

Protecting civilians in UN peace operations: Influencing global policy and practice

Social Equity Research Centre researchers

Professor Charles Hunt

Project partners

International Peace Institute, Stimson Center, United Nations University-Centre for Policy Research, Challenges Forum, Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Australian Government Australian Civil-Military Centre

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What does it mean to protect civilians — not in theory, but in the chaos of war?

This is the question at the centre of Professor Charles Hunt's long-term research program at the Social Equity Research Centre. For over two decades, Professor Hunt has led global work for the protection of civilians in United Nations peace operations, by asking how global institutions can do better to prevent violence and uphold human rights in conflict-affected societies.

His research investigates how peacekeepers interpret their mandates, how protection strategies are implemented on the ground, and how the voices of conflict-affected communities can influence international responses. The program brings together fieldwork in sites such as South Sudan, Mali, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo with policy partnerships across the UN system and member states.

The result is impact — both deep and wide.

Professor Hunt's research has shaped major recent **UN policy processes**, including the Secretary-General's New Agenda for Peace and the UN's revised approach to atrocity prevention and protection policing. His findings have been used in UN peacekeeper training, mission planning, and national policy development.

Governments including Australia, Germany, and the US have commissioned Professor Hunt to inform their engagement in global peace operations. His field handbook on protecting civilians has become a core resource for civil-military teams responding to humanitarian crises.

From expert briefings in capitals and at the UN to public interviews on ABC, BBC and Al Jazeera, his work has helped shift the narrative — showing that meaningful civilian protection demands more than boots on the ground. It requires evidence, accountability, and a commitment to local engagement.

This is research that builds safer futures in the world's most fragile places.



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“While working in South Sudan, I had the opportunity to see Charles conducting his own field research. He put together methodologically rigorous group engagements that created dynamic and open spaces for South Sudanese participants, not only generating important information for his publications, but also helping to bridge the often deep divides between the international community and local actors. I find this extraordinary for academic research, and it speaks to Charles’ ability to speak to different communities, finding commonalities that can help the UN develop more empirically-based and constructive policies.”

Adam Day, Director, United Nations University – Centre for Policy Research

