Written Submission

Submitted to the

House Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights, and International Organizations

Mike Jobbins, Search for Common Ground

Hearing on "UN Peacekeeping Operations in Africa"

April 30th, 2019

Thank you very much for convening this timely and important meeting to focus on United Nations' Peacekeeping in Africa, and for the attention that this committee has shown to African countries experiencing violent conflicts as well as to addressing root causes. I would like to submit several thoughts for your consideration. This perspective is informed by my work with Search for Common Ground, an international peacebuilding NGO with 30 offices in sub-Saharan Africa, but the reflections are my own.

In line with Search for Common Ground's long-term commitment to supporting people and partners in Sudan, South Sudan, Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Mali, and Somalia and elsewhere to build healthy, safe, and just societies, we have worked alongside the UN system and peacekeeping missions. We have also worked with peacekeeping missions that have ended in Cote d'Ivoire, Sierra Leone and Liberia.

The Role of Peacekeeping in Africa's Crises
Deploying peacekeepers has become the preferred international policy response to deal with violent conflict in Africa. Often those peacekeepers are deployed by the UN and sourced from around the world, primarily from other developing countries in Africa and Asia. **Today, 86,855 UN peacekeepers are deployed to support the six peacekeeping missions across Sub-Saharan Africa, a force larger than the entire armed forces of South Africa**. While peacekeeping budgets have declined in recent years, UN peacekeeping missions still represent some of the largest and most visible commitments to countries experiencing violent conflict.

Within these missions there have been examples of true heroism and sacrifice. More than 240 peacekeepers have given their lives serving in these six missions, dying far from home protecting a people who are not their own, and in areas little-known to many of their countrymen and women. From sheltering civilians in PoC sites in South Sudan to shoring up Bambari in the Central African Republic, peacekeepers have protected civilians and saved lives in very direct ways.

Humanitarian organizations, NGOs, and local communities benefit directly and indirectly from peacekeeping missions to access remote areas. In our own experience in the Democratic Republic of Congo, for example, we have relied on MONUSCO air links and MONUSCO-rehabilitated roads to reach displaced people and remote regions. Roads maintained and patrolled

by peacekeepers not only benefit international actors, but open communication, enable businesses to resume, and improve stability for those living along these axes.

Like humanitarian aid, peacekeeping is an instrument crafted to deal with acute crises – the imminent threat of violence by identified armed actors but is often deployed where fragility and insecurity is chronic. **Peacekeeping is fundamentally a military instrument, deployed to places where there is no enduring military solution. As such, it is a vital and necessary capability, but within an international peace architecture that is struggling to build peace in the most fragile place**s.

The international response to crises in Africa – DRC, South Sudan, Mali, Central African Republic, Sudan, Somalia – has undoubtedly saved many thousands of lives. But it is impossible to look at ongoing violence in a place like Beni in the DRC today and say that we are where we thought we would be 20 years ago when MONUC was first mandated. **If I look at the places where there were peacekeeping missions when I was a teenager (20+ years ago), almost all still have peacekeeping missions today**. Only the Mano River countries – Liberia, Sierra Leone, Cote d'Ivoire have I seen peacekeeping missions end in my lifetime. **That is not a failure of the peacekeeping missions themselves, but it does represent a failure to create the environment in which they can succeed.**

Improving Peacekeeping Effectiveness at an Operational Level
As this committee considers how best to increase the effectiveness of peacekeeping missions narrowly and achieving America's interest in helping the six countries where peacekeepers are deployed become stable, prosperous, and open societies broadly, **I would like to suggest a set of recommendations both on the strategic role of peacekeeping as well as at the operational level in how missions are implemented. Operationally:**

1. **Peacekeeping missions should manage expectations and improve trust, accountability and buy-in among the communities they serve.** Peacekeepers lose credibility with host communities when they are seen as failing to save civilian lives. The grand arrival and high visibility of seemingly well-equipped and armed troops naturally raises expectations among civilians that a fighting force will be in place to counter violent threats and protect civilians. This can be reinforced by the UN, the international community, and local leaders seeking to assert confidence and project that the situation is "under control."

   However, in places where peacekeepers only use force when they come under attack, whether by mandate or practice, it comes as a brutal shock when they do not seem to adequately defend the civilian population. When civilians are killed, and peacekeepers are viewed as neglecting their duty, the host community loses faith that the mission is acting in their best interest and resists its presence. **Ambiguity about the role of UN missions and when they will or won't use force, in the public and social discourse encourages public resentment and undermines the degree to which they pose a credible threat to armed actors**. It also opens the UN force to harassment from local communities, armed actors, and security forces. **In addition to the structural question of the mandate of the mission itself, whatever the mandate may be, there is a need to establish clear and predictable expectations in terms of the use of force.**

2. **Violations of human rights and the perpetration of sexual and gender-based violence must be dealt with seriously and transparently.** When abuses by peacekeepers occur, there is very little transparency or accountability to the communities or victims. Human rights abuses by peacekeepers – and the way in which they are handled – not only take advantage of some of the neediest people in the world, but they undermine the effectiveness of the mission, normalize impunity, and reinforce a culture of exploitation. In addition to systemic reform at the New York level, abuses must be investigated locally and with the engagement of communities, victims, and transparency to the wider society within the boundaries of protecting confidentiality.

   Peacekeeping troop deployments have inherently high risks of abuse. Many troop contingents are (a) being deployed from countries with mixed internal training and accountability cultures prior to deployment; (b) are being put into a new and stressful environment with little connection to the civilian population – often not even a shared language; (c) without the command-and-control structure of their regular units; (d) with serious power-imbalances with the local population; and (e) in geographically remote areas. All of these are known to be risk factors in any military deployment. **Beyond only pre-deployment training, peacekeeping missions should consider ongoing *in situ* capacity building focused on increasing understanding of the civilian population and creating positive behavioral norms around reporting abuses and encouraging positive engagement with the civilian population**.

3. **UN missions should employ a communications strategy that focuses on building buy-in, and not just improving public image.** Many UN missions have established their own radio stations, such as Radio Miraya in South Sudan or Radio Okapi in the DRC. One of the reasons why MONUSCO (formerly MONUC) was initially accepted by the Congolese population was because of widespread appreciation for Radio Okapi. The radio brought real value to millions of lives and importantly brought clarity and transparency to the pace process and international activities, *including* the work and mandate of the UN mission. The success of Radio Okapi came in large part due to the UN's partnership with the Swiss NGO Fondation Hirondelle, a professional media organization with an independent editorial line and professional journalistic practices. In South Sudan, Radio Miraya airs content from independent radio producers such as the popular *Sergeant Esther* which explains South Sudanese laws through an *NYPD Blue-*style radio drama.

   The trust and credibility of UN radio stations are enhanced through deep structural partnerships with professional media organizations able to craft a distinct editorial line and journalistic practice. **Creating communications channels in politically charged, highly-conflictual, complex crises require discipline, professionalism and independence. Where they do not have these qualities, UN communications platforms risk becoming mere mouthpieces for the mission itself, and giving "voice" to their public affairs personnel, rather than serving as a channel to raise the voices of ordinary citizens hungry for objective information, debate, creative content and a chance to speak out on matters of war and peace in their country**.

Improving Peacekeeping Effectiveness at a Strategic Level
American and international policymakers are overly reliant on reactions to acute crises without a coherent vision to resolve chronic problems. In 2012, I was in Bangui in the Central African Republic – a country that has had five peacekeeping missions – as the Seleka rebellion was marching across the country. As we were reviewing the towns that had fallen and the humanitarian needs, one discouraged UN official remarked to me that "*the problem with this country is that for the last ten years, we've been substituting peacekeeping for peace; and humanitarian aid for development.*" The analysis stuck, and it is a trap that we risk falling into again without more coherent strategy. Specifically:

1. **The U.S. should accompany its peacekeeping support with robust diplomatic and development engagement aimed at solving crises.** The underlying causes of the six crises that have created the need for each of the U.N. peacekeeping missions in Africa cannot be solved with peacekeeping or humanitarian aid, yet these represent the overwhelming U.S. financial and political commitment. **Places like South Sudan, the DRC or the Central African Republic require a whole-of-government strategy and commitment, close coordination with international partners, and assistance instruments that can support an end to the crises: reconciliation, justice, security, and inclusive economic recovery**. This requires adequately resourcing USAID and the State Department and ensuring sufficient interagency attention and resources are brought to bear.

   The proposed USAID Bureau for Conflict Prevention and Stabilization and the Administration's vision for a Journey to Self-Reliance create a window for fresh thinking, and the six countries with active peacekeeping missions should be among their priority areas. Congress can play its role by elevating the visibility of these countries, engaging with the Administration to develop long-term strategy, and creating instruments to solve these sorts of problems by passing the Global Fragility Act (HR 2116), implementing the Eli Wiesel Act, and using the annual appropriations process to fund the Complex Crisis Fund, USAID's People-to-People Reconciliation Program and Conflict and Stabilization Operations at State.

   For example, MINUSCA partnered with Search for Common Ground and a group of religious youth groups – supported by the State Department's Bureau of Democracy Human Rights and Labor – to re-open and rehabilitate the main Muslim cemetery in Bangui after a year of crisis, one part of a strategy to desegregate the capital. MINUSCA brought its security guarantees and support, Search engaged with the armed groups, Christian and Muslim youth mobilized their communities, working in close partnership between peacekeepers and peacebuilders.

2. **Peacekeeping missions should have realistic goals, expectations, and close coordination with local actors.** While Civil Affairs, protection, and community liaison staff are vital components of a mission, peacekeeping is still a fundamentally military instrument. One Congolese activist reflected *"if you look at some of the worst violence here – say, an old woman who is killed in the night, or a baby has been dashed against rocks – what is a young soldier from Tanzania or South Africa supposed to do about that? How can he understand why that happened, or help 'protect' from it?*" In many places the triggers for violence lie in the histories of conflict, trauma, local politics, injustice and grievance, rooted in place and society. UNMISS struggles to deal with intra-Nuer frictions within PoC sites in South Sudan; to address the brutal

local dynamics of violence and vengeance in North Kivu; to help Muslims and Christians feel safe moving freely in the CAR. These are not – and cannot be -- soldiers' skillsets.

The answer is not for UN peacekeeping missions to move into civilian-led peacebuilding, or for an endless mission-creep pushing peacekeepers to have in-house capabilities to solve every social problem in areas where they are deployed. They are one actor within a complex system. Instead, missions need to have the right kind of personnel and the strategic vision to coordinate with local government and peacebuilding groups with each playing the role to which they are best suited.

For example, in the DRC, Search for Common Ground organized "protection mornings": regular meetings between MONUSCO staff, local civil society, the religious community, national security groups, and aid workers to share intelligence, concerns and risks, and figure out who was best placed to respond.

3. **Peacekeeping missions should include local voices and ensure participation in setting clear benchmarks and objectives, from drafting the mandate, to implementation, to exit strategies.** The nature of multilateral cooperation means that the mission and mandate of U.N. Peacekeeping missions are inherently diplomatic exercises, involving cooperation and coordination in New York, with troop contributing countries, with the host-country government and many more. As a result, **strategy development risks becoming a top-down, international expert-driven process. Yet, the ultimate success – and particularly a successful exit – requires the buy-in and ownership from those who are most affected by the crises and those who will be critical to long-term success. This should be reflected in agreeing to a shared definition of purpose and benchmarks for success, involving communities, local government, and the whole of the U.N. system.**

For example, UNMIL, the Liberian Government, Search for Common Ground, and a team of local and international researchers partnered to use the Social Cohesion and Reconciliation (SCORE) Index to benchmark UNMIL's drawdown. The adoption of this set of standards for measuring progress in social cohesion and reconciliation before, during, and after the UNMIL exit enabled wide citizen participation and a shared definition of "success" by all the actors in the system. More than 2,300 citizens across the country participated in the SCORE process, it was widely discussed on the radio, and achieved high levels of popular and political buy-in, ultimately laying the groundwork for a reconciliation roadmap along with the mission's drawdown. At the launch, Liberian President George Weah praised the process at its launch, observing that the process reflected the "*voices [of] the ordinary people, who became frontline soldiers during our war, whose communities were destroyed, their children raped or used as instruments of death… Conclusive reconciliation in Liberia cannot be achieved if the voices of locals are not heard.*"

In sum, while there have been undeniable successes in UN peacekeeping in Africa, it is hard to say that the international community is succeeding in the six African contexts where peacekeepers are deployed. Like humanitarian aid, peacekeeping missions are a valuable tool to save lives and create space in acute crises. But to move from peacekeeping to lasting peace, we must build and deploy new instruments and partnerships to address the chronic

nature of each of these crises, while improving transparency, accountability, and communications within each of the operations. These kinds of changes will require tactical and strategic shifts within the UN system, close coordination with other partners, but also determined commitment by the U.S. Administration and Congress to ensure our strategy is focused on problem-solving, supporting safe, healthy and just societies, and ending the chronic need for peacekeeping and humanitarian aid.