The Role of United Nations Police (UNPOL) in the Maintenance of Peace and Security in African Fragile States: A Comparative Study of DRC & South Sudan

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Abstract

This article focuses on the challenges UNPOL faces in fragile states in Africa. Several socio-political and operational factors often shape conflicts and peace in Africa. The article hinges on liberal institutionalism as its theoretical framework. Drawing from the DRC and South Sudan case studies, this article adopts a mixed methodological approach with secondary and primary data from Key Informant Interviews (KIIs). The article presents the results of qualitative data analysis in the narrative form. The study finds that UNPOLs in fragile states face numerous challenges in executing their mandates. It identifies that UNPOL in South Sudan experiences resource constraints, political instability, a complex security environment and a humanitarian crisis. On the other hand, UNPOL in DRC encounters two additional challenges: Ebola outbreaks and regional power dynamics. This article concludes that a complex security environment coupled with regional security and power dynamics, political instability, resource constraints, and a humanitarian crisis significantly impede the peacekeeping and peacebuilding efforts of the UNPOL in fragile African states. Despite the commonalities in UNPOL challenges in fragile states, the context-specific challenges require tailored interventions.

Keywords:

Africa, Fragile States, South Sudan, DRC, UNPOL, and Peacekeeping Challenges

Introduction

The United Nations Police (UNPOL) is a vital part of the United Nations Peace Operations. It consists of Formed Police Units (FPUs), individual police officers (IPOs), specialized teams, and civilian experts. According to UN Police (n.d.), there are 12387 UN Police officers from over 93

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countries being deployed in 11 UN peacekeeping operations and 6 Special Political Missions. The goal of the UN Police is to promote global peace and security by assisting member states during times of conflict, after conflicts, and in other crises to implement reliable, authentic, adaptable, and accountable security that serves the populace. In modern peace operations, police are tasked with a wide range of vital duties. These responsibilities include restoring law and order, protecting civilians, UN personnel, and mission facilities, and supporting the restructuring of law-enforcement institutions.

During the Cold War, peacekeeping operations (PKOs) were predominantly military, acting as an unbiased global force that observed and oversaw ceasefires before negotiating a peace agreement. Yilmaz (2005) and Kertcher (2012) observed that these operations were often limited to inter-state conflicts and were focused on maintaining a fragile balance between the two superpowers, which constrained their scope and objectives. However, the collapse of the bipolar global order after the Cold War significantly altered the nature of conflicts. O'Neill and Rees (2005) attributed this change to the disintegration of the USSR, the culture of democratization, and the globalization of threats. The breakup of the USSR and the failure of leadership to prevent it aggravated the implicitly ethnic nationalist civil wars in Eastern Europe witnessed in the breakup of the Balkans. Likewise, the agencies of democratization in Africa provided an opportunity for the revelation of underlying ethnic and governance deficits that triggered civil wars and other forms of instability. Moreover, the new forms of threats, such as terrorism taking place across borders, added to the new character of contemporary warfare.

The shifts described above fit into what Kaldor (2013) describes as 'New Wars'—wars characteristic of globalization and the weakening of authoritarian states due to increased openness to the global economy. Kaldor argues that the 'new wars' of the 21st century are different from the 'old wars' of the 19th and 20th centuries in terms of actors, goals, methods, and forms of finance. The scholar also noted that the 'new wars' are a threat to state building and have a tendency to spread and to persist or recur; a feature that is post-Clausewitzean. This evolving landscape brought an even greater need for PKOs, with the mandate of the UNPOL expanding beyond merely monitoring host-state police services. In the modern era, the UNPOL supports the establishment of a cease-fire, disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration (DDR) for former combatants; security sector reforms (SSR) to assure stability through training programs and also in assisting in electoral arrangements and promoting human rights.

Despite the overarching mandate to assist in developing host countries' police services to uphold the rule of law, UNPOL encounters other significant obstacles that impede the effective execution of its mission. These challenges range from political, security, social, and operational challenges. Durch (2014) argues that the increasingly complex and ambitious mandates of the UNPOL, coupled with the continued deployment of UN peace operations to progressively unstable operational situations have given rise to new challenges for the UNPOL. Consequently, the UN and Police Contributing States (PCCs) are forced to enhance their capabilities to match the

aspirations of the UNPOL to the dynamics and realities of their operational environment. Overcoming these obstacles has led to fresh initiatives to assess, create guidelines for, and provide training for UN police.

According to the Fragile State Index of 2023, 14 of the world's top 20 most fragile states are in Africa, with Somalia, South Sudan, and DRC topping the list (Bassey et al., 2023). This article focuses on the DRC in Central Africa and South Sudan in the Horn of Africa. These two African nations have experienced protracted conflict, political upheaval, and social unrest. Day (2022) highlighted that the DRC has, for decades, experienced armed conflict, resource-based conflicts, and poor governance. On the other hand, Day (2022) also noted that South Sudan has struggled with internal strife since gaining independence. Ensuring peace and security is, by all means, complex within these two volatile African nations. It becomes easier to appreciate the importance of UNPOL and at the same time understand the diverse nature of the challenges in the two countries that UNPOL is mandated to undertake. Consequently, understanding the challenges UNPOL faces in these contexts is essential for comprehending the complexities of peacekeeping efforts in fragile regions.

Theoretical Basis

This study's theoretical framework is based on liberal institutionalism theory. Some of the leading theorists of this paradigm include Robert O. Keohane, Joseph S. Nye Jr., and John Ruggie (Johnson & Heiss, 2018). Liberal institutionalism originates from liberalism and rejects the realists' conception of an international structure based on egoist power struggle and uncertainty (Johnson & Heiss, 2018). On the contrary, liberal institutionalism posits that institutions develop structures that make cooperation possible. Liberal institutionalists agree that states could form domestic and international organisations and coalitions that put aside rivalry, conflicts, or wars (Monteleone & Oksamytna, 2020). Thus, a renewed reliance on institutions, cooperation, and norms can be attributed to liberal institutionalism in regulating relations in the global system.

According to Johnson and Heiss (2023), liberal institutionalists argue that international institutions actively determine state behaviour. This institutionalist perspective also holds that the accumulation of interests through cooperation is more important to maintaining peace than the balance of power. Liberal institutionalists point out that international organisations such as the UN help set up norms, rules, and expectations about state conduct in conflict areas (Monteleone & Oksamytna, 2020). Therefore, the theory offers a framework for evaluating what role international institutions and cooperation can play in maintaining peace and security. Since UNPOL works under the overarching system for conducting PKOs, it receives legitimacy and backing from international institutions to perform its task. In light of the preceding, the UN's cooperative approach leads to greater adherence to the principles of peacekeeping and enhances the overall effectiveness of UNPOL in fragile states.

Methodology

This study is premised on a mixed-method case study approach that incorporates quantitative and qualitative research techniques. This design was employed to better understand UNPOL challenges in fragile African states. By combining both designs, the approach allowed for triangulation to enhance the credibility and validity of the findings. Being conducted in DRC and South Sudan, the study targeted various stakeholders directly involved in or affected by UNPOL operations in both countries including UNPOL Officers, Military personnel deployed in the PKOs, academicians, civilians, and community leaders in both countries. Secondary data was obtained from relevant publications including books, peer-reviewed journals, policy papers, and UN and government reports. On the other hand, the primary data was obtained through KIIs. Purposive sampling was used in selecting 42 key informants to ensure that the study gained access to the most relevant information from the most knowledgeable respondents in the subject area. The gathered data were then analysed using content analysis and presented in narrative form for qualitative data and graphs for quantitative data.

Analysis of Findings

This section of the article covers the analysis of findings and a discussion of the challenges faced by UNPOL. The section contains three sub-sections: i) a case study of DRC, ii) a case study of South Sudan, and iii) the commonalities and divergences between the two case studies.

Case Study 1: DRC

Through Resolution 1279, the UN established the UN Organisation Mission in the DRC (MONUC) on 30 November 1999 (MONUC, n.d.). The MONUC was tasked with observing the Lusaka Ceasefire Agreement (signed in July 1999) before its mandates were expanded to supervisory roles concerning the implementation of the ceasefire. On 15th June 2001, the first police component of the MONUC was created through resolution 1355 of the UN Security Council (MONUC, n.d.). The MONUC police were tasked with mandates like capacity-building and reforming the Congolese National Police (PNC), reforming the stabilisation Plan for the East, ensuring safe elections, protecting UN facilities and staff, and coordinating international assistance.

Since MONUC's establishment, several resolutions have strengthened its mandates, staffing, priorities, and strategic goals. In 2005, the first FPU unit deployment (5 units containing 125 FPU members per unit) was done, reinforcing 841 police officers (MONUC, n.d.). This was further improved to 1,050 FPU members and 391 UNPOLs with the extension of MONUC's mandate until 31 December 2009; a total of 1,441 (MONUC, n.d.). On 1st July 2010, MONUC was renamed the UN Organisation Stabilization Mission in the DRC (MONUSCO) to enable the mission to use all necessary means to achieve its mandates. As of 9th September 2024, MONUSCO had deployed

1,357 police officers (303 individual police officers and 1357 FPU personnel) from 30 police-contributing countries (PCCs) (UN Security Council, 2024). While UNPOL's capacity and mandate have expanded over time, its effectiveness in achieving its goals remains mixed. Positive strides have been noted in capacity-building and reforms within the PNC and stabilization efforts in conflict-prone regions. However, several challenges persist. Some of the challenges faced by MONUSCO police are discussed below as follows;

i.   Complex Security Environment

Accordingly, 90.5% of the respondents observed that the complex security environment prevalent in DRC poses a significant challenge to the ability of the UNPOL to achieve its mandates. It emerged that the complex security environment in DRC is mainly attributed to two factors: numerous armed rebel and militia groups and the sporadic outbreak of violence. Liberal institutionalism emphasizes international cooperation, rule-based systems and diplomacy to promote peace and stability (Johnson & Heiss, 2023). However, in the DRC, while international institutions such as the UNPOL aim to stabilize the country, their efforts often depend on the strength and functionality of local institutional frameworks. The presence of numerous armed groups with distinct agendas and affiliations, weak governance structures, and a fluid conflict environment expose the inability of local institutions to enforce the rule of law or maintain order. For example, the security situation in Eastern parts of DRC has been deteriorating due to limited local institutional capacity amid the resurgence of the 23 March Movement (M23) and other armed militia in the region (United Nations, 2022). This lack of local capacity undermines international peacekeeping efforts. The adverse effect on peacekeeping also illustrates a critical intersection where the shortcomings of local institutions limit the effectiveness of international frameworks in addressing security challenges.

According to Halabo (2020), conflicts in the DRC are strongly linked to the security dynamics of the smaller Great Lake Region (SGLR). This region consists of Uganda, Burundi, Rwanda, and Eastern DRC. The presence of foreign militia within DRC is evidence of the influence of the region's security dynamics on what happens within DRC. The dynamics in the Eastern DRC region are primarily based on interest and competition in mineral mining and trade as well as the counter-insurgency operations conducted by the Rwandan and Ugandan forces against insurgents (for example, the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR) and the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), respectively) within the region (Tamm, 2019; Samset, 2002; Stearns, 2013; and Scorgie, 2022). UNPOL officers have to strike the right balance in engaging with and understanding the motivations and intricacies of various armed factions in the region. Consequently, the spread of SGLR security dynamics into DRC adds another layer of complexity to addressing DRC's protracted conflicts.

Vlassenroot and Huggins (2005) also note that conflicts in DRC have been peculiar in that they have been uncertain and constantly evolving. Vlassenroot and Huggins aver that such fluidity can be due to changes in the coalition formation of armed groups, changes in the political situation, and alterations in territorially based control. UNPOL officers must, therefore, continuously adapt to these changes to effectively fulfil their mandates. The lack of a stable security environment and the fluid nature of conflicts in the DRC means that UNPOL officers must navigate scenarios where their safety is constantly at risk. For instance, UN personnel encountered 597 security and safety incidents (81 hazard cases, 55 civil unrests, 365 crime-related incidents, and 96 armed attacks) between 20th June and 19th September 2024 (UN Security Council, 2024). The violent incidents involving UNPOL officers and peacekeepers in the MONUSCO underscore the problematic security challenges faced by the UNPOL in DRC. These tragic events are directly related to the views of the respondents of this study. 90.5% of the respondents in this study agreed with the statement that complexities in DRC's security environment, namely the presence of numerous rebel groups militias and sometimes sporadic political violence, limit the ability of UNPOL to fulfil its mandates. Such experiences are clear indications of complications in conflict areas that present major challenges to conflict resolution in the DRC.

ii.   Resource Constraints

66.7 % of the study respondents agreed that limited resources are one of the challenges facing UNPOL in DRC. There is a direct relationship between the presence and distribution of resources for the UNPOL force, whereby their effectiveness, efficiency, and resources determine its capabilities, capacities, and equipment. UNPOL's tasks often tend to be more than what they are assigned. Hunt (2020) observed that UNPOL is faced with a deficit in capabilities, tools, and capacities to achieve its mandate. He also noted that in DRC, less than 2,000 UNPOL officers are authorized to operate alongside more than 150,000 national police officers. With the current human resource constraint, the UNPOL cannot effectively implement training programs and capacity-building initiatives for PNC officers.

An interview with a UNPOL officer in DRC revealed that UNPOL in DRC also lacks appropriate vehicles and operating equipment. The logistical aspects of UNPOL missions are compromised by resource limitations. This impedes the mobility and coordination of UNPOL officers on the ground. According to Brayne (2020), effective policing in complex environments requires the integration of modern technologies such as advanced communication systems, surveillance equipment, and other technological tools. However, the use of such sophisticated equipment is severely restricted in the comparatively poorly equipped UNPOL force. This means that the UNPOL in DRC cannot rival the complexity of the armed groups in the country and has to depend on the military.

Johnson and Heiss (2023) pointed out that liberal institutionalism underlines interdependent cooperation and coordination in addressing global challenges. In this study, 66.7% of respondents agreed that resource limitations were a major issue in UNPOL's operations in DRC. However, one must question the ability of international institutions to provide sufficient support. The resource shortfall implies a gap concerning the implementation of mandates in UNPOL. This reinforces the argument that there is a need for stronger intergovernmental cooperation in an effort to come up with ways of addressing the problem of lack of resources. In essence, addressing resource constraints from a liberal institutionalism perspective involves reinforcing global commitment to adequately fund and support UNPOL operations. Such a move could enable UNPOL to meet the demands of their crucial mandates in conflict zones like the DRC.

iii.   Political Instability and Weak Governance

Lake (2017) also argued that institution-building projects in fragile states do not translate into durable peace. Lake noted that such institutions provide rival groups with fresh opportunities to assemble military and political power The study by Lake found that post-conflict institutions established by international stakeholders provide armed groups in Eastern DRC with covert means to advance their objectives while pretending to support peacebuilding initiatives. This finding resonates with the perspectives of respondents in the current study.

80.1% of the study's participants agreed that weak governance impedes UNPOL's peacekeeping efforts. The view above is coherent with the findings by Lake (2017). The relation with weak government is that the setup institutions are perceived to be incapable of withstanding the challenges posed by armed groups. The current structures of government do a poor job when it comes to checking and balancing the behaviours of these groups. This weakness makes the institutions realize their goals at the expense of constructing actual peace. On a macro-platform, it subverts the creation of sustainable structural peace. This is in line with the difficulties observed with UNPOL in managing crises and other complex environments.

An interview with a senior lecturer of international relations at the University of Kinshasa revealed that weak governance structures increase the complexity of UNPOL's mission in DRC. The interviewee stated that; "the absence of strong governance hampers the creation of post-conflict institutions. It also perpetuates cycles of instability by creating power vacuums that armed groups exploit." (KII, 2023). This lack of robust governance undermines efforts to build sustainable political and institutional frameworks that are essential for long-term stability. Consequently, UNPOL faces the intricate task of maintaining security while simultaneously contributing to the development of governance structures that can withstand the pressures of persistent instability. Various empirical studies have linked the insecurity in Eastern DRC to political instabilities in the region. For instance, Vlassenroot and Verweijen (2017) argue that armed mobilisation results from three interlinked factors: ineffective policies intended to address armed groups, militarized power

competition at different levels, and local dynamics of conflict and insecurity. According to Vogel and Stearns (2018), the security problem in Kivu is partly due to political elites' use of armed mobilisation to bolster their influence, and the government's use of its security agencies as avenues for patronage. Even though most armed groups are situated in isolated locations away from Kinshasa, their leaders closely monitor national politics. The Kivus have been affected by the political unrest surrounding the *glissement* or postponement of elections. This has impacted conflict dynamics and armed group tactics.

For instance, the aftermath of the Saint Sylvestre Agreement called for an indefinite delay of elections and a power-sharing deal between the opposition and the government. Congo Research Group (2019) argues that this power-sharing deal pushed the Coalition *Nationale pour la Souveraineté du Congo* (CNPSC) leader, Yakutumba, to launch offensive attacks. The instance above exemplifies how political instability in DRC introduces a volatile element that demands continuous adaptation of strategies by UNPOL. The fluidity of political landscapes necessitates a nuanced understanding of evolving power structures and allegiances. Vogel and Stearns (2018) noted that the attacks on Butembo's police station by Mai-Mai Kilalo were orchestrated on 19 December 2016, the same day President Kabila was to step down. This incident was no mere coincidence, but instead highlights that political instability in the country also renders security actors in DRC to be targets of armed militia. UNPOL officers must grapple with the challenge of recalibrating their approaches to align with the ever-shifting political dynamics.

iv.   Regional Power Dynamics

DRC has several illegal foreign armed groups operating within its territories. According to MONUSCO (2023), key foreign armed groups in DRC include the National Liberation Forces (FNL), the ADF, the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), and the FDLR. These foreign armed groups attract the involvement of DRC's neighbours in the security dynamics within DRC. Vogel and Stearns (2018) assert that the influence of DRC's neighbouring countries has been a dominant factor in the conflicts in Kivu. Among these armed groups, the FDRL is the largest in numbers and geographical distribution across Masisi and Rutshuru. However, the ADF and other Burundian armed groups are relatively small; their military might and geopolitical significance make them significant.

47.6% of the respondents acknowledged that the influence of regional power dynamics in the internal conflicts of the DRC was a challenge to the effectiveness of UNPOL. The part played by surrounding nations like Rwanda in DRC's conflicts sets up a complex equilibrium for UNPOL. On the one hand, UNPOL officers must mediate between various internal conflicts in the DRC; on the other, they must consider neighbouring states' interests and possible interventions. One major challenge is the possibility of escalating tensions or unintentionally encouraging outside interference. The key for UNPOL is diplomatic prudence and strategic foresight. Treading on this

path calls for a delicate balance that would contribute to the internal stability of the DRC without creating regional conflicts.

v. Ebola Outbreaks and Related Public Health Challenges

UNPOL officers can be potential disease spreaders in disease outbreaks as in the United Nations Stabilisation Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH). According to Maertens (2019), the mismanagement of sewage in the MINUSTAH camps in 2010 resulted in the outbreak of cholera that killed more than 9000 people. This unfortunate incident underscores the critical importance of adequate health management within UN missions. 28.6% of the respondents in this study agreed that Ebola outbreaks are a challenge to UNPOL. According to the respondents, the issues in the study are not devoid of obvious connections to health emergencies, security, and UNPOL operation and it is evident that the respondents had deep insights into the importance of capturing these broader factors. However, it also stresses the utility of extensive solutions to these issues. As one of the challenges that UNPOL in DRC has to contend with, epidemic outbreaks can also be seen from Di Salvatore's view. Di Salvatore (2022) argues that the operational implications arising from disease outbreaks determine the realization of a mission's immediate and futuristic objectives. An interview with a community leader in DRC revealed that the outbreak of Ebola poses a dual challenge for UNPOL. The interviewee stated that;

> *"First of all, the safety and welfare of the UNPOL officers are in question, which means that measures to minimize the risks of the presence of any viruses among the personnel have to be efficient. Secondly, UNPOL is to maintain security in the impacted areas in which public health crises engender conditions for social turmoil and potential security threats."*
> (KII, 2023).

The acknowledgement of UNPOL's dual challenge during disease outbreaks—ensuring the safety of officers and maintaining security in affected regions—resonates with Di Salvatore's emphasis on the multifaceted impact of health crises on mission effectiveness. Kraemer et al. (2020) also noted that areas that reported Ebola outbreaks also reported high incidences of violence and conflicts due to mistrust of governments' initiatives to combat the spread of the disease. However, the impacts of disease outbreaks on operational effectiveness are similar to those of the DRC. Specifically, the Haitian case and UN Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) somewhat illustrate how cases that are related to the peacekeeping mission have had to combat the disease outbreak while still fulfilling their mandates (Kraemer et al., 2020). Ebola's impact on the operational capability of the UNPOL aligns with the liberal institutionalists' perspective that effective global governance requires collaboration. Therefore, there is a need for improved health management practices and international coordination to mitigate the impact of disease outbreaks on PKOs. This approach suits the liberal institutionalist hypothesis that international institutions can cope with global problems through collective means.

vi.   Humanitarian Crisis

According to 57.1% of the respondents in this study, the humanitarian crisis in DRC jeopardizes the peace-building efforts of the UNPOL. The country's humanitarian crisis is mainly due to the prevalence of inter-communal conflicts and armed group activities in the country. Since the 1990s, inter-communal conflicts and armed group activities in North and South Kivu, Ituri, and Tanganyika provinces have resulted in massive displacement of people (Carrilho, 2020). An interview with a representative of Amnesty International in DRC also confirmed that the widespread displacement of populations due to conflict and humanitarian crises in the DRC poses a significant obstacle for UNPOL. DRC has various IDP camps. For instance, Ituri province hosts over 235,000 IDPs in 87 sites; Tanganyika province is also a central hub for the IDPs, at one point hosting over 95,000 IDPs in 14 locations (Carrilho, 2020).

The establishment of makeshift refugee camps often lacks adequate security measures. This makes them vulnerable to various forms of criminal activities like recruitment of child soldiers, human trafficking, and other illicit practices. An interview with a senior lecturer of security studies at the University of Kinshasa also revealed that UNPOL is compelled to navigate the delicate balance of maintaining order within these camps while ensuring the protection and rights of the displaced individuals. UNPOL is mandated to provide physical protection in and around the concentration camps. However, the numerous IDP sites in Ituri and Tanganyika make it a daunting task for the UNPOL and other humanitarian actors to access the sites since some are inaccessible while others are in conflict areas.

Mlambo et al. (2019) opine that the above-cited living conditions offer easy ground for recruiting already vulnerable children, especially acts of joining groups that use them as child soldiers in DRC. They abduct children and force them to provide services or fight on their behalf. The number of IDPs in DRC is more than 4. 49 million, of whom 2,700,000 are children (Mlambo et al., 2019). In addition, it is established that more than 3,000 children are being forced to become child soldiers in the South Kivu and Tanganyika provinces. UNPOL is faced with the herculean task of counteracting and dealing with such recruitment within IDP camps. This calls for the provision of security and the protection of vulnerable children and their families in the IDPs.

Case Study 2: South Sudan

The UNPOL presence in South Sudan began with the establishment of the United Nations Mission in Sudan (UNMIS) in March 2005. UNMIS was tasked with supporting the implementation of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) signed in 2005 (UN, 2005). Following South Sudan's independence in July 2011, the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) was established through Resolution 1996. The UNMISS was tasked with consolidating peace and support state-building efforts (UN Police, 2012). UNPOL's initial deployment under UNMISS consisted of 900

police. This was to be done in phases within a span of two years: 2011 to 2013. The UNPOL officers were tasked primarily with capacity-building for the South Sudan National Police Service (SSNPS), community policing, and assisting with law-and-order stabilization (UN Police, 2012). Over time, the UNPOL mandate and personnel have expanded, particularly in response to South Sudan's ongoing conflicts and humanitarian crises. There are currently 1,446 UNPOL members spread across 10 South Sudanese regions (UNMISS, n.d.). Of these, 38 are employees of correctional services, 561 are IPOs, and 847 are members of FPUs. Despite the growth from 900 to 1446 officers, and contributions to supporting community policing initiatives and training local police forces, the mission's police component faces numerous challenges that impede its effectiveness. Some of these challenges include:

i. **Resource Constraints**

57.1% of the respondents recognized that resource constraints significantly impede the UNPOL in effectively maintaining peace and security in South Sudan. Adequate resources are imperative for the success of UNPOL's operations in South Sudan. Currently, UNPOL has 1446 personnel (38 correctional officers, 561 IPOs, and 847 FPUs) deployed in 10 regions in South Sudan (UNMISS, n.d.). However, insufficient funding poses a direct challenge to the increasing number of personnel required for the mission, let alone procuring essential equipment, training programs, and establishing operational infrastructure. With the necessary financial backing, UNPOL finds it more accessible to implement comprehensive strategies that address the multifaceted issues contributing to the country's instability. An interview with a UNPOL officer in South Sudan also revealed that the demand for skilled and adequately trained police officers often outstrips the available human resources of the UNPOL (KII, 2023). This hampers UNPOL's capacity to deploy personnel effectively across the vast landscape of South Sudan.

Hunt (2020) noted that UNPOL in South Sudan had only a few vehicles, less than 100 IPOs, and was limited to only one FPU to undertake round-the-clock patrols and secure the exit and entry points to the Malakal Protection of Civilian (POC) site. The limitations imposed by resource constraints hinder the scale and scope of UNPOL's interventions and compromise the organisation's ability to engage in long-term capacity-building initiatives. Overcoming these resource challenges requires a concerted effort from the international community to ensure sustained financial support and the provision of skilled personnel. Such a move could enable UNPOL to effectively contribute to restoring peace and security in South Sudan.

ii. **Political Instability**

The political instability in South Sudan is a result of past conflicts, some of which have been ethnic and others ideological. According to Knopf (2013), these tensions were further compounded by the after-effects of the Sudanese Civil War. The nature of internal divisions among political elites

began to appear soon after South Sudan became an independent state in 2011. This process hampered the creation of compact and encompassing governance architecture. Sustained politico-security crises in and among political groups have escalated the turbulence as well. In the view of Knopf (2013), political competition, concern with resources, and ethnicity have been primary and central in maintaining the conflict. The lack of a well-coordinated blueprint for the country and the battle of different powers has led to the emergence of a highly charged political system. This hinders the formulation of a stable system of governance. 66.7% of the study respondents acknowledged that the political instability in South Sudan hampers UNPOL's ability to create a stable and secure environment. The responses in this study identified the five critical mechanisms for the political instability-UNPOL ineffectiveness nexus. These included insecurity and conflict escalation, impaired rule of law, compromised collaboration with local communities, increased ethnic tensions, and strained resources.

iii. Complex Security Environment

Deng (2018) avers that there are more than 40 armed groups in South Sudan. Among these groups are the Revolutionary Movement for National Salvation (REMNASA), Tiger Faction New Forces (TFNF), South Sudan United Front (SSUF), and Sudan People's Liberation Movement-In Opposition (SPLM-IO). These armed entities perform different activities. Due to the complexity of these groups, it is essential that UNPOL officers design and employ tactics that will effectively address them. Based on the study respondents' response, 90.5% supported that the long-standing civil wars in South Sudan make it challenging for the UNPOL to sustain peace and security in South Sudan. One of the challenges is the fact that these armed actors have multiple drivers of operation and allegiance. They often operate with distinct political, ethnic, or ideological agendas. This complexity requires officers to navigate through rivalries and historical grievances that contribute to the existence and activities of these armed groups. The diversity of the armed actors makes it challenging to address the root causes of conflicts and implement effective peacekeeping strategies.

An interview with a senior lecturer of security studies at the University of Juba revealed that the fluidity of alliances and allegiances among these entities poses another layer of complexity to the problems that confront UNPOL in South Sudan (KII, 2023). Armed groups align or realign with different factions or interests as political situations evolve and power dynamics shift. UNPOL must stay attuned to these changes to effectively adapt its interventions.

According to Keohane (2012), liberal institutionalism emphasizes the long-term goals of peacebuilding. The fluid alliances and allegiances among armed entities challenge immediate peacekeeping efforts. However, by paying attention to the political processes and shifting power relations, UNPOL participates in a wider institutional practice consistent with the liberal notion of building sustainable peace in post-conflict environments. The adaptive and strategic responses

demanded of UNPOL encompass a range of activities. These include intelligence gathering, community engagement, and the implementation of peacekeeping mandates. Officers must strike a delicate balance between engaging with these groups while avoiding actions that could inadvertently contribute to the perpetuation of conflict.

One of the biggest aspects of the day for the UNPOL in South Sudan is dealing with inter-community tensions. Pinaud (2022) posits that these tensions are not new, but were instigated by historical issues, competition over resources, and political factors. Ethnic tensions are sometimes expressed in a localized form of ethnic conflict. Mitigating and preventing conflicts at the community level demands an understanding of the complex dynamics involved. Nyadera (2018) posits that historical grievances result in inter-communal violence if entrenched in the social institutions of the societies. These grievances are linked to past issues like conflicts, land disputes, or other historical events that have left lasting tensions. UNPOL officers must navigate these historical complexities, and recognize the sensitivities involved. UNPOL's comprehension of these sensitivities extends to the diverse cultural and social dynamics in intercommunal conflicts. Different societies have unique traditions, norms, and social structures. These dispositions influence their interactions and potential sources of tension. UNPOL's interventions should consider these cultural nuances to engage with and mediate between communities effectively. Bilali (2023) observed that the continued use of small arms in South Sudan creates an environment where the use of weapons becomes a prevalent means of resolving disputes. Armed groups rely on these readily available firearms to assert their control. According to an interview with an official in the Ministry of Interior in South Sudan, the proliferation of small arms results in a culture of violence. This, in turn, waters down UNPOL officers' efforts to maintain stability in South Sudan (KII, 2023).

As it relates to this challenge, it is always a problem to disarm and demobilise combatants once there is proliferation of small arms in the society. From an interview with a community leader from South Sudan, UNPOL is constantly left in a complicated position of either convincing or coercing armed persons or groups to disarm (KII, 2023). The presence of abundant firearms amplifies the potential for localized disputes to escalate into larger confrontations. This creates a volatile and unpredictable security environment. An interview with an official in the Ministry of Interior in South Sudan also revealed the sheer number of small arms that exacerbate the challenges of monitoring and controlling the use of the weapons. UNPOL must contend with the risk that when these weapons fall into the wrong hands, they are used for criminal activities. These criminal activities complicate the process of ensuring communities' safety and security. This undermines UNPOL's efforts to establish a stable and peaceful environment.

iv. Humanitarian Crisis

The conflicts in South Sudan (particularly in 2013 and 2016) have resulted in massive displacement of people. According to Carrilho (2020), there are approximately 200,000 IDPs spread across five POC sites in Wau, Bor, Bentiu, Malakal, and Juba. The UNPOL is responsible for access controls, safety, and security of IDPs within such sites. According to Marier and Ford-Williamson (2014), the rising number of refugee camps in South Sudan makes it challenging to protect the children who are particularly vulnerable to recruitment by the armed forces. This finding is consistent with the responses from 33.3% of the key informants who acknowledged that displaced children are a good ground for recruitment into the armed forces in South Sudan.

According to Keohane (2012), lliberal institutionalism places importance on shared norms and international human rights standards. The recruitment of child soldiers is a blatant violation of these norms, as highlighted by UNICEF and various international agreements. These norms create an institutional basis for condemning and addressing such practices. For instance, UNPOL is tasked with protecting civilians. The vulnerability of displaced populations heightens the importance of this mandate. These tasks include safeguarding individuals from exploitation, abuse, and recruitment into armed groups. In light of the aforementioned, UNPOL officers must operate keenly and be aware of the specific security risks displaced communities face.

Humanitarian crises in South Sudan introduce a heightened risk of recruitment into armed groups. Mlambo et al. (2019) argue that kidnappings, poverty, and inadequate protection of refugee camps are the main factors leading to the recruitment of child soldiers. In light of the assertion above, efforts to address the challenge of child soldiers should extend beyond conventional security measures to reduce the susceptibility of vulnerable populations. However, an interview with a UNPOL officer in South Sudan revealed that UNPOL is faced with the challenge of preventing and mitigating the recruitment of individuals (particularly minors) into armed conflicts. Consequently, the number of child soldiers in South Sudan has been on the rise. According to Campeanu and Huon (2018), South Sudan has over 19000 child soldiers in South Sudan's armed forces. It will be challenging to free these children because they will still struggle to fit into society. After all, the social environment that is necessary for their reintegration into society is still violent.

According to Mlambo et al. (2019), child soldiers are actively involved in combat activities in South Sudan. Their presence complicates security situations as they engage in hostilities, posing risks not only to UNPOL officers but also to civilian populations and other peacekeeping forces. Child soldiers often endure traumatic experiences that have lasting psychosocial effects. These effects manifest in various ways, including heightened aggression, trauma-related stress, and difficulties in reintegration into civilian life. Furthermore, the involvement of children in armed groups perpetuates cycles of violence. An interview with an official of Amnesty International in South Sudan revealed that child soldiers are more susceptible to manipulation and coercion,

contributing to the continued existence of armed factions (KII, 2023). This dynamic challenges UNPOL's mandate to foster stability and security in post-conflict environments.

UNICEF (2023) approximated that the reintegration programs for child soldiers take three years at a total cost of USD 2,000 per child. The resource-intensive nature of these programs- specialised approaches and resources implies a resource strain on the part of UNPOL, which must collaborate intensively with other UN agencies. Despite efforts of the UN to rescue over 2000 children from armed groups in the past five years, many more are still being replaced due to the heightened prevalence of poverty in the nation (Carrilho, 2020). This vicious cycle of recruitment into the armed groups and the subsequent reintegration of child soldiers complicates the demobilisation process. Liberal institutionalism emphasises the role of institutions in promoting long-term peace and stability (Keohane, 2012). The cycle of recruitment and reintegration poses a challenge to the broader goal of peacebuilding. Efforts to break this cycle require sustained institutional interventions that go beyond conventional security measures.

Similarities, Differences, and Patterns Observed in the Study
The challenges faced by UNPOL in maintaining peace and security in South Sudan and DRC are summarised in the figure below:

Figure 1

Challenges faced by UNPOL in Maintaining Peace and Security in DRC and South Sudan
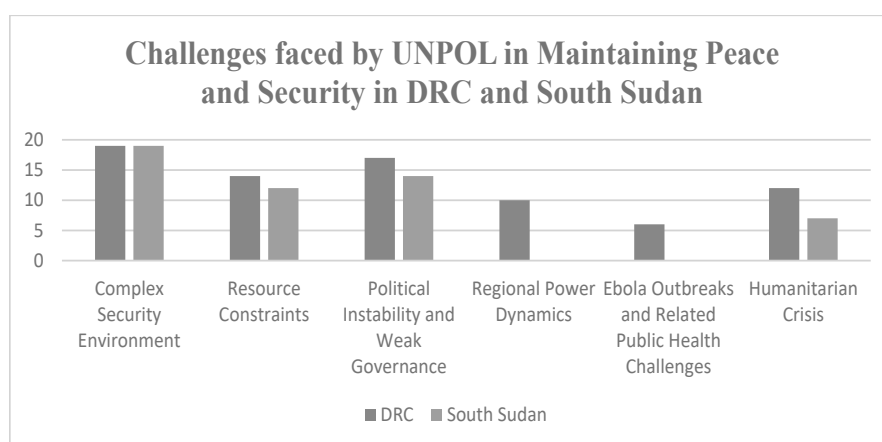
Source: Author, (2023)

As shown in the table and graph above, UNPOL in both DRC and South Sudan share challenges, such as a complex security environment, resource constraints, political instability, and humanitarian crises. However, DRC faces additional challenges related to regional power dynamics and specific public health issues like Ebola outbreaks. The common challenges facing UNPOL in both countries are akin to several fragile states, as per the assertions of Jean-Pierre

Lacroix, the Head of the UN Department of Peace Operations, during an opening ceremony of the UN Chiefs of Police Summit (UNCOPS) held on 21 June 2018 (United Nations Police, 2018). The UN Chief stated that UNPOL officers operate in challenging security and political environments characterized by a lack of negotiated political settlements, armed groups, extremists, unclear long-term political horizons, and resource constraints that make peacekeeping more perilous.

The complex security environment was the major challenge facing UNPOL in maintaining peace and security in both South Sudan and DRC, as per 90.5% of the respondents in South Sudan and DRC. Both countries have experienced conflicts involving various armed groups. The armed groups in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and South Sudan exhibit several common features that highlight the complexities of their existence and impact on the regions. Primarily, these groups are often tied to specific ethnic or communal identities, resulting in heightened grievances related to ethnicity, land, resources, and political power, which in turn fuels the formation and activities of various factions. Both regions have seen these armed groups fragment, reorganise, and form shifting alliances over time. Additionally, many of these factions have gained control over and exploited valuable resources such as minerals, oil, and land. This control poses significant challenges to existing governance structures, as armed groups undermine political stability and authority. The consequences have been dire, leading to severe humanitarian issues, including forced displacement, human rights violations, and the troubling involvement of children in armed conflict as child soldiers, illuminating the profound impact of these groups on the social fabric of both nations.ng others.

However, as mentioned above, the level of differentiation of the armed groups, their programs, and their environments are different in the DRC and South Sudan. The varying historical context for each mission, the political context of the environment, and the nature of the dispute explain the dissimilarities in the roles the UNPOL has to undertake in every region. It must be noted that cognisance of these peculiarities is uniquely pertinent to the development of coherent peacekeeping policies.

The problems encountered by UNPOL in the DRC and South Sudan are mutually reinforcing. More so, different factors influence and are worsened by others in various ways. Security and stability are intertwined, so political stability influences the security situation. Weak governance gives armed groups free rein to take advantage of institutions and fails to keep them under control. The involvement of neighbouring nations in conflicts adds another level of complexity due to regional power dynamics. These difficulties interact to create a volatile environment in which solving one problem requires solving others. As Johnson and Heiss (2023) note, liberal institutionalism and international organisations are useful in shaping state behaviour and creating cooperation. However, the difficulties that UNPOL experiences are not unique to the current conflicts. These challenges also include system-related challenges that have a bearing on the effectiveness of international institutions in African fragile states. Because all these problems are

interrelated, it is argued that it is best to approach peacekeeping with an institutional-level, systems view.

Conclusion

This article examined the challenges faced by UNPOL in maintaining peace and security in DRC and South Sudan. The study found that UNPOL officers in fragile states like South Sudan and DRC face numerous interlinked challenges in executing their mandates. This article concludes that a complex security environment coupled with regional security and power dynamics, political instability, resource constraints, and a humanitarian crisis significantly impede UNPOL's peace-building initiatives in fragile states in Africa. Within the framework of liberal institutionalism, the challenges above can be viewed as arising from immediate security concerns and broader institutional deficiencies and interactions. These factors are a microcosm of the larger institutional environment in which UNPOL functions. While there are quite a number of similarities between the problems that UNPOL faces in fragile states, this article argues that it should not be concluded that UNPOL is facing identical challenges everywhere.

Recommendations

This study proffers the following four recommendations to ensure that UNPOL effectively maintains peace and security in fragile African states.

1. To address the resource constraints and economic problems that lead to conflict, international community attention should be concentrated on ways of supporting sustainable development in fragile states by increasing the funding for peacebuilding initiatives in fragile states (for instance, the Peacebuilding Fund (PBF) in DRC). Such a move could include strategic investment in infrastructure, education, and health care to promote economic growth. In addressing the deep socioeconomic roots that often underlie conflicts in Africa, the international community can help create a more resilient and prosperous base.

2. Inclusive political dialogues and reconciliation processes should be the main priority for the DRC and South Sudan governments. Political grievances must be addressed, and inclusive governance structures should be established if long-term stability is to be achieved. Such a situation would provide an excellent environment for the development of UNPOL. While both the DRC and South Sudan have experienced multiple peace agreements, these agreements have often been criticized for being elite-driven, externally influenced, and lacking mechanisms to address the root causes of conflict comprehensively. To address such weakness, this article proposes a focus on i) genuine inclusivity by involving marginalized groups such as women, youth, and civil society

actors, ii) integrating political reconciliation with economic justice, local governance reform, and resource-sharing mechanisms, and iii) establishing robust monitoring frameworks that ensure commitments—such as DDR programs—are fulfilled. This recommendation speaks to the need for a qualitative shift in existing and future political dialogues and reconciliation processes by addressing their shortcomings in implementation, inclusivity, and sustainability.

3. The UN Department of Peace Operations (DPO) needs to intensify its capacity-building activities for UNPOL officers, especially concerning cultural sensitivity, conflict resolution skills, and a basic understanding of the local dynamics. Such capacity-building efforts must include language training and education in these regions' historical, cultural, and political backgrounds. To keep pace with changing challenges, continuous capacity building is imperative.

4. More in-depth studies of the dynamics of conflict in DRC and South Sudan are needed at research institutions and think tanks. Up-to-date research into this field will allow evidence-based policymaking and strategy development.

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