaling out' through having multiple organisations using the approach where they have presence and acceptance through relationship building (see Davies et al., 2024). This takes time and requires investment before transitional moments.

In addition, in a post-MONUSCO South Kivu mainly controlled by the AFC/M23, there is a low presence of organisations working on protection. According to the Protection Cluster in DRC, in January and February 2025, only 18 organisations working on protection were present in South Kivu (compared to 54 in North Kivu) (Protection Cluster DRC, 2025: 12). The operational landscape is characterised by mainly mobile interventions (as opposed to permanent presence) and closures of projects due to decreased funding. Local organisations based in parts of South Kivu under the control of AFC/M23 operate at a small scale to ensure low visibility for security reasons while navigating the uncertainty of the de facto authorities, with international organisations mainly working through local organisations.

Compounding the challenge of presence, capacities for effective community-based protection are low. In South Kivu, community-based protection as an approach existed long before MONUSCO's exit. However, a recent mapping of these practices conducted by the protection cluster has highlighted gaps in practice in eastern DRC. This mapping, conducted in November and December 2025, revealed that there are more than 150 organisations engaged in direct physical protection techniques, with the majority using protective presence. The survey also highlighted that the technical application of community-based protection as an approach to address protection risks is not holistically understood, especially with regards to direct physical protection that is unarmed and civilian in nature. This may be because these aspects of community-based protection carry the highest risk and require thorough contextual and risk analysis to inform mitigation plans. This capacity tends to be limited in organisations in DRC, as is the case across many contexts. Unarmed, civilian-led, direct physical protection also

requires a constellation of staff profiles to be effective. With most organisations being local or national organisations, they do not always have the constellation and diversity of staff profiles to make these methodologies effective and to manage risks (see Lieberknecht, 2026).

4.3 Greater complementarity, collaboration and coordination through a more diverse ecosystem for PoC in transition contexts

There is an urgency to unite limited PoC capacities in transition contexts through more collaborative, complementary and coordinated approaches to mitigate PoC gaps. Experience in South Kivu, Darfur and South Sudan highlights opportunities and challenges to do this.

4.3.1 Focusing on added value and critically rethinking roles

For complementarity to work, different actors must critically appraise where they add value and where they do not. The study found that the gaps that were hardest to mitigate were in relation to armed deterrence and use of force to protect civilians, especially as state authorities in the contexts studied continue to lack capacities and willingness to protect civilians, and peacekeeping forces have drawn down or exited. The second capacity that is often lost with peacekeeping missions drawing down is the protection of civil society actors, which has a significant impact on those actors' appetite and ability to take risks.

In Kalehe, different actors interviewed for this study (i.e. communities, local actors, peacebuilding or protection actors and peacekeeping actors) had different perceptions of what interventions from MONUSCO were most effective in protecting civilians (see Table 1).

The interesting take-away from the analysis outlined in Table 1 is that DDR and physical protection – which in the case of MONUSCO uses a mix of deterrent presence and patrol with threat of and the use of force – were repeatedly mentioned as the most effective MONUSCO interventions. As MONUSCO exited South Kivu, the capacities for these modes of action were greatly reduced.

Table 1 MONUSCO PoC interventions perceived to be most effective by different stakeholders[i]

	Perceptions from affected communities in Kalehe territory, South Kivu	Perceptions from community-based actors[ii] in Kalehe territory, South Kivu	Perceptions from protection and peacebuilding actors in DRC	Perceptions from peacekeeping mission actors in DRC
Intervention	DDR Physical protection Sensitisation of communities and local authorities to reduce community violence	DDR[iii] Physical protection Capacity-strengthening and sensitisation of traditional authorities Protection monitoring through intelligence gathering[iv] with communities	Physical protection Early-warning system (CAN) supported by LPCs and CLAs Strengthening and supporting local civil society including women's groups and youth groups Facilitating the work of protection and peacebuilding actors withlogistical, security and medical support	Early-warning system (CAN) supported by LPCs and CLAs Sustainably investing in LPCs and strengthening relationships with local security actors Capacity-strengthening of the FARDC and the national police as part of wider SSR

i This table is derived from eight focus group discussions with affected communities conducted in Kalehe territory, South Kivu, DRC in November 2025 representing a total of 80 individuals and semi-structured interviews with 18 community-based actors in Kalehe territory, 18 protection and peacebuilding actors (local, national and international) and 6 peacekeeping mission actors working in DRC. Focus group discussion and interviews asked open-ended questions. This table is a translation and trend analysis from the data collected through these open-ended questions.

ii The term community-based actors here refers to community leaders, local and traditional authorities, local religious actors, local civil society actors.

iii Alongside DDR, actors at community level mentioned the contribution of MONUSCO to local infrastructure such as bridges and roads (also see Nagel et al., 2021: 12). While not related to the safety and security of civilians, it is interesting to note the link between visibility (physical infrastructures) and perceptions of effectiveness.

iv The term 'intelligence gathering' is used here deliberately and is a translation of the French word, *renseignement*. The term has a military and security connotation and was used by communities as well as actors at community level to describe what MONUSCO would call 'information gathering' as part of its early-warning mechanism and community engagement. The military and security connotation of the term is important as some of the community structures put in place by MONUSCO were perceived as lacking neutrality and were therefore a legitimate target by armed groups.

In Sudan, a humanitarian protection actor reflected that while UNAMID was not always effective in protecting civilians,[26] it did significantly reduce the number of incidents through its armed presence and deterrent effect. The physical protection granted by peacekeeping missions was also highlighted as an effective deterrent that reduced the protection risks for civilians in Darfur. As Mamiya et al. found, UNAMID's 'presence, monitoring and patrolling had a deterrent impact at times' (2020: 65; see also Brown, 2021; Kleinfeld, 2021). This was reflected in the concern many communities expressed at the imminent withdrawal of UNAMID and in their belief that the presence of UNAMID provides them with some degree of protection and security (Mamiya et al., 2020: 18).

In South Sudan, notwithstanding the many challenges, there is strong consensus that the unprecedented opening of the PoC sites at the height of violent conflict from 2013 saved tens of thousands of lives (Arensen, 2016; Cormack and Pendle, 2024).[27] Communities widely perceive PoC sites as providing 'immediate safety for many civilians during acute crises' (Mura and Saade, 2025). .

Unarmed protective presence, accompaniment and interpositioning[28] are all forms of direct physical protection that can have a deterrent effect. For example, in South Sudan, there are numerous accounts of civilians deterring active violent threats through their presence, directly preventing targeted attacks against civilians, including when mission personnel refused to intervene (see Gray, 2022). Supporting the visibility and legitimacy of community-based groups can also have a deterrent effect. In South Sudan, women's protection group members that wear matching t-shirts in groups can signal collective strength and legitimacy, with evidenced impact on deterring attacks (see Sjöberg et al., 2026).

As outlined above in the context of South Kivu, while many organisations engage in physical protection, this practice is not systematised and not always effective due to the need for more capacity-strengthening among local civil society actors.

Physical protection from peacekeeping missions was also seen to be critical to protect human rights defenders and other local civil society actors when these were individually at risk of being targeted due to their advocacy in support of protecting civilians. In transition contexts, this remains a critical gap that affects the ability of these actors to fully contribute to the PoC ecosystem. In DRC, communities interviewed for this study in Kalehe saw local organisations as the main actor able to support their safety and security, but were very aware of local organisations' own risks in doing so. When MONUSCO

26 According to Mamiya et al., 'reports of blatant inaction' of UNAMID have been highlighted, with well-evidenced 'instances where the Mission failed to act to protect civilians' (2020: 64).

27 However, the need to open PoC sites was also seen as a failure of the mission prior to 2013 to effectively protect civilians where they lived (Arensen, 2016; also see Paddon-Rhoads and Sutton, 2020). As one former UN official explained, where people were able to access the mission, they entered the UNMISS site but where they could not, they fled, stating, 'civilians fled to UN bases, opting not to wait for blue helmets to come to them, is telling' (Paddon-Rhoads and Sutton, 2020: 19). In some ways, civilians' decision to flee to UN bases reflected a realistic understanding of the limits of the mission's PoC capacities.

28 As per Ridden and Bliesemann de Guevara (2023), 'in interpositioning, practitioners put themselves in the way of opposing parties to create a physical barrier between them'.

was present, local and traditional authorities as well as local civil society actors could take refuge in MONUSCO bases and be relocated by MONUSCO when necessary. One of the critical gaps left by MONUSCO's exit is the protection of local civil society actors particularly those working on human rights issues.[29] This has led these actors to substantially reduce their advocacy work and operate in more limited and clandestine ways to manage risk.

Interestingly, communities interviewed in Kalehe territory did not explicitly mention MONUSCO-supported LPCs, CPPs and the work of CLAs as effective protection interventions. While unclear from interviews and focus group discussions, this may be the result of them being rapidly dismantled as MONUSCO drew down from South Kivu, or simply the limited ownership of these mechanisms by communities, as highlighted during interviews with community-level actors as well as peacebuilding and protection actors.

While this is anecdotal, it seems to highlight a larger challenge with MONUSCO's approach to community-based protection. As outlined above, communities felt this approach had not led to a feeling of ownership, improved community agency or more sustainable community systems and structures. This perception was reinforced by humanitarian and peacebuilding interviewees who felt that MONUSCO, whilst trying, had faced challenges to translate its intention around community engagement and community-based protection into reality.

While not intentional, it is difficult for missions to avoid a militarisation of its community engagement. Civilian components of missions are often conflated with armed components of the mission, which will always be limiting precisely because they are armed. For MONUSCO, this was most evident through the use of the term 'intelligence gathering' communities used in DRC to refer to MONUSCO's community alert networks. Interviewees that used to work for the mission or collaborate with the mission, and moved to work with an NGO on community-based protection, reflected on the key difference of how they now worked with communities, engaging much more in two-way dialogues, seeking to empower communities to build on their strategies and building much stronger relations with them. Effective civilian-centred, participatory approaches with communities lead to a tighter link between information, analysis and action, which reinforces trust in and the legitimacy of actors. This is lost with peacekeeping missions because they are not able, due to their composition and structure, to be as proximate to communities, and are associated with the use of armed force.

This is in no way to say that peacekeeping missions should not engage with communities or aim to adopt civilian-centred practice. However, this is where partnering with NGOs may lead to better outcomes as NGOs may be better positioned – including because of who they are (a more humanitarian and civil society actor) compared to a peacekeeping mission (a political and security actor) – allowing closer proximity to communities. Peacekeeping missions are increasingly exploring

29 Research conducted by the DRC Conflict Sensitivity Hub after MONUSCO's exit but prior to the arrival of the AFC/M23 highlights this loss of protective capacity. The research notes that with MONUSCO's departure, communities and civil society actors are increasingly unable to discuss protection issues with security actors, especially when it concerns abuses committed by FARDC or the national police (DRC Conflict Sensitivity Hub, 2026).

partnerships on PoC including with more local and national civil society actors as well as INGOs. This reflects missions' recognition of their limitations and the value of collaboration with actors often better placed to engage with communities. While only anecdotal takeaways were found in this study, one challenge is for peacekeeping missions to adopt much more equal partnership approaches, as well as wider collaborative approaches, in order to shift power dynamics, let others set the agenda and themselves take on more of a facilitating and enabling role with organisations better placed to work with communities on PoC.

Complementarity also requires recognising the contributions of a diversity of actors. Increasingly in the humanitarian protection sphere there has been a recognition that peacebuilding actors contribute to protection outcomes through their work on preventing and reducing violence. In DRC, the current Humanitarian Country Team and Protection Cluster strategies are not only in line with a community-based protection approach to mitigate PoC gaps in the transition context in South Kivu,[30] but are also strongly committed to working with and recognising the unique contribution of peacebuilding actors in reducing violence and therefore reducing protection risks to civilians.[31]

Similarly, in Darfur, while UNITAMS lacked the right capacities on PoC by design, one mechanism that worked to reduce and prevent violence at community level was the Darfur Permanent Ceasefire Committee (PCC). This mechanism, linked to the Juba Peace agreement (see Gregory, 2024), acted as a conflict early-warning, early-response system, deploying mediation and dialogue capacities where tensions rose. It prevented violence from escalating and therefore acted to reduce protection risks faced by civilians in Darfur. Gregory reports this committee to be 'widely cited by those interviewed as one of the most successful mechanisms the mission invested in', although with the dissolution of UNITAMS these mechanisms have disappeared (2024: 29). There are opportunities to rethink roles, ways of collaborating and who can contribute to mitigating PoC gaps in transition contexts, by further exploring these opportunities.

4.3.2 Coordination forums do not automatically lead to more strategic collaboration

In DRC, the way the UN Country Team is set up with a triple-hatted DSRSG/HC/RC has greatly enabled coordination across UN funds, programme and agencies and with MONUSCO (see Levine-Spound and MacClinchy, 2022a; CIVIC, 2023). For many, in particular mission staff interviewed, coordination was effective and resulted in a better drawdown process. Mission staff noted that beyond the DSRSG/HC/RC, MONUSCO and the rest of the UN Country Team had existing coordination forums on protection

30 The Protection Cluster in DRC and its partners have made community-based protection a key element of their 2024 strategy and invested in mapping these mechanisms in South Kivu 'to improve coordination, avoid duplication, and build a strategy based on existing community structures' (InterAction et al., 2024: 2).

31 Lieberknecht found that in DRC organisations working on protection have a limited understanding of protection and practice whereas organisations that define themselves as peacebuilding organisations 'appear to use holistic approaches that are combining prevention/conflict resolution/ dialogue methods with protection methods, giving them a stronger and wider range of methods and more flexibility in their response towards identified protection risks on the ground' (2026: 2).

which enabled a smoother transition. One non-mission protection actor, however, felt that existing forums on protection were not working at a strategic level, and power dynamics between the mission and non-mission actors undermined effective collaboration with MONUSCO, which often imposed its vision on the drawdown and how they envisioned future PoC capacity. Many people interviewed in DRC felt the transition process had led to competition among UN actors rather than creating opportunities for collaboration, often leaving aside those working most closely with communities, including on preventing violence and protection risks.

4.4 UN leadership and political engagement on PoC in transition contexts

Unsurprisingly, given their mandate, large multi-dimensional peacekeeping missions were repeatedly perceived as carrying extensive political clout with host governments and, to a certain extent, other parties to the conflict. As peacekeeping missions draw down, they not only lose individual staff capacities and technical expertise for engaging politically on PoC issues, they also lose this political clout (see Gorur, 2025). With MONUSCO's exit from South Kivu, some interviewees reflected that a significant gap is the capacity to politically engage on protection, particularly with the government, as a smaller presence also diminishes the mission's political capital, despite the mandate of the RC/HC at country level.

In Sudan, the move from peacekeeping and humanitarian priorities to peacebuilding and development priorities led to the installation of senior UN leadership ill-equipped to provide adequate political engagement on the protection of civilians. According to Gregory, 'UNITAMS' bifurcated structure and leadership approach led to the separation of "political" and "protection" issues within the mission', leading to a lack of strategic political engagement (2024: 7). The UN leadership was unable or unwilling to act on humanitarian actors' analysis of the rapidly deteriorating conflict dynamics and the significant protection risks they created. According to one humanitarian actor, the protection pillar (which, as previously described, did not actually mandate PoC) of UNITAMS was 'completely abandoned':

> '[...] A mix of UNAMID withdrawing, the international community not dedicating leadership to the protection of civilians and subcontracting it to the humanitarians when we know that PoC is inherently political. They did not dedicate the right human resources to it and counted on the Juba Peace Agreement to be a PoC safety net. The Juba Peace Agreement was maybe for peace but not for protection. (Interview with humanitarian actor in Sudan)

UN actors in Sudan post-UNAMID exit were also reportedly unwilling to take over protection advocacy and engagement with government and perpetrators of violence, because it was considered too risky, potentially jeopardising their relationship with government and endangering access. These examples demonstrate another critical capacity gap that affects PoC in transition contexts. This should also inform how the UN repositions itself post-transition to ensure it retains capacity to engage on the political dimensions of PoC, with considerations given to options to reassert this role and maintain political capital, including through its relationship with the UNSC.

5 Conclusion and recommendations

Transition contexts present opportunities and challenges to mitigate PoC gaps, as seen in South Kivu, Darfur and South Sudan. In the three contexts studied, the UN Country Teams, including the peacekeeping missions, approach transition contexts as opportunities to hand back and reassert the duty of national state authorities to protect its civilians. This in itself has been an obstacle to mitigate PoC gaps, as national state authorities in these three contexts continued to be unable and unwilling to take full responsibility to protect civilians, remained significant perpetrators of violence against civilians themselves, and too often faced challenges to retain effective control over their territories due to ongoing conflict with armed non-state actors.

The three transition contexts studied also demonstrate that actors that could contribute to mitigating the PoC gaps are not always prepared to gear up and take on additional roles, as PoC capacities diminish when peacekeeping missions draw down. This includes state authorities as well as humanitarian, protection and peacebuilding actors. Examining these three contexts sheds some light on some of the challenges. Communities are central to efforts to mitigate PoC in transition contexts. They have capacities and knowledge to put in place strategies for their self-protection. But these have limits, face constraints and can be high risk without external actors' support for such efforts – support that is not always present, enabled or funded in transition contexts. UN funds, programmes and agencies, as well as some NGOs, must consider how to rebalance protection practices more towards preventing and reducing risks of violence to civilians. While many local, national and international humanitarian, protection and peacebuilding organisations use community-based protection approaches, effective practices are still not systematic, requiring further investment in capacity-sharing and learning.

Collaboration across actors working to mitigate PoC gaps in transition contexts is not always effective. While PoC partnerships, including with peacekeeping missions, are becoming more common, peacekeeping missions should consider their power and ways of partnering to ensure these partnerships lead to greater complementarity and the right division of roles and collaboration, to lead to better protection outcomes. The UN Country Team in transition contexts must consider how it can use its political capital, relaying and building efforts through community-based protection to effect greater change, including through connecting to global mechanisms such as the UNSC.

Ultimately, challenges will only be addressed and opportunities will only be capitalised upon if all actors and institutions involved are honest about the nature of these transition contexts. Current narratives, policies and frameworks that exist around transitions are premised on the basis of a normatively positive process, one that warrants a reduction in international support and engagement because of an improvement in the context and an increase in the will and capacities of national actors to take over. Without reconfiguring transition planning and preparedness away from normatively positive processes and accounting for the reality of challenges and needs, transition contexts will continue to suffer critical gaps and fail to engage the right partners to mitigate these.

This study highlights the potential to turn opportunities into realities and tackle the challenges and obstacles to better mitigate PoC gaps in transition contexts. To do so, the diversity of actors working to prevent and reduce violence and mitigate PoC gaps should consider the following recommendations:

- Transition contexts call for better preparedness and planning, including planning for worst-case scenarios and having clearer and more collective PoC strategies.
  - These should account for the loss of PoC capacities from peacekeeping missions and identify opportunities to gear up PoC interventions, both to reduce risks of violence against civilians and to invest longer term in building the protection environment.
  - The strategy should be articulated around what PoC looks like in transition contexts where peacekeeping missions draw down, where state authorities lack the capacity and will to protect civilians and where PoC needs remain high.
  - This should be supported by integrating planning for drawdown and exit of missions from the outset, including through collective planning and preparedness with non-mission actors.
- Such strategies should consider where opportunities to leverage existing capacities exist.
  - This should include accounting for the capacities of communities and community-level actors, (such as traditional leaders and community structures), local and national civil society, state authorities, national and international NGOs and the UN Country Team, as well as capacities across the humanitarian, human rights and peacebuilding sectors.
  - This should be supported by a reflection on who is best placed to play what role and how to better collaborate and complement interventions across actors and from the local to the global levels. This should include reflection on peacekeeping missions' roles and focus, and their shift to more enabling and facilitating roles.
- More powerful actors such as peacekeeping missions and UN funds, programmes and agencies should consider carefully how they account for power dynamics to enable more equal collaboration, complementarity and partnerships, by rethinking how they interact and work with others.
  - Considering who sets the agenda, who inputs to strategies, who holds the funding can help inform better collaboration that allows each actor to play their role and maximise their comparative advantage in transition contexts.
- Transition contexts call for the humanitarian sector, including UN funds, programmes and agencies, to rebalance protection work towards the prevention and reduction of violence against civilians, engaging with protection threats actively, and proactively seeking to reduce protection risks.
- This shift is happening slowly but requires more urgency in transition contexts to ensure the right interventions, capacities and skills are in place to mitigate PoC gaps.
- Investment in better practice on community-based and civilian-centred protection is needed, including to ensure more sustainable interventions that build on the agency, strategies and ownership of communities for their own protection.
  - This could be through peer-to-peer learning exchange and capacity-sharing.
  - This should also include a reflection on who is best placed to support communities and what the role of other actors is to ensure community-level efforts link up to national, regional and global efforts, in order to ensure impact. Not every actor should engage directly in community-based protection but all actors should consider what role they could play in supporting (directly or indirectly) community-level initiatives.
- The UN Country Teams, including the Resident and Humanitarian Coordinators, must consider how to make the most use of their political capital to engage on the more political side of PoC and complement the efforts of other actors to mitigate PoC gaps.

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