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Optimising National Staff Contributions in UN Peacekeeping Operations

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HOW TO REFER TO THIS BRIEF:

Coleman, Katharina. 2024. Optimising National Staff Contributions in UN Peacekeeping Operations. Joint brief series: The Performance of Peacekeeping. Stockholm: Folke Bernadotte Academy, the Challenges Forum International Secretariat, and the Swedish Defence University
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.61880/NULO7273>

HOW CAN THE UN optimise the contributions that locally recruited ‘national staff’ make to peacekeeping operations? Especially given intense pressure to reduce costs through ‘lighter footprints’, peacekeeping operations need to mobilise the full potential of all their personnel to accomplish mandated tasks. This includes civilian staff, of whom 61% are national staff. Missions depend on national staff both for cost savings (since national staff typically earn less than international staff) and for local expertise and access. Yet tensions arising from status inequalities between national and international staff pose significant risks to individual staff performance and to unit effectiveness. Hostile mission environments and downsizing trends exacerbate these tensions. Drawing on extensive interviews in four UN peacekeeping operations, this brief recommends that missions:

Policy recommendations



1. **Counter the culture of inequality** between national and international staff by upholding formal rank equivalents, reconsidering restrictions on some unit leadership positions, avoiding generalisations about individuals based on their staff category, and revisiting differential administrative policies.
2. **Visibly invest in national staff security** by reviewing safety and security protocols for national staff, improving communication about protection policies, and improving mechanisms for national staff to report protection concerns.
3. **Carefully manage downsizing** by instituting a transparent downsizing process, ensuring fairness across staff categories, working to retain relevant existing staff throughout mission drawdown, and placing greater emphasis on career management and employment transitions.

Introduction

HOW CAN THE UN OPTIMISE the contributions that national staff make to peacekeeping operations? As of December 2021, 61% of civilian staff in UN peacekeeping operations—5,924 individuals—were locally recruited.¹ National staff provide the backbone of logistics support in contemporary UN peacekeeping. They also bring local expertise into missions and can facilitate local access; a vital contribution, as missions undertake an expanding range of substantive tasks requiring interaction with local actors, including civilian protection, human rights monitoring, and supporting justice and security sector reform. To accomplish mandated tasks, peacekeeping operations rely both on individual national staff members’ performance and on cooperation between national and international staff within mission units. Mounting pressure for ‘lighter footprint’ missions that accomplish goals more cost-effectively with fewer resources intensifies the need to mobilise the full potential of all personnel, including national staff. However, working relationships between national staff and international UN person-

nel are marked by recurring tensions that pose significant risks to both individual performance and unit effectiveness.

This brief draws on over 200 interviews with national and international peacekeepers, primarily in UN missions in Central African Republic (MINUSCA), Cyprus (UNFICYP), the Democratic Republic of Congo (MONUSCO), and Western Sahara (MINURSO). It begins by outlining how integral national staff are to contemporary peacekeeping operations and identifying two major—and contrasting—UN rationales for employing national staff: cost reduction and local expertise. The brief then highlights tensions emerging from the unequal status of national and international staff as a key management challenge in contemporary UN operations. These tensions are exacerbated where missions operate in hostile environments or face downsizing, both common dynamics in contemporary UN peacekeeping. The brief ends by offering recommendations for mitigating these challenges.

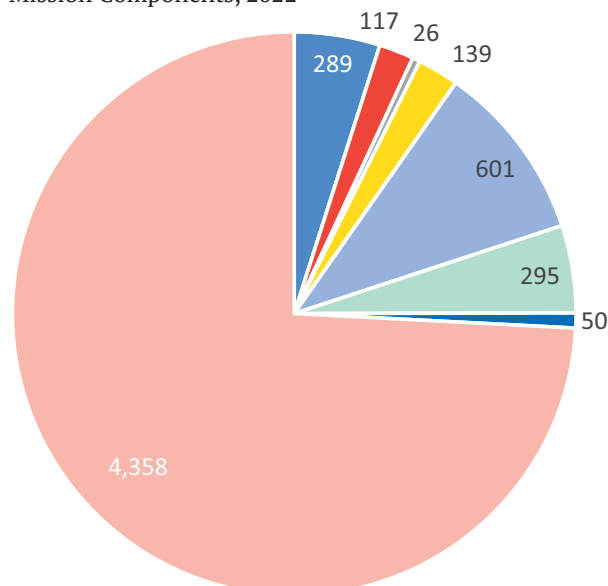
National Staff in UN Peacekeeping

NATIONAL STAFF WORK in virtually every unit within contemporary UN peacekeeping operations. As Figure 1 illustrates, a large majority (74%) are employed in mission support components, including transportation, engineering, communications technology, and procurement units.² Without support services, missions cannot function, and national staff account for 55% of mission support posts. The remaining national staff (26%) work in various substantive mission components, contributing to units tasked with implementing mandated mission tasks such as supporting the extension of state authority.

- Executive direction and management
- Human rights
- Humanitarian
- Political
- Protection of civilians
- Support for extension of state authority
- Uniformed personnel
- Support

There are two main categories of national staff: General Service and National Professional Officers. Most national staff are General Service staff. Junior General Service staff typically provide support such as administrative assistance for other unit members. More senior General Service staff contribute directly to their units’ core tasks, facilitating the work of in-

Figure 1: Distribution of National Staff Posts Across Mission Components, 2022³



ternational peacekeepers but also independently performing substantive duties, especially at the ‘grassroots’ level and in remote locations. Community Liaison Assistants, for example, help protect civilians by facilitating communication between local communities and uniformed peacekeepers, advising contingents on mediation and protection activities, and

supporting intercommunal dialogue.⁴ National Professional Officers (NPOs), meanwhile, account for 11% of national staff in the 8 missions for which data are available.⁵ They are typically recruited from the host state’s professional elite and are expected to apply their expertise to their unit’s task. For example, NPOs in Justice Support units are usually jurists who can orient international colleagues in national judicial institutions and may also train local penitentiary officers or advise on local judicial processes and reforms.

UN peacekeeping operations have at least two common—and contrasting—rationales for hiring national staff.⁶ First, national staff are typically cheaper to employ than international staff. Salaries for international staff (including ‘Professional+’ staff who can also work at Headquarters, and ‘Field Service’ staff who specialise in field locations) are designed to be globally competitive.⁷ By contrast, national staff compensation matches the “best prevailing conditions” of local employment, which often entails significantly lower salaries, especially for General Service positions.⁸ Moreover, national staff are entitled to few-

er benefits and allowances than international staff.⁹ This relatively inexpensive labour is vital in allowing UN missions to operate within existing budget envelopes, a consideration that gains particular importance in periods of financial austerity.

Second, national staff bring local knowledge to missions and enhance their ability to interact with local interlocutors. This rationale is relevant for mission support positions where local expertise (e.g., expertise on national import processes) or engagement (such as reassuring local residents about communications installations) can enhance task performance. However, this rationale is most prominent in substantive units that recognise local knowledge (e.g., of local customs) and access (for example, access to conflict actors or government officials) as vital to their tasks. It extends both to NPOs (defined as “perform[ing] professional duties that require knowledge and experience at the national level”¹⁰) and to General Service staff in positions created to improve missions’ understanding of and interactions with local actors.

Fundamental Challenge: Status Inequality Tensions

UN PEACEKEEPING operations are hierarchical organisations. National staff hold relatively subordinate positions in formal mission hierarchies and low status in informal social hierarchies. Tensions arising from these hierarchies pose a significant challenge to not only individual staff performance but also unit effectiveness, which depends on cooperation among international and national staff.

The formal hierarchy of UN staff categories is depicted in Figure 2. Senior Professional+ staff outrank other civilian personnel; they assume senior mission management and many unit head positions. In addition, units typically include some combination of more junior Professional staff, Field Service and General Service staff, and NPOs. Formally, senior NPOs outrank and thus could supervise junior Professional+ and most FS team members. Senior GS staff formally outrank junior Field Service staff.

A potent informal hierarchy complicates this formal structure, to the detriment of national staff. One norm is that virtually all substantive and most support units are headed by international staff, even when a rank-equivalent national alternative is formally possible, e.g., a NO-D instead of P4 unit head. Another norm is that regardless of rank equivalencies, national staff typically do not supervise international staff. Missions rarely place national staff in such supervisory roles, and when they

Figure 2: UN Staff Grade Equivalencies¹¹

USG			
ASG			
D-2			
D-1			
P-5		NO-E	
P-4	FS-7	NO-D	
P-3	FS-6	NO-C	
P-2		NO-B	
P-1		NO-A	
	FS-5		GS-7
	FS-2		GS-5 / GS-6
	FS-3		GS-4
	FS-4		GS-3
	FS-5		GS-1 / GS-2
P+	FS	NPO	GS

have done so, some international staff have refused to accept supervision from national staff.

International staff thus typically act as gatekeepers shaping how national staff contribute to missions, and assuming responsibility (and often credit) for the overall work of units. Advocates for this distribution of labour—and power—frequently stress the need to protect the impartiality of UN missions,

avoid any perception of bias, and shield national staff from pressure or retribution by powerful local actors. Many also cite the professional experience of international staff across UN missions. Some add that national staff are generally privileged relative to other local citizens (given employment scarcities in most peacekeeping host states) and argue that if they are dissatisfied, national staff should seek international positions in other missions.

Yet many national—and some international—staff argue that the current system is unfair or even discriminatory. They express frustration at the undervaluing of national staff's expertise and extended work experience within particular missions, and question why supervisors arriving with varying degrees of competence benefit from instant authority as international staff. Many interpret arguments justifying the need for international supervisors with reference to impartiality as indicating an unfair blanket mistrust of national staff,

regardless of their length of service or performance. National staff commonly report disillusionment with the UN for its perceived disregard for national staff. Limited social interactions between national and international staff reinforce perceptions of an exclusionary system.

These dynamics create multiple risks for unit performance. Many national staff report declining motivation and morale, potentially impacting productivity: "In my experience, you work less when you are frustrated." Some also report providing less support to international supervisors perceived as arrogant or dismissive of national staff or deliberately making mistakes to test supervisor competence. Disputes over the relative status of national and international team members can also debilitate a unit by creating difficult working relationships between team members, including refusal to collaborate and mutual undermining.

Exacerbation 1: **Hostile Mission Environments**

HOSTILE MISSION ENVIRONMENTS exacerbate divisions between national and international staff. Strict security protocols that confine international staff to designated safe zones or mission premises reinforce distinctions between international and national staff and limit social interactions. International peacekeepers stressed by dangerous working conditions amid rapidly evolving patterns of local violence may be especially wary of the possibility of national staff leaking sensitive information, being biased toward their own communities, and/or collaborating with or being pressured by local powerholders.

National staff, meanwhile, may find their subordinate status within UN missions especially demotivating in hostile mission environments where their UN employment exposes them to personal risk through two principal dynamics.

First, some national staff positions entail an inherent risk of offending powerful local actors. Examples include human rights monitors and child protection officers reporting violations by armed groups or government actors, or Community Liaison Assistants and language assistants seen to be advising international peacekeepers against the interests of local powerholders. Having international unit heads provides only limited protection if affronted local actors suspect national staff of enabling the unit's work.

Second, national staff can face severe repercussions when a peacekeeping operation fails to meet local expectations. Pro-

tection failures, perceived bias, peacekeeper misconduct, and/or apparent ineffectiveness can make missions deeply unpopular.¹² In these contexts, national staff are often accused of betraying their communities by working for the UN and face recrimination and even direct personal threats.

These challenges not only make it more difficult for national staff to act as intermediaries between the UN and its local interlocutors, but they also increase the costs national staff face in performing their duties. The hostility national staff face from other local actors can be fatal: since 2000, 39 of the 60 civilian staff fatalities in UN peacekeeping operations due to 'malicious' (i.e., hostile) acts were among national staff. As a proportion (65%), this is roughly in line with national staff's share of civilian positions, suggesting that national staff are no safer than international civilians.¹³ The risk may be especially high for national staff in substantive positions, but local hostility can also be fatal for logistics staff: one interviewee recalled a MONUSCO water truck driver involved in a traffic accident being "lynched" by a local mob because he was driving a UN vehicle.

It is important to note that many national staff continue to fulfil their duties despite these challenges, sometimes with remarkable courage. Nevertheless, hostile mission environments that increase the risks of working for the UN are likely to exacerbate morale and motivational challenges among national staff who feel undervalued and/or unsupported within their missions.

Exacerbation 2: Downsizing

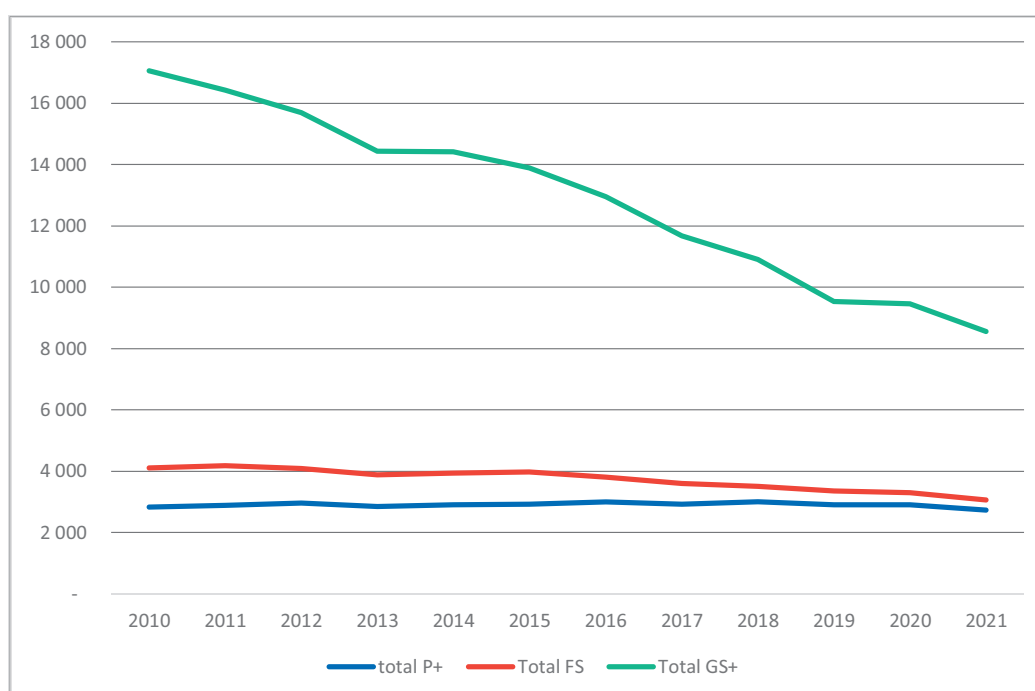
UN PEACEKEEPING has been contracting due to the closure of some missions (for example in Darfur), the downsizing of others (including MONUSCO) amid cost-cutting pressures, and the Security Council’s failure to establish any major new peacekeeping operations since 2014. Compared to their 2015 peak, authorised peacekeeping expenditures have declined by 25.5% and uniformed personnel deployments have declined by 30.5%.¹⁴ For civilian staff, the contraction began earlier and has been more severe: between 2010 and 2021, the number of civilian staff in UN field operations (most of whom serve in peacekeeping operations) declined by over 40%.¹⁵ This trend has three principal effects.

First, downsizing undermines both national and international staff morale. Business scholars have documented that “downsizing survivors” (employees who retain their positions after downsizing) often suffer debilitating stress and reduced motivation, especially if they are dedicated to their work (‘affective commitment’) and/or financially dependent on it (‘continuance commitment’).¹⁶ Both commitment types are common among civilian UN peacekeepers. Despite its frustrations, national and international staff often take pride in their UN employment; many international and some national staff experience it as central to their identity. Continuance commitment arises differently for national and international staff. For the former, it is principally rooted in the scarcity of attractive al-

ternative employment opportunities within many host states. For international staff, the contraction of UN peacekeeping overall increases continuance commitment by reducing their chances of obtaining a similar position in another UN position. For both national and international staff, downsizing fundamentally undermines the sense of job security that long-lasting missions, routine contract renewals, and years of UN peacekeeping expansion had previously fostered despite the prevalence of fixed-term contracts. Downsizing has made the loss of UN status a more immediate prospect for both international and national staff—and for the latter, this also implies the loss of UN protection, further exacerbating the dilemmas of UN employment risks noted above.

Second, tensions between national and international staff escalate as they compete to preserve their employment in downsizing missions. In principle, the UN endorses the “nationalisation of posts” during mission drawdown, meaning that international staff posts are progressively re-designated as national staff posts to save costs and to “build...sustainable national capacity” in host states.¹⁷ National staff overwhelmingly favour this policy, but for international staff—particularly at ranks for which there is a national staff equivalent—nationalisation presents a threat. In practice, as Figure 3 shows, job reductions have been steepest among national staff, whose number plummeted by 50% between 2010 and 2021 while Field Service staff decreased by 25% and Professional+ staff decreased by only 4%. Some national staff suspect international managers of deliberately undermining nationalisation to protect their own posts. Many see these dynamics as further confirmation of the subordinate position of national staff in UN operations.

Figure 3: Civilian Staff in UN Field Operations, 2010-2021¹⁸



Third, tensions between national and international staff increase as the contraction of UN peacekeeping overall forecloses mobility to other missions. Some national and international staff compete directly for a dwindling number of employment opportunities in other missions, exacerbating workplace conflicts. International staff fear that their careers will stagnate with fewer possibilities to apply for higher ranking positions

elsewhere. National staff resent the loss of opportunity to move into higher-status international positions abroad. For both types of staff, an important escape valve for UN workplace tensions closes as they can no longer expect difficult work relations with managers, co-workers, or team members to be resolved relatively quickly by at least one of the parties moving into a different position.

Policy recommendations

UN PEACEKEEPING operations rely on thousands of national staff to work alongside international civilian and uniformed peacekeepers, providing labour at lower salary levels and complementing international colleagues' skill sets with local expertise and access to local actors. Cooperation between these personnel is critical to mandate implementation. There are many examples of successful collaboration based on mutual respect, acknowledgement of complementary strengths, and shared dedication to mission and unit goals. However, such successes require careful navigation of the tensions and contestations created by unequal formal and social hierarchies, especially where these are complicated by hostile mission environments and downsizing challenges. UN missions cannot fully eliminate these tensions, but they can take steps to mitigate them.

1. Counter the Culture of Inequality

Material inequalities between national and international staff will persist as long as the UN faces significant budget constraints and sees cost reduction as a major rationale for hiring national staff. Some material inequalities also have at least partially valid justifications. For example, while the salary gap between national and international staff can be jarring, it is also true that UN national staff compensation is typically high compared to the salaries other local employers offer, making it hard for local businesses, civic organisations and even governments to compete in hiring skilled professionals. However, UN missions can do more to counter a culture of inequality that suggests that national staff are not only paid less but also valued less than international staff:

- *Uphold rank equivalents:* Missions should not avoid unit compositions in which some national staff outrank some international staff. When national staff do outrank some international unit members, management responsibilities should be assigned accordingly. If necessary, senior managers should support national staff in asserting their supervisory authority.

- *Reconsider restrictions on (some) unit leadership positions:* Some politically sensitive units may require an international unit head. Other units may not. There are precedents of units effectively run by national staff heads in UN agencies and, more rarely, in UN peacekeeping operations (e.g., MONUSCO's Protocol Office).
- *Limit generalisations.* Concern that national staff may be subject to particular pressures (e.g., local political pressure, threats to family members, corruption norms...) should not foreclose the possibility of particular individuals proving their commitment to performing their duties despite any such pressures. Moreover, some risk of corruption and abuse of power also exists for international staff. Consequently, responsibilities should be assigned based on individual merit, not nationality. To do so effectively, the UN must continue efforts to improve staff performance evaluation mechanisms.
- *Revisit differential administrative policies.* Pragmatic reasons for treating national and international staff differently should be assessed relative to any material hardship imposed on national staff and the risk of suggesting lower national staff status. Small savings that depress national staff morale do not represent value-for-money.

2. Visibly invest in national staff security

In hostile environments where UN employment creates personal risks for national staff, missions should visibly work to mitigate these risks, both to fulfil their duty of care and to reinforce the morale and dedication of their national staff. National staff do not always feel that their security is a priority for their missions. Anecdotal grievances include denying requests to sleep on UN bases because the mission did not believe conditions to be unsafe for national staff; military escorts leaving national staff behind; mission security not responding to assistance requests; and emergency evacuation procedures prioritising international staff. To counter such perceptions, missions should:

- Review safety and security protocols for national staff to mitigate any deficiencies;
- Communicate policies designed to protect national staff clearly and not only explain reasons for any differences with international staff but provide adequate alternatives (e.g., within-state evacuation plans if international evacuation is not possible);
- Ensure national staff has access to and confidence in mechanisms to report protection needs and gain remedy for protection failures.

3. Manage Downsizing

Downsizing is likely to remain a reality for UN peacekeeping in the foreseeable future. To mitigate friction, missions can:

- *Institute a transparent downsizing process.* The long-delayed UN Administrative Instruction on downsizing, finally issued in January 2023, is helpful in this respect.¹⁹
- *Ensure fairness across staff categories.* When post reductions fall disproportionately on national staff, this suggests that nationalisation has been abandoned and in-

ternational staff are being protected at the expense of national staff.

- *Work to retain relevant existing staff throughout mission drawdown.* The General Assembly recently instructed the Secretary-General to “identify ways...that facilitate the retention of expertise, as appropriate, from already on-boarded staff, including national staff, until the end of the liquidation period”.²⁰
- *Facilitate career management and employment transitions.* As UN peacekeeping contracts, the current system of individuals building their own careers by strategically applying to additional UN positions becomes increasingly tenuous, frustrating, and stressful for both international and national staff. Longer-term career planning based on transparent training opportunities and rigorous performance reviews may alleviate some stress. Material support for transitions into local (self) ployment (e.g., small business start-up grants, partial funding for transitional positions) could supplement job fairs and ad hoc efforts to lobby others to hire downsized national staff.

Endnotes

¹ UN Secretary-General, *Composition of the Secretariat: staff demographics*, A/77/580, 7 December 2022.

² Data from 2022 mission budget proposal reports. Mission components grouped based on descriptive similarity.

³ Source: 2022 UN Secretary-General budget proposals for all UN peacekeeping operations except UNTSO and UNMOGI.

⁴ Janosch Kullenberg, “Community liaison assistants: A bridge between peacekeepers and local populations.” *Forced Migration Review* 53 (2016), 44-47.

⁵ Data from ACABQ reports on 2022 mission budget proposals.

⁶ A third rationale, host state capacity building, is briefly noted in the downsizing discussion.

⁷ International Civil Service Commission (ICSC), *United Nations Common System of Salaries, Allowances and Benefits*, February 2022.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid, p.19

¹¹ Source: https://casquebleu.org/index.php?title=United_Nations_staff#Grade_equivalencies.

¹² For example, see the violent protests against MONUSCO in July 2022. <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/two-anti-un-protesters-east-congo-shot-dead-by-un-peacekeepers-reuters-witness-2022-07-26/>.

¹³ Calculated from UN data at https://peacekeeping.un.org/sites/default/files/stats_by_year_incident_type_appointment_type_6a_74_april_2022.pdf.

¹⁴ Katharina P. Coleman, “Downsizing in UN Peacekeeping: The Impact on Civilian Peacekeepers and the Missions Employing Them” *International Peacekeeping*, 27:5 (2020), 703-731. Updated data from <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/data>.

¹⁵ Data from annual UN Secretary-General *Staff Demographics* reports.

¹⁶ Marjorie Armstrong-Stassen, “The Influence of Prior Commitment on the Reactions of Layoff Survivors to Organisational Downsizing” *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology* 9:1 (2004), 46-60.

¹⁷ UN Secretary-General, *Civilian Capacity in the Aftermath of Conflict*. A/67/312-S/2012/645. August 15, 2012.

¹⁸ Source: UN Secretary-General, *Composition of the Secretariat: staff demographics; yearly reports*.

¹⁹ UN Secretariat, *Administrative Instruction” Downsizing or restructuring resulting in termination of appointments*. ST/AI/2023/1*20 January 2023.

²⁰ UN General Assembly, Resolution 76/274: *Cross-cutting Issues* 7 July 2002.

Author biography

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