

UNSC - United Nations Security Council

The Ethics of Peacekeeping

Introduction

Peacekeeping helps maintain peace and security in areas affected by conflict, usually through international forces. It is defined as the deployment of military forces, including soldiers, police, and civilian aid, to monitor ceasefires and protect civilians. Peacekeeping is a key method used by the United Nations to maintain stability and peace in areas affected by conflict. Still, there are many ethical issues surrounding this practice. Some question whether peacekeeping missions always protect the people they are supposed to help, since problems like bias, abuse of power, or poor accountability can occur. When peacekeepers act unfairly, it can harm civilians, create distrust, and sometimes even worsen conflicts (United Nations, Peacekeeping). It is also hard to decide when to send peacekeepers because doing so can interfere with a country's independence. To resolve these problems, various groups and governments have tried to improve training, set clearer rules, and hold instigators accountable for their actions. Even with these changes, keeping peacekeeping ethical and respectful is still a major challenge.

The UN Security Council (UNSC)

The United Nations Security Council (UNSC), founded in 1946, works to keep peace and security around the world by helping solve conflicts and preventing new ones from arising (United Nations, Peacekeeping). The UNSC's work reflects its values of fairness, cooperation, and respect for human rights, helping countries make peace and protect their people. The UNSC also focuses on the ethical side of peacekeeping, encouraging countries to follow clear rules, improve training, and make sure peacekeepers act responsibly to protect civilians and maintain trust in global peace efforts.

Overview - Ethical challenges in peacekeeping

Peacekeeping faces several ethical challenges that affect how well missions can protect communities. While peacekeeping is meant to maintain peace and stability in conflict zones, missions do not always succeed in protecting civilians and can sometimes make tensions worse (The New Humanitarian). One major debate covers who decides when and where peacekeepers are deployed. Although peacekeepers are sent by the United Nations, the decision-making power lies with the UN Security Council (United Nations, Peacekeeping). When a crisis occurs, the UNSC reviews the situation and votes on whether a peacekeeping mission is necessary. If they approve it, they create a mandate that outlines the peacekeepers' responsibilities and limits. These decisions and actions are guided by international agreements such as the Geneva Conventions, the Convention on the Safety of United Nations and Associated Personnel (1994), and the Convention on the Rights of the Child. For example, as per the Geneva Conventions, wounded and sick civilians must be cared for and protected, no matter which side they belong to. This includes not attacking medical workers or ambulances and ensuring people who are injured get treatment. However, even with these regulations, there still exist ethical concerns about fairness, accountability, and the real impact peacekeepers have on the people they are meant to protect (TIME).

The Importance and Rapid Development of the Issue

The issue has grown rapidly in importance as global concern increases over misconduct and harm caused during peacekeeping missions. Reports of abuse, corruption, and failure to protect civilians have emerged from several major operations, leading many to question the reliability of peacekeeping as a whole (The New Humanitarian). In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the MONUC and MONUSCO missions were created to help end a long-running civil

conflict and protect civilians caught in ongoing violence. Similar problems occurred there, where peacekeepers were implicated in sexual abuse, corruption, and repeated failures to protect civilians from ongoing violence (United Nations Peacekeeping). In South Sudan, the UNMISS mission has struggled with reports of sexual exploitation and accusations that peacekeepers did not intervene to prevent attacks on civilians (The Guardian). Even earlier missions, such as UNPROFOR in Bosnia (1992–1995), faced severe criticism after peacekeepers failed to stop the Srebrenica massacre, despite the area being designated a UN “safe zone” (TIME). These incidents have damaged public trust in UN peacekeeping and have increased pressure on governments and international organisations to introduce stricter standards, better oversight, and stronger accountability.

Effects of unethical peacekeeping

Unethical peacekeeping has serious and long-lasting effects on both the communities involved and the global peacekeeping system as a whole. When peacekeepers act irresponsibly or fail to protect civilians, it leads to a major loss of trust among people living in conflict zones (The Guardian). Misconduct also damages the reputation of international peace efforts, making it harder for future missions to operate effectively (Yale Law School). In some cases, unethical actions can worsen or prolong conflicts by increasing resentment or weakening cooperation with international help. Countries may reduce their participation or funding for peacekeeping operations if they believe missions are ineffective or harmful (United Nations, Peacekeeping).

Case Study: The Haiti Mission (MINUSTAH)

Highlighting many of these consequences is the UN’s disastrous peacekeeping mission in Haiti. Known as MINUSTAH, the operation was launched in 2004 after President Jean-Bertrand

Aristide was overthrown and the country erupted into political violence, gang warfare, and widespread instability. The UN aimed to restore order by deploying peacekeepers to support a transitional government, disarm armed groups, and rebuild Haiti's police and institutions. In some aspects, the mission succeeded: security improved in major cities, kidnappings were temporarily reduced, and the presence of peacekeepers helped stabilize elections and allow basic government functions to resume. However, significant failures overshadowed these successes. The mission struggled to fully disarm gangs, long-term political stability never materialised, and peacekeepers were implicated in serious misconduct, including the introduction of cholera, which killed thousands, as well as sexual exploitation scandals (Yale Law School). Ultimately, while MINUSTAH brought short-term stability, it failed to address the deeper political, economic, and social issues driving Haiti's conflict, leaving the country vulnerable to new crises after the mission ended (The Guardian).

The MINUSTAH mission in Haiti is one of the clearest examples of how misconduct can create long-term distrust toward the UN (Yale Law School). The abuse cases and the cholera outbreak linked to UN forces show exactly how unethical behaviour can ruin a mission and harm the UN's reputation for years. By using this example, it becomes easier to see how misconduct doesn't just affect one situation; it weakens peacekeeping as a whole.

International actions and responses

In response to concerns about unethical peacekeeping, the international community has taken steps to strengthen standards, oversight, and accountability. Global discussions within the UN and other organisations have focused on improving behaviour, increasing transparency, and preventing further harm to civilians (United Nations Peacekeeping). One major effort has been the creation of clearer codes of ethics and mandatory training programs. The UN Code of

Conduct for Peacekeepers highlights strict rules, including a zero-tolerance policy for sexual exploitation and abuse (United Nations Peacekeeping), while the Department of Peace Operations Conduct and Discipline Unit works to enforce these expectations (United Nations Peacekeeping). Several nations have also pushed for stronger oversight and more transparent reporting systems. The issue has inspired multiple UN resolutions, including Resolution 1325, Resolution 1820, and Resolution 2272 (The Guardian). Even with these efforts, it remains debated how to balance international intervention while respecting a country's independence and sovereignty.

Questions to Consider

1. What methods are most effective for ensuring fairness in peacekeeping missions?
2. Are the codes of conduct and ethical guidelines for peacekeepers being followed worldwide, and how is your country contributing to that effort?
3. Should countries or organisations that fail to act ethically in peacekeeping missions face consequences?
4. How much should nations invest in training, monitoring, and accountability systems for their peacekeepers?
5. Should we focus on fixing the worst missions first, or should every country improve its peacekeeping standards?

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