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ABSTRACT

What strains working relationships between United Nations (UN) peacekeepers and the humanitarian community? That is the question answered by this article. As UN peacekeeping missions and their practices evolve over time, so to do their relationships with partners and other actors in the field. The partnerships needed for a peacekeeping mission to be deployed and achieve its mandate are diverse and multifaceted. Missions such as United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA), United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO), United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) and the recently closed MINUSMA have undertaken 'robust' stabilisation mandates with more military capabilities than ever before which has been argued to have had a negative impact on the missions' relationships with non-governmental organizations NGOs). This article gathers recent experiences of how UN peacekeeping missions and the humanitarian community (including other UN agencies, funds and programmes, and NGOs) work together in the field to draw out the straining factors in those relationships. To do this, 31 semi-structured interviews were undertaken between September 2023 and February 2024 with participants with experience of such relationships between peacekeepers and humanitarian actors. Whilst presenting a rich dataset of experiences of individuals working in this space, the article highlights the importance of leadership across all organisations to drive common agendas and positive working relationships that are in the interest of conflict-affected communities.

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Introduction

As United Nations (UN) peacekeeping missions and their practices evolve over time, so to do their relationships with partners and other actors in the field. The partnerships needed for a peacekeeping mission to be deployed and achieve its mandate are diverse and multifaceted. For instance, the UN Security Council must work with potential troop contributing countries and the host state to deploy and sustain a mission. UN peacekeepers then

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work alongside other UN programmes and agencies and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) as part of integrated missions. Both the UN mission and non-UN humanitarian community will interact with civil society, the host state, and ultimately local communities in the implementation of their mandates. Effective peacekeeping requires good relationships between these actors and when interviewed, some peacekeepers have understood this to be more important than weapons (Furnari 2015, 25).

Whilst research has examined the relationship between the UN and regional organisations and the dynamics of different troop contributing countries (TCCs), qualitative research on the relationship between integrated UN peacekeeping missions and (a) other UN agencies funds and programmes and (b) NGOs operating in the same environment is fairly dated.[1] We have also seen missions such as the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA), United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO), United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) and the recently closed United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) undertake 'robust' mandates with more military capabilities than ever before with some research querying the impact of such mandates on the UN's impartiality and highlighting that a 'tarred with the same brush problem emerges for the humanitarian community' (Hunt 2017, 118). This research updates and deepens our understanding of these relationships given the more recent practices of stabilisation missions with robust mandates to use force.

In this article I document experiences of how UN peacekeeping missions work with and in the same spaces as the humanitarian community, including other UN agencies, funds and programmes, and international NGOs. To do this, 31 semi-structured interviews were undertaken between September 2023 and February 2024 with participants with recent experience of such relationships between the UN mission and other actors. Purposive sampling was used to find participants who had direct experience of peacekeeping at tactical, operational and strategic levels. This included individuals who currently or previously worked for the UN, including in the Secretariat, peace operations and other funds, agencies, and programmes, international NGOs, and troop-contributing countries. Most participants had first-hand field experiences with missions such as MINUSMA, MINUSCA, MONUSCO, UNMISS, United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL), United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) and United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) whilst others had functions where they liaised with or had oversight of activities across a variety of missions. Ensuring an appropriate gender balance was considered when contacting potential participants which resulted in a reasonable split of 58% men and 42% women.

A topic guide was designed for use in the interviews to build trust, empower the conversational partner and allow the interviews to search for context and richness the interviews were responsive with unscripted follow-up questions (Rubin and Rubin 2012). I did not seek to compare responses to an 'ideal' that has been theorised as the correct way of conducting missions or interacting with partners.[2] Instead the dataset accounts for the diverse array of interviewees and their experiences in the field and working for a multitude of organisations by giving value to all the views collected.

That said, the topic guide included specific questions on the impact of robust mandates and close working relationships between the UN and the host state on relationships with humanitarian actors. These questions were included to allow the interviews to contribute to and update the literature that has suggested integrated, and later, stabilisation

missions have led to shrinking humanitarian space.[3] Sauter (2022) found that integrated missions with stabilisation mandates led to a shrinking of humanitarian space and particularly MINUSMA blurred the lines between integrated peacekeeping activities and humanitarianism.[4] Hunt and Curran (2020) also suggest robust stabilisation missions have encroached on space traditionally used for peacebuilding. The dataset below specifically speaks to this contestation and lends weight to arguments that integrated peacekeeping activities, such as quick impact projects (QIPs), can have a negative impact on the mission's relationship with the humanitarian community.

Interviews also employed active subjectivity in narrative practice to allow participants to tell the story of their experiences (Gubrium and Holstein 2012). In this sense, the interviews were both investigative and narrative depending on the interviewee and their own experiences that they wished to share. This enabled the gathering of a rich dataset of views on the relations between different actors, the straining factors that have resulted in difficulties, what works well when peacekeepers are working alongside other actors, and unique stories of working under or alongside a robust mandate. However, given the size of the project, it was not possible to provide comprehensive coverage and a catalogue of experiences across all or most missions within a specific time period. Instead, this project provides useful snapshots that adds nuance to existing research on the impact of integration on peacekeeping missions' relationships with the humanitarian community and inform future work on how actors can improve these vital relationships that promote effective action in the field.

First, using both relevant literature and the interview dataset, the article describes how UN peacekeeping missions typically work with the humanitarian community in the field primarily focusing on other parts of the UN Country Team and international NGOs. Second, an analysis of the data using inductive coding resulted in five potential stressors that can impact relationships. Namely, the differences between the so-called blue and black UN, (mis)understandings around neutrality and humanitarian space, robust mandates, short vs long-term funding, and (mis)communication and information sharing. These stressors are both causes and effects of shrinking humanitarian space and the detail presented by participants adds significant depth to our understanding of how humanitarian space has been impacted by peacekeeping missions.

In the discussion, I highlight the importance of leadership and building trust to ensure UN peacekeepers and humanitarian actors are not 'talking past' each other – this may be a partial antidote to the difficult relationships that have ensued in integrated missions. This article contributes new empirical and conceptual insights to how peacekeepers interact with the humanitarian community. It builds on—but also challenges—existing findings and assumptions about the need to better coordinate and the negative impact of more robust, stabilisation mandates. These lessons are important for the UN when considering the 'what next?' of UN peacekeeping during the closure and draw down of current, large stabilisation missions.

Partnerships in peace operations: How UN peace operations collaborate with partners in the field

The need for UN peace operations to work with partners in the field has been acknowledged for some time. In the 1992 Agenda for Peace, UN Secretary-General Boutros

Boutros-Ghali explained that peacebuilding involves a range of actors that bring a variety of resources and skills. Since then peace operations have expanded their mandates and activities to include diverse ways of protecting people, statebuilding activity, and influencing the political sphere to 'become an instrument of soft power' (De Montclos 2014, 234). In 2008, the Capstone Doctrine recognised that UN missions are often deployed alongside many external actors with differing mandates but only asked missions to coordinate their own, internal military and civilian elements ('United Nations Peacekeeping Operations Principles and Guidelines' 2008, 69). It has been suggested that protection of civilian efforts in particular cannot succeed without partnering more widely, such as between the UN mission, other UN agencies, and NGOs, because of the economy of scale all of those actors bring to table and their different focuses that ensure there are no gaps in protection (Rolfe 2011, 564). As a result, this article focuses primarily on those relationships between the UN mission, other UN programmes, funds and agencies, and NGOs, and not on how missions work with, for example, regional organisations or the relationships between different TCCs.[5]

Integrated peacekeeping emerged in the late 1990s as a way of bringing together the UN's previously siloed military, diplomatic and humanitarian agencies under a single decision-making structure to better combat complex emergencies. Early debates around the efficacy of this decision centred on how the humanitarian community would benefit from coordination and armed escorts but conversely could result in the targeting of humanitarians by armed actors and the shrinking of humanitarian space. The humanitarian community raised concerns in 1997 through the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) arguing that humanitarians should maintaining independence from UN political and military activities.

Nevertheless, the Brahimi Report in 2000 recommended the creation of Integrated Mission Task Forces (IMTFs) 'that brings together those responsible for political analysis, military operations, civilian police, electoral assistance, human rights, development, humanitarian assistance, refugees and displaced persons, public information, logistics, finance and recruitment'. Similarly, it was suggested the UN Humanitarian Coordinator would no longer remain outside the peacekeeping mission and would serve as a Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary-General reporting directly to the Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG). Therefore, the SRSG would have authority over both the military and political aspects of the peacekeeping mission and the UN's humanitarian agencies, funds and programmes (see Figure 1). By having strategic partnership between these domains the UN aimed to develop integrated plans that improved the effectiveness of the UN in-country (Rolfe 2011, 571).

The UN continued to develop the role of the SRSG and Deputy SRSG (who normally concurrently serves as the Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator) throughout the 2000s.[6] Both Stoddard, Harmer, and Haver (2006) and Metcalfe, Giffen, and Elhawary (2011) found no clear evidence that the presence of an integrated UN mission increased the incidence of violence against humanitarian workers. Nevertheless, humanitarian actors believed association with an integrated UN mission pursuing a political mandate was a risk factor and that whilst UN armed escorts could improve humanitarian access this should be a last resort (Metcalfe, Giffen, and Elhawary 2011).

In 2008 the UN Secretary-General affirmed that integrated peacekeeping missions should 'allow for the protection of humanitarian space, to take full account of

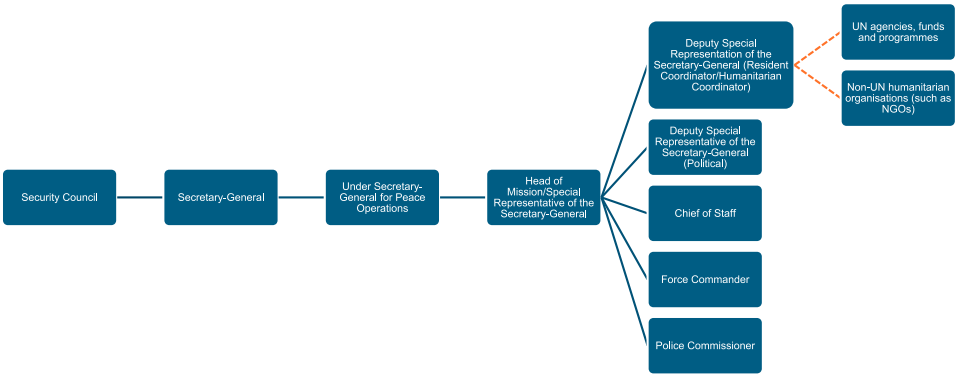

Figure 1. Example UN peacekeeping organisational chart.

humanitarian principles, and to facilitate effective humanitarian coordination with all humanitarian actors' (UN Secretary General. 2008). The Inter-Agency Committee (representing both UN and non-UN humanitarian organisations) undertook a review of the impact of integrated missions on humanitarian action reporting in 2015 that 'humanitarian actors somewhat recognise the practical benefits of coordination' with integrated missions at the strategic level, but improvements could be made on awareness of integration policy, humanitarian access arrangements and more (Task Team on Revitalizing Principled Humanitarian Action 2015).

More recently, stabilisation missions with robust mandates to use force, such as MINUSMA, have been used as a prime example of the continued strenuous relationships between integrated peacekeeping missions and humanitarian actors.

The UN has not formally adopted a definition of stabilisation or clear policy guidelines on what activities a mission that utilises stabilisation will entail. The use of stabilisation in mandates has been said to be a 'hodge-podge' of words and '[t]he danger is that the terminological imprecision surrounding "stabilization" creates a meta-category; full of buzzwords but empty of meaning' (Mac Ginty 2012). Some UN officials say that no specific significance should be given to the fact that some missions have been designated 'stabilization' missions. This, they argue, is because mandates are unique and peacekeeping is practiced no different day-to-day between stabilisation and non-stabilisation missions (de Coning 2018).

Nevertheless, the inclusion of stabilisation in a mandate 'indicate[s] a belief that force is a key element in solving conflict' (Karlsrud 2017). In particular, past mandates given to MONUSCO, MINUSMA, and MINUSCA share similarities in that they were mandated to extend state authority, operate alongside state forces and actively build the capacity of those forces, and use varying degrees of proactive, 'robust' force to prevent attacks on themselves and those they are mandated to protect. There is a distinct trend of stabilisation missions being asked to contain aggressors, enforce law and order, and protect civilians (de Coning 2018).

Missions that possess a stabilisation mandate are then focused on two areas, (1) the deterrence of armed groups and (2) peacebuilding activities aimed at creating state legitimacy within local communities (Tull 2018; Gilder 2022). Both of these actions are intended to extend state authority, first by displacing armed groups through the use of force for

state-centric counter-insurgency, or a more robust posture to be taken by UN forces, followed by civilian-led activities to entrench state authority in the vacuum left behind (Gilder 2019). Through its stabilisation strategy the UN seeks to support the host state as the designated legitimate authority and progressively build peace in territory that has been cleared of armed groups and spoilers, whether the offensive action is taken by the UN in cooperation with the state forces or by state forces acting unilaterally is dependent on the mission.

This integration of military action to entrench state authority with political, economic, and development efforts is deeply problematic for humanitarian actors. In 2019, Refugees International found MINUSMA's use of 'quick impact projects (QIPs) to build community support has blurred the lines between the international stabilization presence and humanitarian actors' (Lamarche 2019). The report recommended better coordination between MINUSMA and humanitarians on the mission's QIPs and that peacekeeping contingents should not directly provide humanitarian aid (Lamarche 2019). Similarly studying MINUSMA, Sauter found that the UN's stabilisation activities decrease local humanitarian access in the short term. Sauter highlights a key fallacy of integrated missions – that shrinking humanitarian space has meant humanitarians are limited in their access to populations which results in fewer attacks (Sauter 2022).

Given these changes in the mandating of major missions over the last decade, this article collects important, new data on how a variety of UN and non-UN actors have experienced their working relationships in the field. There is clear evidence that despite over two decades of work on improving integrated peacekeeping missions and how they collaborate with humanitarians, issues such as the division between the blue and black UN, (mis)understandings around neutrality and humanitarian space, the impact of short vs long-term funding, and (mis)communication and information sharing are problems that still prevail. Similarly, in stabilisation missions, such as MINUSMA, there has been added tension between non-UN humanitarians and the mission, but also recognition that robustness brings benefits to the security environment.

UN agencies, funds and programmes

UN peacekeeping missions rarely exist in isolation. With over 30 UN agencies, funds and programmes a UN presence can be found in almost every state. The UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) is present in over 190 countries and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in 120 countries. As mentioned above, where a UN peace operation is present alongside other UN bodies, it is now common practice that a Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary-General appointed to the peacekeeping mission simultaneously services as Resident Coordinator and Humanitarian Coordinator. The Resident Coordinator system aims to bring together the different UN agencies to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of operational activities at the country level. Whereas the Humanitarian Coordinator supports coordination of humanitarian operations among all international actors, including both UN and non-UN actors. But in practice, the Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator roles are often held by the same individual.

Coordination and collaboration between the mission and other UN agencies, funds and programmes has become common place under the resident coordinator system

and 'everyone agrees to coordination in principle'.[7] (Post)conflict situations require a huge amount of collaboration and integration of programmes that aim to protect and ultimately improve the lives of civilians and 'there have been standing arrangements for that for many years at this point'.[8] In particular, there will be programmatic areas of activity that the mission and other UN actors will share a common agenda.

For instance, Hopkins explains the World Food Programme (WFP) liaises with a myriad of parallel agencies providing emergency relief and there are Memorandums of Understanding in place with UN bodies to facilitate the coordination (Hopkins 1998, 86). As early as 1996, the WFP introduced a military liaison unit to support coordination of the WFP's rapid responses with relevant military actors. In a similar fashion, UNICEF will monitor the violations of children's rights alongside a peacekeeping mission's human rights team and co-lead on writing the country report on children's rights for the Security Council.[9] UNICEF and the mission's human rights team will have similar but complementary expertise and the mission will be able to negotiate directly with armed groups for the reintegration of children associated with the armed groups, which would not be possible for UNICEF to achieve due to humanitarian neutrality.[10]

Another example discussed was that of UNMISS. UNMISS and the wider UN country team created a standing working arrangement to co-ordinate on the impact of flooding that led to important cooperation between UNMISS and UNDP.[11] UNMISS also worked with the International Organization for Migration (IOM) to protect internally displaced persons (IDPs) displaced by flooding. This relationship was described as unique due to how the mission was able to

> leverage the processes of the IOM to procure equipment that we would not necessarily be able to procure. For us [in UNMISS], it takes about a year for a procurement process to but the IOM can raise funds and run a procurement process that's much quicker and bring on board some of the synergies that we are lacking in the mission.[12]

However, the partnerships in South Sudan were put under stress by whether armed peacekeepers were able to transport IOM or Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) personnel due to the need for the agencies to prioritise their neutrality. There is also a 'real reluctance' from some UN agencies to a joined-up and coordinated approach.[13] For example, one participant discussed how different UN agencies would run similar projects with limited coordination which they would then need to take active steps to retroactively address overlap through multi-agency meetings.[14]

Non-governmental organisations

NGOs are also routinely found working in similar spaces to UN peace operations undertaking a range of humanitarian and peacebuilding activities. The relationship between the UN and NGOs can be complex. Often the organisations will have overlapping objectives that, on the face of it, makes coordination appealing. Similarly, UN agencies will routinely contract NGOs as implementing partners to deliver UN-funded programmes. For instance, UNHCR has often devolved the management of refugee camps to NGOs including Care and the International Rescue Committee and UN Women manages a large number of implementing partners who carry out gender equality work in many countries (Stahn 2001, 381; Abiew and Keating 1999, 97).

Working in the same (post)conflict zone has necessitated UN peacekeepers learning how to approach and engage with NGOs. UN peacekeepers may be needed by an NGO for access and security (armed escort). There may also be overlap between a QIP undertaken by the mission and existing work by the an NGO in the region. But UN peacekeepers are not neutral, whereas NGOs rely on their neutrality as a core humanitarian principle that enables their work. Previous research has found that NGOs commonly worry about association with UN peacekeepers particularly where local support for the UN dwindles as this can impact the NGOs' ability to operate (Dorussen and de Vooght 2018, 2). Zanotti suggests integration between peacekeepers and NGOs may mean the NGOs are perceived as allies of the mission and lose the confidence of local populations (Zanotti 2010, 25). In the DRC, NGOs painted their vehicles pink to avoid association with the UN mission, MONUSCO (Mackintosh 2011).

These worries can stem from both the actions of the peacekeepers, such as where they are actively engaged in hostilities, or the extent to which the UN mission is cooperating with and supporting the host state government. The host state government may be unpopular, have committed violations of international law, or simply have a history of restricting the activities of NGOs on their territory which means the NGO must carefully navigate those relationships (Dorussen and de Vooght 2018, 2). In the same vein, NGOs are increasingly uncomfortable with sharing information with peacekeeping missions as information provided by them may be passed to political or military parts of the mission and used for non-humanitarian purposes (Marit 2012, 6).

That said, NGOs can provide critical insights to a UN peacekeeping mission. NGOs will often have been active in the country or region for many years prior to the arrival of UN peacekeepers and will have knowledge of local conflict dynamics that UN personnel cannot match (Stahn 2001, 382). NGOs will be able to provide early warning functions and alert the UN to changes in government relations with sections of the population (Aall 1996, vi).

Before discussing examples of the relationships between NGOs and UN peacekeepers, it is important to emphasise that there are humanitarian coordination systems to facilitate cooperation and information sharing between UN and non-UN humanitarian actors. Since 2005 the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) has operated a cluster system. Clusters are groups of UN and non-UN organisations in each of the main areas of humanitarian action (such as protection, water, health, education, food security etc). Each cluster has a cluster lead organisation (and potentially a co-lead) such as the education cluster being co-led by UNICEF and Save the Children (see Figure 2). Led in-country by the Humanitarian Coordinator, the clusters organise how UN and non-UN organisations will deliver on the agreed Humanitarian Response Plan (which is co-created by both UN and non-UN organisations).

The UNCHR has reported that the appointment of NGOs to co-lead a cluster generally improves partnership, advocacy and information distribution (UNHCR 2023). However, in one instance, a participant explained that when attempting to cooperate with a UN agency within a cluster 'all the UN agency did was ask us who our contacts were. It became very transactional, not at all strategic'.[15] Views on whether the processes for how the UN and non-UN organisations cooperate under the cluster system were mixed with one participant noting the coordination was clear 'with good working relationships'

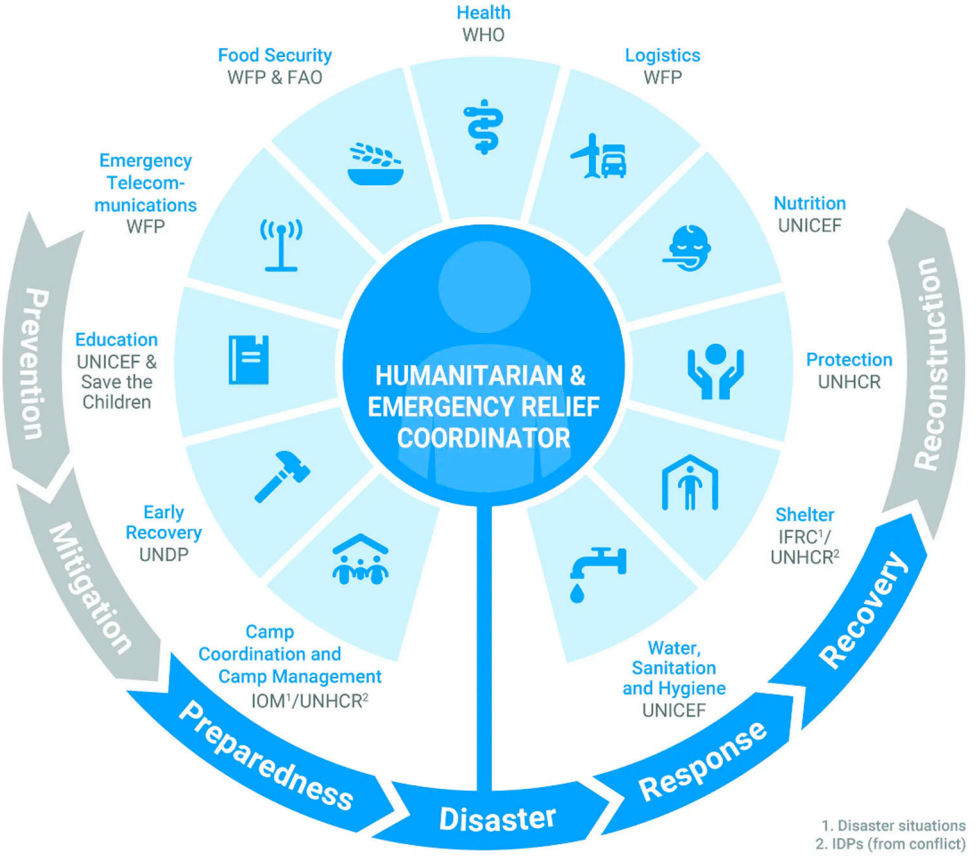

Figure 2. The humanitarian cluster system with designated cluster lead agencies. Source: From 'We coordinate', by United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, © United Nations. Reprinted with the permission of the United Nations. Available at https://www.unocha.org/we-coordinate. Downloaded on 25 June 2025.

but another explaining that it often felt as if you were 'two groups operating under different mandates'.[16]

Participants identified that the primary areas of cooperation between the UN peace operation and NGOs were (1) force protection provided to NGO personnel where requested (2) the use of UN compounds by NGO personnel where necessary due to the security situation in-country and (3) the exchange of information whether that be on the security situation or programmatic areas of overlap.

Stressors in peacekeeper's relationships with the humanitarian community

The blue vs black UN

The first stressor raised by numerous participants was the tension between the so-called blue and black UN. The blue and black UN get their names from the colour of their vehicles where the peacekeeping mission typically uses white vehicles with black 'UN'

lettering and other UN agencies, funds and programmes use blue 'UN' lettering or blue UN logos for their specific organisation. This difference may not be immediately evident to communities on the ground that engage with the UN but it is an important distinction for humanitarians who are conscious of the need for humanitarian space that is not encroached upon by an actor who may be, or at least perceived by some to be, a party to the conflict, such as the armed peacekeeping mission. A senior NGO official explained it is not always possible to explain the difference between the blue and black at the field level.[17]

Whilst not new, the tension between the blue and black UN can be evidenced in a few ways – both through clear instances of reticence of NGOs or the blue UN to be seen with the black UN and other comments made by participants about differences in views, experiences and working practices between military personnel and civilians that is part of or feeds into blue vs black tension. One participant explained how it is not always clear where the demarcation between the blue and the black UN should be. For instance, 'if you have IOM boats running in a place where there is flooding can armed UN peacekeepers get on board?'[18] The interviewee stressed there needs to be a balance between humanitarian principles and common sense, particularly during emergency situations.[19]

A senior Irish Army officer spoke of having to 'beat our way into the meetings [with the Resident Coordinator and OCHA]' to engage with actors beyond the mission on the protection of civilians and having to 'deliberately and forcefully reach out and make the case for coordination between military and humanitarian parts of the UN'.[20] Similarly, a senior UK police officer recounted that he managed to get invites

> to a few UN agency meetings and you could feel the suspicion and dislike in the room because my impression was that the UN agencies are more embedded in the country compared to the peacekeeping folk with our uniforms who fly in and out.[21]

A lack of previous experience of working together or an avoidance of working together in the current situation can lead to 'a real risk of people talking past each other'.[22] One participant spoke of 'real stove piping' between the military and civilian personnel due to the blue and black parts of the UN not necessarily being accustomed to working with one another.[23] Particularly on contentious issues, like the need to use of force to protect civilians, there may be fundamental differences in perspective between, for example, uniformed peacekeepers and a UN agency's child protection staff that are predominately social workers with vastly different experience.[24] Both police and military participants explained they were used to delivering specific outcomes on tight timescales but 'that is not the UN culture'.[25]

Humanitarian space, neutrality and force protection

The next stressor follows much the same vein. Force protection may impact the neutrality of the NGO and what they claim as their humanitarian space. The Norwegian Refugee Council reported a reluctance of NGOs to carry out joint assessments alongside UN agencies due to the UN agencies making use of armed escorts from the black UN which participants in this research mirrored (Marit 2012, 12). Making use of UN armed escorts could not only impact the perception of neutrality but also have a practical impact on the security of humanitarian personnel where peacekeepers are targeted by parties to the conflict and access to victims (De Montclos 2014, 234).

One former civilian UN peacekeeper explained they would often seek to undertake joint missions with NGOs to speak to voters in the community but that as UN staff they would go with a military escort from the mission whereas, the NGOs

> don't like any military escorts. So we have to change how we work. I will go separately and we will meet somewhere so that they are not associated with me because they see me as a challenge to their mandate. It becomes very difficult.[26]

Some NGOs will simply not wish to be seen with uniformed peacekeepers unless they are forced to do so due to the security situation.[27] But for military personnel the notion that the presence of the military attracts insecurity and makes humanitarians unsafe was described as 'perverse' because their mandate is to provide security.[28]

Whether UN peacekeepers fully appreciated how neutrality must work in the field was a point of disagreement amongst participants. One NGO official explained

> [t]he problem is that if they come to a village, you're walking around, and they just come and say hello to you, sometimes they offer you a cigarette … and this is a complete lack of understanding of how the relationship should work.[29]

Conversely, another participant stressed that all the UN personnel they spoke to 'understood neutrality perfectly'.[30] A senior Irish Army officer explained the need to be discreet and that he would be conscious his forces could not enter a camp under the administration of an NGO and any meetings with the NGO would take place away from the camp and would only include specialist officers.[31] Part of this issue may be affected by UN policy and how the demarcation (or lack of) between UN missions and humanitarian actors is detailed at the strategic level. One participant noted that 'NATO's protection of civilians handbook is actually very instructive in that it seems to recognize the validity of humanitarian space in ways that UN missions don't'.[32]

In Mali, in particular, NGO association with MINUSMA was problematic. A participant explained

> because [the international community] became such a target in Mali we saw bunkerisation and the UN peacekeepers having to choose between supporting others or protecting themselves so they always chose the latter. This then led to a negative perception [of the mission by NGOs].[33]

An NGO official drew a distinction between whether MINUSMA was a party to the conflict or not and that if they determined MINUSMA were a party then they needed to quickly install very strong separation and not be seen to work alongside the mission.[34] Nevertheless, another participant found it 'ironic that humanitarians are panicking that peacekeepers are withdrawing [from Mali] but they've been historically very critical of escorts'.[35]

Robustness

As mentioned above, the UN's largest peacekeeping missions over the last decade have been stabilisation missions with robust mandates to use force. Participants clearly reported this shift towards more proactive uses of force had created friction between the mission and humanitarian actors. Robust uses of force by the uniformed peacekeepers can mean 'other members of the UN family, particularly the humanitarians,

will want to remain a little bit at arm's length'.[36] Even within the mission, civilian staff will sometimes not wish to be escorted by armed peacekeepers operating under a stabilisation mandate that includes the robust use of force. The UK contingent in MINUSMA offered to provide support to the mission's civil–military cooperation (CIMIC) team

> but they weren't prepared to have a military escort for purely reputational and optical reasons, which surprised me because it meant that they were doing their jobs from behind the desk, behind the wire and actually had very little engagement with the local population.[37]

The increased use of force by large stabilisation missions has the potential to exacerbate already difficult relationships but robust mandates, and niche military capabilities that enable robustness, were largely seen as positive by participants as they allow the UN to be more visible, access the local population, and provide tangible improvements to the security situation due to greater freedom of movement.

Those who perceived robust mandates negatively often did so not due to believing the UN mission received little benefit from those units or mandates but instead because of a lack of understanding from those forces of their impact on the humanitarian environment and that their actions could lead to blow-back on the humanitarians and restriction of humanitarian space. For example, a senior NGO official felt 'the fact that [the mission was there] under Chapter VII was probably the most appropriate. It would have been highly problematic if they couldn't shoot first in some instances'.[38] But the more robust posture adopted by missions has created a bigger gap between the blue and the black UN potentially leading to some negative impacts on the humanitarian community.[39] Similarly, the niche capabilities provided by European TCCs in Mali could prevent a village from being encircled and impact the passive control armed groups held over areas.[40]

Short vs long-term funding

Another stressor in the relationship between the mission and other UN actors is funding and the short versus long term nature of these actor's engagement with the host state. Quick impact projects (QIPs), are an example of short term work where they are included in a UN mission mandate that must be renewed in 12 months' time. Whereas, other UN actors will have longer term projects that span several years funded by donors making them feel like 'they're in it for the long haul'.[41] For example, MINUSTAH's Community Violence Reduction programme undertook QIPs and 'collaborated with Haitian authorities, the UN military, other UN agencies, and national as well as international NGOs' (Müller and Steinke 2020, 65).

QIPs are seen to have value in how they can lead to the building of trust with the local population (Labuda 2020, 10). But QIPs proved contentious for participants with one suggesting '[i]t's a catastrophe and [the UN missions] need to stop'.[42] QIPs are used by missions transactionally to win hearts and minds. NGOs felt excluded from decision-making on QIPs with guidance explaining the mission should avoid overlap with the activities of NGOs but 'in practice, they never listen to that'.[43] Where information on QIPs was shared with NGOs active in the area, there was not 'the level of detail where you could tell if a project is really going to have an impact or not'.[44] The lack of detail was put down to the mission sharing overall plans but individual TCCs not needing to share specific QIP information with NGOs.[45]

Whilst some QIPs were seen as positive, such as engineering projects that would be difficult for NGOs to emulate, NGOs were concerned about the need for the UN to be weary of their impact on other actors.[46] For instance, distributing medicine and some of the medicine ending up on the secondary market.[47] But NGOs have little in the way of recourse where a QIP causes adverse impact

> There's no accountability. There's no specific complaint mechanism, so in the end what happens is the force just do what they want, even when we throw their own manual at their face and say, look what you're doing is unacceptable.[48]

One solution suggested was funds should be assigned for humanitarian NGOs to be integrated into the planning and implementation of QIPs in the same way as TCCs receive funds for their forces. The participant explained, 'there's an opportunity there in terms of how you fund QIPs better whilst leaving the peacekeeping forces to do what they do best, provide protection and facilitate access for humanitarian actors'.[49]

Another funding related criticism of was the focus of UN agencies on outputs and outcomes that must be evidenced by performance indicators and reported back to donors.[50] For example, a senior UK police officer explained their experience of working with the UN Development Programme (UNDP) 'was a nightmare' and 'one of the most demoralising parts of the job'.[51] This was because of pressure from UNDP for UN Police (UNPOL) to train as many South Sudanese police officers as possible and report how many had been trained whilst 'nobody cared that the people that were being sent to training couldn't speak English'.[52]

One participant explained how programmatic projects run through a UN agency would have an overhead cost of up to 42% to pay for agency costs. Whereas, if the mission were able to run the same project with administrative assistance internally, they 'could cut out the UN agency altogether and effectively run at about 15 to 20% overhead and then deliver more to communities'.[53] This made the participant 'thoroughly unpopular with a number of UN agencies' because they used this method of project delivery on a number of UNPOL QIPs to the exclusion of other UN agencies.[54]

(Mis)communication and information sharing

Whilst information-sharing between the UN and NGOs is encouraged by the UN Secretary-General, the Norwegian Refugee Council notes growing discomfort with the sharing of information due to concerns the information may be used to advance the military objectives of a peacekeeping mission (Abiew and Keating 1999, 95; Marit 2012, 6). Some sharing of information was not problematic for participants and examples were given of members of the humanitarian community being registered to shared mailing lists, inclusion in meetings with the UN mission related to the security situation and positive experiences of working with different teams within the UN peacekeeping mission such as on child protection. But others reported they were reluctant to engage in formal mechanisms of information sharing with the UN, such as a notification system, because 'we didn't trust them to respect the anonymity of the NGO'.[55] However, examples were raised of trust being fragile on both sides of the coin with one instance where an NGO had audio recorded a senior UN official in a humanitarian country team meeting and subsequently shared the recording. This was detrimental to the relationship between NGOs and the mission

'because if you can't be candid and if you cannot provide candid analysis of what is happening in the country then job is not being done well, but that trust was breached'.[56]

Sensitive information was raised by numerous participants. It is difficult to develop positive relationships, communicate on programmes or plans for the NGO to visit certain locations, if in so doing sensitive information would need to be shared. Numerous participants raised this as one of the biggest areas of contention and 'almost impossible to resolve'.[57]

Generally speaking, NGOs were chiefly concerned with sharing information that could be used to assist military operations and missions are unwilling to share information about operations. One worry was that information sharing must be reciprocated which could lead to the NGO needing to disclose sensitive information.[58] Information sharing could also be personality driven and reliant on the persons involved having a good prior understanding of what the organisations can and cannot share.[59] One way of avoiding reliance on individuals was to have previously negotiated access to relevant mailing lists which then means the sharing of information was by default for new staff.[60]

Some tension also emerged in situations where the UN and NGOs are seeking to verify information, such as where civilian harm has occurred. Examples were given where information had been successfully shared and verified, but a former UN official explained

> we can't just say Human Rights Watch did it and we accept their data. We need to prove it ourselves and while you would think that we could all share a little bit everyone pretty much holds their own independence and has their own reporting.[61]

(Mis)communication more generally featured heavily in interviews and was often rooted in differences in background, experience, and training between military and humanitarian actors. For instance, a UK policing unit tasked with undertaking community policing work sought to engage with NGOs active in the area in order to understand and align their activities. But one officer reported

> we got called in to our big boss, the Police Commissioner, who said to us, why are you talking to them? We thought is this a trick question because we've come here to do between community policing and our Commissioner is asking us why we talking to the NGOs[62]

Processes for communication and the assistance that should be provided by the mission to NGOs were not always clear can be demonstrated by one participant's anecdote from their time in Mali. A driver for the NGO had been shot and the NGO required a spinal stretcher:

> Every [UN] contingent has at least one and I asked all of them. None of them would lend me one for the duration of the trip from the hospital to the airport because 'we don't know you, this is expensive equipment and what if we need it right now'. In the end I did manage to get it, but from the French, not from MINUSMA … MINUSMA makes you pay for the airplane which might or might not be correct … and the process to get it was extremely complex. In fact, there is no process. You basically have to do a bit of begging, a bit of yelling, a bit of threatening to go to the media at various levels before you get that plane to evacuate your personnel.[63]

Conversely, participants with experience of the UN perspective also had instances of misunderstanding or simply not being fully on the same page as the NGO. For instance, it is

important that the UN mission have information on where the NGO is operating in order to plan what a protection operation would look like in the event those NGO personnel came under attack. A senior Irish Army officer explained,

> If you want me to come to the assistance of you and your staff, if something happens I have to write a plan for that. I have to rehearse the plan. I have to train my soldiers. I have to meet you and your staff every couple of months. You can't just suddenly click your fingers in an emergency and say 'we want the military. It was our full time job to think about these things, plan them and rehearse and evaluate units and we just did that constantly over and over and over. And we would gladly have done that with NGOs.[64]

In discussions with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), a TCC's legal advisor recounted that they asked the ICRC if they would want protection if they were attacked and reiterated that 'obviously we'd defend you'.[65]

This disconnect in perspective and communication appeared to stem from differing levels of experience of military-civilian/NGO engagement on both sides. An NGO official explained,

> there's not always a good understanding how the military work, how their missions work, how they get assigned, and that's a bit of a problem when we engage, because sometimes you will have people who might be fairly experienced on the NGO side but they've never worked for the military and they have no idea they're asking for things that are impossible to people who cannot tell them no.[66]

Similarly, there was a perceived attitude of the UN being 'pushy, authoritarian, and in charge' which meant 'a little bit of humility went a long, long way'.[67]

Despite integrated peacekeeping being in place for over two decades, the dataset provides clear evidence that peacekeepers and the humanitarian community regularly 'talk past each other', do not always have trusting relationships and may be perceived as transactional, and differences in funding leads to differing as opposed to integrated, mutually reinforcing priorities. The UN as a whole has also not made significant progress in how to differentiate between the blue and the black UN which continues to be a significant concern for humanitarians. That said, robust mandates were not as negatively perceived as some may have expected given the widespread criticisms of robust mandates in the broader peacekeeping literature. Instead, robustness as an approach was seen as positive but highlights the importance of work that improves peacekeepers' understanding of humanitarian space and neutrality.

The importance of leadership and mutual understandings

When asked about the antidote for those straining factors, several participants highlighted the need for leadership amidst dysfunctional organisations, systems and processes that negatively impact how actors collaborate.[68] Leadership can shape how staff engage with others and leaders can lead from the front to influence those behaviours.[69] Due to how personality driven these situations are, how leaders interact and engage with others can positively influence congenial relationships built on trust allowing the sharing of information where appropriate, inclusion of organisations in planning efforts and a better understanding of the challenges each organisation faces.

Communication between organisations and understanding of how military and civilians will have different backgrounds and experience is key. Some humanitarian staff

may not have worked in the same environment as military personnel and military personnel may not have any prior experience of UN deployments and the relationships that exist in those spaces. Uniformed participants spoke of how complete neutrality of humanitarians was 'difficult to grasp' particularly within the UN family and that they would step in and defend non-UN humanitarian colleagues despite not being completely clear on where they would want such force protection offered.[70]

Working within the UN system it is entirely possible that you will work with colleagues who 'will tell you 'no, you can't work on this because this is my our area' but the next day, that person is away or is out. Then another person comes in and wants to work with you very closely'.[71] Where career ambitions are brought into play, individuals may not wish to work with others across the UN system because positive dividends and credit for strong performance against indicators may go to others as opposed to solely being a product of that individual's agency/fund/programme.[72] Several participants discussed the need to be 'an honest broker' or to make a particular effort to bring other UN actors on board through existing relationships that have built trust on an individual level.[73]

Ultimately, building a positive relationship that allows for the sharing of information, trust, and understanding of each organisation's mission, approach, and restraints was described by participants as being personality driven. In some instances, individuals were able to rely on friends and acquaintances they've encountered previously and others stressed the need to be proactive in reaching out and constructing a relationship with organisations working in the same spaces or simply mindful of neutrality and other differences in approach between the UN and non-UN partners.[74]

For example, upon arrival, one participant working for UNPOL ensured they mapped out which organisations were undertaking certain activities, spoke to them, and, despite initial pushback from organisations and their UNPOL commissioner, worked their way into meetings with NGOs active in the POC camps.[75] The participant sought to make the relationships positive by ensuring that when attending meetings they were willing and able to answer questions in order to be accountable to the NGO community, and acted on suggestions from NGOs that would bring a meaningful impact to the community.[76] This is despite the participant noting the issue of neutrality being 'quite hard for us to grasp'.[77]

Conclusion

UN peacekeepers and the humanitarian community are necessarily operating in the same spaces, engaging with the same communities and both trying to provide a positive impact. This is unlikely to change in future missions. Building on literature that documents concerns around integrated peacekeeping missions and shrinking humanitarian space, the main contribution here has been a significant deepening of our understanding of the straining factors on working relationships between these actors when operating in the same (post)conflict environment. Unfortunately, the result is that similar concerns remain that were first raised in the late 1990s and 2000s when integrated peacekeeping was introduced. After over two decades of collaboration within the UN's integrated peacekeeping structures, participants recognised such coordination was accepted and brought benefits but that often peacekeepers and humanitarians would 'talk past' one another.

For participants, the key straining factors contributing to these difficult working relationships were (1) the differences between the so-called blue and black UN, (2) (mis)understandings around neutrality and humanitarian space, (3) robust mandates, (4) short vs long-term funding, and (5) (mis)communication and information sharing. Integrated peacekeeping activities, such as quick impact projects (QIPs), can have a negative impact on the mission's relationship with the humanitarian community and differing understandings of humanitarian space, neutrality and expectations around information sharing are clear stressors on the relationships presupposed by integrated peacekeeping.

At an individual and team level, personnel will need to engage in dialogue that aims to build trust and be understanding of the different approaches organisations must take due to command structure, funders, and other factors. Power dynamics will shift as personnel change and so too will the operating environment. Colonel Timothy O'Brien explained, military personnel may need to deliberately aim to work with humanitarians, demonstrate their willingness and understanding, and at times be discreet to account for humanitarian neutrality.[78] This shows the task is not insurmountable if willingness is there, even in the context of a complex conflict environment. Where leadership figures and individuals across the organisations are willing, act as honest brokers, and engage positively there is scope for UN peacekeepers and the humanitarian community to work together to improve protection and the livelihoods of civilians – a partial antidote to long-standing concerns around integrated peacekeeping.

Notes

1. See e.g. Stoddard, Harmer, and Haver 2006; Metcalfe, Giffen, and Elhawary 2011; Task Team on Revitalizing Principled Humanitarian Action 2015. Dorussen and de Vooght (2018) is a more recent example but is a smaller study with semi-structured interviews with only NGO personnel.
2. See the following examples of theoretical research that looks to the future of mandates, (Curran 2017; Karlsrud 2023).
3. See e.g. de Torrenté 2004; Harmer 2008; Metcalfe, Giffen, and Elhawary 2011; and Hoelscher, Miklian, and Nygård 2017.
4. See also Lamarche 2019.
5. See instead, (Schumann and Bara 2023, 2; Daniel, Williams, and Smith 2015; 3).
6. See UN 2006 and UN Secretary General 2008.
7. Interview with Colonel Timothy O'Brien, Irish Defence Forces.
8. Interview with a UN official.
9. Interview with an anonymous participant.
10. Interview with an anonymous participant.
11. Interview with a UN official.
12. Interview with an anonymous participant.
13. Interview with Simon Blatchly OBE, Former Police Commissioner (UNMIL), Chief of Mission Management and Support Section (Police Division, UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations), and Senior Police Adviser (UNAMI).
14. Interview with Simon Blatchly OBE, Former Police Commissioner (UNMIL), Chief of Mission Management and Support Section (Police Division, UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations), and Senior Police Adviser (UNAMI).
15. Interview with a senior humanitarian non-governmental official.
16. Interview with an anonymous participant; Interview with an anonymous participant.
17. Interview with a senior NGO official.
18. Interview with an anonymous participant.

19. Interview with an anonymous participant.
20. Interview with Colonel Timothy O'Brien, Irish Defence Forces.
21. Interview with Simon Blatchly OBE, Former Police Commissioner (UNMIL), Chief of Mission Management and Support Section (Police Division, UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations), and Senior Police Adviser (UNAMI).
22. Interview with an anonymous participant.
23. Interview with a US Government official.
24. Interview with a senior official at UN Women.
25. Interview with a former official with the UK's Long Range Reconnaissance Group to MINUSMA; Interview with Simon Blatchly OBE, Former Police Commissioner (UNMIL), Chief of Mission Management and Support Section (Police Division, UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations), and Senior Police Adviser (UNAMI).
26. Interview with a former UN peacekeeping civilian official currently working within a UN Country Team.
27. Interview with Major General (Dr) AK Bardalai (Retd).
28. Interview with an anonymous participant.
29. Interview with a senior NGO official.
30. Interview with an anonymous participant.
31. Interview with Colonel Timothy O'Brien, Irish Defence Forces.
32. Interview with a senior humanitarian non-governmental official.
33. Interview with an anonymous participant.
34. Interview with a senior NGO official.
35. Interview with an anonymous participant.
36. Interview with an anonymous participant.
37. Interview with a former official with the UK's Long Range Reconnaissance Group to MINUSMA.
38. Interview with a senior NGO official.
39. Interview with an anonymous participant.
40. Interview with a senior NGO official.
41. Interview with a senior official at UN Women.
42. Interview with a senior NGO official.
43. Interview with a senior humanitarian non-governmental official; Interview with a senior NGO official.
44. Interview with a senior NGO official.
45. Interview with a senior NGO official.
46. Interview with a senior NGO official.
47. Interview with a senior NGO official.
48. Interview with a senior NGO official.
49. Interview with a senior humanitarian non-governmental official.
50. Interview with a UN official.
51. Interview with a senior UK police officer seconded to a UN mission.
52. Interview with a senior UK police officer seconded to a UN mission.
53. Interview with Simon Blatchly OBE, Former Police Commissioner (UNMIL), Chief of Mission Management and Support Section (Police Division, UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations), and Senior Police Adviser (UNAMI).
54. Interview with Simon Blatchly OBE, Former Police Commissioner (UNMIL), Chief of Mission Management and Support Section (Police Division, UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations), and Senior Police Adviser (UNAMI).
55. Interview with a senior NGO official.
56. Interview with an anonymous participant.
57. Interview with an anonymous participant.
58. Interview with a senior NGO official.
59. Interview with an anonymous participant.
60. Interview with an anonymous participant.

61. Interview with a former UN official.
62. Interview with a senior UK police officer seconded to a UN mission.
63. Interview with a senior NGO official.
64. Interview with Colonel Timothy O'Brien, Irish Defence Forces.
65. Interview with MINUSMA's Long Range Reconnaissance Group's Legal Advisor.
66. Interview with a senior NGO official.
67. Interview with a senior UK police officer seconded to a UN mission.
68. Interview with a UN official.
69. Interview with Major General (Dr) AK Bardalai (Retd).
70. Interview with a senior UK police officer seconded to a UN mission; Interview with MINUSMA's Long Range Reconnaissance Group's Legal Advisor.
71. Interview with a former UN peacekeeping civilian official currently working within a UN Country Team.
72. Interview with a former UN peacekeeping civilian official currently working within a UN Country Team.
73. Interview with a senior official at UN Women; Interview with a former UN peacekeeping civilian official currently working within a UN Country Team.
74. Interview with a senior humanitarian non-governmental official; Interview with an anonymous participant; Interview with a former UN official.
75. Interview with a senior UK police officer seconded to a UN mission.
76. Interview with a senior UK police officer seconded to a UN mission
77. Interview with a senior UK police officer seconded to a UN mission.
78. Interview with Colonel Timothy O'Brien, Irish Defence Forces.

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