Summary Document and Analysis

Utilizing Modern Technology in Peacekeeping Operations
To Improve Security for Women and Girls

Introduction

The Department of Peacekeeping Operations has historically utilized technology to enhance missions, both conventionally and with the integration of the latest technologies, in order to fulfill its mandate to protect civilians. Today, the advent of modern technologies and the rapid development of new platforms for intelligence have not only necessitated that we look more deeply into how these technologies can have a positive impact in conflict and post-conflict societies, but also how they impact women, specifically.

On November 25, 2014, the United Arab Emirates Mission to the United Nations, the Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security, and UN Women hosted a panel on using modern technology in peacekeeping operations to improve security for women and girls. H.E. Lana Zaki Nusseibeh, Permanent Representative of the UAE to the United Nations, delivered opening remarks to contextualize the issue and moderated a panel of three experts; Hervé Ladsous, Under-Secretary General, Department of Peacekeeping Operations; David Haeri, Director, Policy, Evaluation and Training Division, Departments of Peacekeeping Operations and Field Support; and, Sarah Williamson, Founder and Managing Director, Protect the People. The experts described a number of case studies in which new technologies are being deployed by peacekeepers on the ground, and discussed the opportunities becoming available through new platforms and information streams, but also what challenges are presented by new technology. The main objective of the panel discussion was to explore how new technologies can be leveraged in peacekeeping operations to improve operational effectiveness, especially the protection of women and girls. It is important to note from the outset that women and girls typically comprise the majority of civilians in situations of violent conflict and are amongst the most vulnerable populations.

Rapid technological advances across the globe have created new opportunities as tools such as mobile phones penetrate even the most remote and volatile contexts. Today, there are more
than 6 billion mobile phone subscriptions, including 2.5 billion added from low and middle-income countries between 2009 and 2013 alone. A ‘digital divide’ persists between the developed and developing world in terms of access. For instance, only 6% of the population in low-income countries reported using the internet in 2011 versus 76% in high-income countries. There are, nevertheless, a multitude of ways in which technology can be leveraged to improve peacekeeping operations as it becomes more and more available in conflict settings.

As the terrain of violent conflict changes, the majority of today’s peacekeeping operations look vastly different than they did only decades ago. The primary objective in most peacekeeping operations remains the protection of civilians, but this mandate is made significantly more challenging by the way in which civilians – especially women and children – have become the main targets of violence throughout the world. Being able to predict emerging threats, react quickly and efficiently to instances of violence, and understand community needs are essential to effective peacekeeping; leveraging modern technologies can improve operations on all of these fronts. There are a number of different ways in which new technologies are already being leveraged to improve security for women and girls, and their success is a strong indication of the potential for these tools to be scaled up.

Monitoring

One of the areas where the potential for new technologies to enhance conflict prevention is greatest is early-warning monitoring, observing instances of violence, and predicting future threats. The majority of environments in which peacekeepers are working today are not conventional peacekeeping environments. Instead of arriving once a peace agreement has been signed, today many peacekeeping missions begin in the midst of conflict, in many cases without an accord to uphold. These uncertain contexts require intelligence-led peacekeeping that necessitates being able to predict and mitigate emerging threats. Aerial and satellite imagery is a powerful tool to monitor combatant movement, and as technological capabilities increase, they can provide detailed information to tailor interventions to the needs of local populations. Under-Secretary General Hervé Ladsous used the example of how unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) in the DRC have revolutionized MONUSCO’s work in the Congo, not only in monitoring combatant activity, but also in tracking migration and the movements of civilians being pushed from their homes by attacks. The majority of these internally displaced populations are women and children, so knowledge of their whereabouts is particularly important in improving the security of women and girls in conflict. UAVs and other geospatial intelligence tools can serve as deterrents to violence if combatants know their movements can be detected and they can be held accountable for crimes committed. Collecting and archiving this data also allows for predictive analysis. Attempts to create a coordinated platform to unify reports are laying the
groundwork for a historical database of conflict data that could be mined by analysts to predict patterns in future instances of violence.

**Reporting**

In addition to big data that can provide a more comprehensive set of analytics, technology opens new avenues to collect micro-level conflict data: eyewitness reports of violence, individual stories of sexual assault, and local opinions about community needs. Platforms for crowd-sourced data range from mainstream social media like Facebook and Twitter, to specialized apps like HarrassMap, to programs created specifically for certain communities. Women are often uniquely positioned to contribute to these information streams as they tend to be attuned to community-level happenings and trends. Such “crowd seeded” data can be a major asset for peacekeepers in targeting aid and adapting to local specificities. One instance in which crowd-sourcing tools are being leveraged to improve security for women are the rise of initiatives to help women safely report and document sexual assault. One MONUSCO program involved an SMS reporting tool that allows civilians to register reports to violence directly to UN peacekeeping forces. Other tools are being created specifically for women, like the mobile phone app HarrassMap, which allows women to record instances of sexual harassment, creating a real-time map of areas where harassment is most prevalent. Though this kind of self-reporting can be more difficult to verify, it can be used to corroborate other information streams and helps underscore the seriousness of claims that may otherwise be disregarded, a common problem when it comes to reporting harassment or violence against women. In these cases, technology can provide an extra layer of safety for reporters as community contributors can often be targeted for collaborating with peacekeeping forces, and women in particular face a backlash for reporting on crimes of sexual violence. These technological tools can mitigate the risk of sharing information directly, and depending on the platform can provide anonymity for sensitive cases where victims are unwilling to be identified.

**Technology in prevention, protection and participation**

Crowd-sourced information can be used constructively in a number of ways beyond reporting violence. The same technologies that allow women to report street harassment can be harnessed to improve women’s voice and agency in conflict and post-conflict settings. Improving women’s access to information and avenues through which to share their opinions helps ensure their voices are part of important discussions about political transitions, peacemaking and community development. As David Haeri pointed out, improving security for women extends beyond physical protection to creating a protective environment with strong rule of law and stable political institutions. Including women’s voices in post-conflict recovery is critical in ensuring that
these institutions address their needs as countries transition out of conflict. Even basic steps such as installing streetlights and increasing access to clean water can make a marked difference in the safety and security of women and girls, but in many cases, women are not consulted when it comes to reconstruction efforts. As such, their perspectives and ground-truths are marginalized. Sarah Williamson described an initiative in South Africa called Violence Prevention through Urban Upgrading, which sought to change this by incorporating community input and crime data when redesigning a downtown area. A visible drop in assault in the areas transformed by the project shows the importance of these small steps in providing real security to women and girls.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Address the digital divide in the developing world, particularly between men and women, and the urban/rural divide. There is a ‘digital divide’ between the developed and the developing world, as well as between men and women, making women in the developing countries less likely to have access to new technologies. In developing countries, rural populations have the least access, where women are particularly marginalized. In times of conflict, that marginalization is exacerbated by a lack of access to communications technology, which can provide women with the ability to better protect themselves, their families, and their communities, but only if women’s access to technology is improved.

Ensure gender sensitivity when leveraging new technologies. There is immense potential to leverage new technologies in improving security for women and girls, but it is important to be gender-sensitive in the production and use of these tools. Just as mobile phones, internet platforms and geospatial intelligence can offer new opportunities to better understand conflict dynamics, they also open up possibilities for abuse and can endanger the women who use them.

Technology is not gender neutral, and it must be deployed with this understanding in order to be effective. There are a number of gendered factors that must be taken into consideration when using modern technology to improve security for women. When MONUSCO distributed mobile phones in the DRC to aid in reporting instance of violence, community liaisons worked primarily with local leaders, who tend to be men. Thus, the majority of mobile phones were given to men, not women, and women were less likely to report sexual violence, as to do so would require approaching either a male community leader or a man in their own family. Even in cases where safety is not a risk, as in anonymous community polling or SMS tools for engaging with elected officials, if mostly men are able to access and use these platforms for input, the data collected may not take into account women’s voices, even if it seems at face value to be an objective survey. Understanding who has access to and control of technological tools is necessary.
in order to provide a safe and confidential way for women to monitor and report violence and to voice their opinions.

**Verify the validity of crowd-sourced reporting and maintain the confidentiality of data.** This is a significant challenge for peacekeepers, but the need to preserve confidentiality of data remains paramount, particularly for women. With tools such as social media or SMS reporting, selection, recall and reporting biases all tend to be inevitable. Peacekeeping operations must develop systems to triage the large amounts of reports, but also ensure that reporters’ identities are safeguarded in sensitive cases. Especially in instances of sexual violence, identifying victims can lead to social stigma and backlash against them by their families or communities or even new attacks. Online platforms also risk targeted political violence against women. While modern technology can facilitate protected reporting of these crimes, it can also expose victims through identifiable usernames or phone numbers if data is leaked. It is also important that data security and data analysis keep up with developments in technology so that new sources of information are channeled to provide efficient, relevant and timely tools to improve safety and security for women and girls in conflict.

**Tailor the deployment of technology to specific actors.** There are different actors in any peacekeeping situation, and each of these actors has different technological capabilities and access. It is necessary to tailor initiatives to police, military, humanitarian agencies, civil society organizations, political actors, and civilians that are useful and usable to each group. Improving peacekeeping through new technologies requires partnering with the private sector so that those who are developing new tools are doing so in a gender-sensitive manner, and partnering with local communities to understand how and by whom technologies are used on the ground.

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