Evaluation of the contribution of strategic communications to fostering public trust in peacekeeping operations

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OIOS

Office of Internal Oversight Services

INSPECTION AND EVALUATION DIVISION

Function

"The Office shall evaluate the efficiency and effectiveness of the implementation of the programmes and legislative mandates of the Organization. It shall conduct programme evaluations with the purpose of establishing analytical and critical evaluations of the implementation of programmes and legislative mandates, examining whether changes therein require review of the methods of delivery, the continued relevance of administrative procedures and whether the activities correspond to the mandates as they may be reflected in the approved budgets and the medium-term plan of the Organization;" (General Assembly Resolution 48/218 B).

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Summary

OIOS-IED conducted a thematic evaluation of the outcomes achieved through the contribution of strategic communications in peacekeeping operations to fostering public trust between 2017 and 2023.

Overall, peacekeeping strategic communications provided relevant support to mission objectives, but further opportunities remained to fully adapt to the United Nations strategic communications policy and incorporate the needs and priorities of the host population. Mission strategic communications were largely coherent and sometimes slow and inwardly focused, demonstrating an insular approach that limited engagement with partners. Further structured and whole-of-mission support is needed to stem the tide of mis- and disinformation and hate speech in peacekeeping contexts.

Public trust in peacekeeping missions varied across contexts. Several factors built or eroded this trust, highlighting the need for holistic and people-centred approaches to strategic communications. In one case, there was evidence a mission was able to build trust with the contribution of strategic communications. In other missions, especially due to crisis situations, there was an erosion of public trust. Other results included:

- Strategic communications efforts contributed to an understanding and awareness of mission mandates and activities among host populations, especially through radio and outreach in multi-dimensional missions.
- Missions demonstrated differing capacities and approaches to crisis communications: while proactive and strategic communications efforts helped prevent and mitigate crises and mis- and disinformation attacks, an absence of or delay in communications inflamed them.
- Strategic communications amplified the promotion of dialogue, reconciliation and social cohesion, but further efforts, including continued coordination with civil affairs, are needed to address remaining challenges.
- In some missions, strategic communications increased representation and voices of women and raised awareness on gender equality and integrated with human rights reporting; however, there was no evidence of systematic integration across other cross-cutting considerations.
- Prioritization of strategic communications by mission leadership was key to its effectiveness, while inadequate strategic messaging and mis- and disinformation campaigns were significant challenges. Host government and local authority reception was an enabling or disabling factor.

The seven recommendations are founded on the findings and include focal point feedback from a preliminary results validation meeting. They centre around ensuring relevant communications strategies guide the missions and a whole-of-mission approach to communications, including clear communications protocols for clearance of key messages by mission leadership.

I.   Introduction

1.   The overall objective of this Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) evaluation was to determine, as systematically and objectively as possible, the relevance, coherence and effectiveness of the strategic communications contribution to fostering public trust[1] in peacekeeping operations (see Annex 1 for the theory of change). The evaluation topic emerged from a programme-level risk assessment described in the evaluation inception paper produced at the outset of the evaluation.[2] This is the first OIOS-IED thematic evaluation on the topic. The evaluation conforms with the norms and standards for evaluation in the United Nations System.[3]

2.   Mission and the Department of Peace Operations (DPO) management comments were sought on the draft report and considered in the final report. Evaluand responses are included in Annex 1.

II.   Background

3.   Peacekeeping operations have been deployed in contexts where they have faced complex, multi-layered asymmetric and traditional threats and become targets of hostile disinformation by parties to the conflict. Rapid changes in the technological and communications landscape, as well as geopolitical shifts, have led to the increasing role and prominence of communications to control narratives. The United Nations has increasingly considered strategic communications as an essential tool for enhancing the credibility of peacekeepers, advancing trust, promoting transparency, addressing mis- and disinformation, as well as managing expectations. Misinformation, disinformation and hate speech in particular have eroded public trust in peacekeeping missions by undermining the accuracy and credibility of information and exacerbating conflicts and promoting hostility, thus diminishing confidence in the missions' ability to achieve their mandate. This in turn has jeopardized the safety of peacekeepers and the population at large.

4.   In 2017, the United Nations promulgated a policy on Strategic Communications and Public Information (Ref. 2016.11). According to the policy, strategic communications in peacekeeping operations are purposeful or directed communications to targeted audiences with the objective of building support for the mission, its mandate and activities, as well as for the peace process. Designed to foster cooperation with the host population, objectives of strategic communications also include guiding a mission's response to crises, familiarizing local media and the population with the goals of the mission and its activities, setting expectations, and countering inaccurate and/or antagonistic media.[4]

5.   Strategic communications encompasses two-way communications (between the mission and its audiences), public information and the use of digital and social media.[5] It should be strategic, measurable and in line with relevant established guidance. However, not all communications activities undertaken by the mission constitute strategic communications. For example, good offices, internal mission communication and partner and community engagement do not fall directly within the purview of strategic communications.

6.   Strategic communications is one of the seven top priorities of the Action for Peacekeeping (A4P+) initiative. In 2023, a strategic review of strategic communications assessed capabilities,

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[1] Public trust defined as building understanding of and support for United Nations peacekeeping operations.
[2] Evaluation of the contribution of strategic communications to fostering public trust in peacekeeping operations. 29 August 2023.
[3] United Nations Evaluation Group (UNEG). Norms and Standards for Evaluation, 2016.
[4] Strategic Communications and Public Information Policy (Ref. 2016.11).
[5] Public information was traditionally one-way communication to external audiences.

approaches, and impact on local communities, and identified gaps and proposed measures to address them. Member States committed to improving strategic communications and engagement with host populations to strengthen the understanding of peacekeeping missions and their mandates.[6] The Special Committee on Peacekeeping Operations recommended the establishment of a framework for strategic communications in peacekeeping to address anti-United Nations propaganda.[7]

III.   Scope and Methodology

7.   The evaluation took an explicit field-based focus by examining six peacekeeping missions that contained a communications component within their 2023 mandate, namely:

a.   United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission on the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO),

b.   United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA),

c.   United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS),

d.   United Nations Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus (UNFICYP),

e.   United Nations Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) and,

f.   United Nations Interim Security Force in Abyei (UNISFA).[8]

8.   The evaluation covered the period from January 2017 to March 2023. A mixed methods approach was used, including case studies,[9] desk reviews, analysis of secondary data, surveys, in-person and virtual interviews, field visits, observations and group interviews. Three online surveys were conducted: a) with mission leadership and staff, including all communications staff and heads of components; b) peace and security communications staff at DPO and Department of Global Communications (DGC); and c) external stakeholders.[10] A total of 107 individual and 131 group interviews were conducted with 403 people, of which 38.7 per cent were women. Stakeholders interviewed included mission staff and leadership, host government officials, members of the media, host population, civil society actors, United Nations headquarters (UNHQ) and country team (UNCT) staff (Table 1 below).

Table 1. Category and number of stakeholders interviewed

#	Stakeholder category	Number of interviewees	% female

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[6] United Nations, "Declaration of Shared Commitments on UN Peacekeeping Operations," 2018.

[7] UN reports, "Report of the Special Committee on Peacekeeping Operations," 2021.

[8] The financial resources of the strategic communications components across the six missions differed significantly; 2022/2023 budgets ranged from US$ 1.8 - 4.6 million for multidimensional missions and from US$ 20,000 - 460,000 for tradition missions. Likewise, the human resources capacity ranged from 131 to two posts.

[9] Case study missions selected were MINUSCA, UNMISS and UNIFIL. This included deeper analysis of missions, perceptions of awareness and trust due to radio exposure, radio content and crisis or mis- or disinformation communications responses. In CAR and South Sudan, host population were purposively sampled for group interviews by high or low exposure to UN radio, and then by demographic representation (women, youth, civil society, community leaders, and people with disabilities).

[10] External stakeholders contact lists were received from three missions only: UNMISS, MINUSCA and UNFICYP. Survey responses were kept confidential.

1	Host population (in CAR and South Sudan)	202	45.5%
2	Peacekeeping mission staff	98	36.7%
3	Civil society	58	27.6%
4	Media	18	22.2%
5	Government officials	14	14.3%
6	UNHQ staff	10	50.0%
7	Regional bodies	2	0.0%
8	United Nations agencies, funds and programmes	1	100.0%
Total		**403**	**38.7%**

9.   A briefing was conducted in early March 2024 to validate findings with evaluation focal points, seek feedback, supplement evidence and solicit ideas on recommendations. In May 2024, all entities were given the opportunity to comment on the informal draft report, with UNIFIL being the only mission that did not provide comments.

10.   Three limitations impeded this evaluation. First, data on work plans, campaign concepts and reports relevant to the theory of change and outcomes was not readily available; further, a general lack of knowledge management processes, services, and culture restricted a full assessment of the contribution of strategic communications to said outcomes. Finally, the evaluation team could not travel to UNIFIL or hire a local consultant as part of their case study data collection due to the conflict on the Lebanese-Israeli border.

IV.   Evaluation Results

A.   Relevance: Missions' communications strategies and programmes provided relevant support to mission objectives, but further opportunities remained to fully align with the United Nations strategic communications policy and incorporate the needs and priorities of the host population.

Sub-result statement 1.1: There was significant variability in the extent to which missions' communications strategies and programmes were aligned with the SCPI policy and their own mandates.

11.   Peacekeeping environments are inherently dynamic, with shifting political, social and security landscapes. Regularly updated communications strategies ensure that peacekeeping missions remain relevant and responsive to these changes. Additionally, as peacekeeping mandates evolve in response to changing circumstances and international priorities, communications strategies must adapt accordingly to reflect new objectives and priorities. Four of the six missions in the study were found to have adequate and updated strategic communications strategies that included elements of their current mandate priorities. Good examples were identified in crisis communications plans, especially crafting key messages in advance of potential scenarios. Only half of missions included any mention of two-way communications into their strategies and tools, a key element of the SCPI policy from 2017. Outdated or incomplete strategic communications strategies in two cases were found alongside vacant posts or high turnover in the communications chief role. Only one mission included a media plan as a part of their strategic guidance. Additionally, missions' strategies were all inadequate in measuring their work. For the period 2018 to 2023, four of six missions reported on at least one indicator related to communications in Comprehensive Performance Assessment System (CPAS).

However, there was no evidence that these assessments contributed to mission decision-making.[11] Table 2 below illustrates the evaluation content analysis of mission communications strategies and associated documentation.

Table 2. Content analysis of missions' communications strategies

	UNMISS	UNISFA	UNFICYP	MINUSCA	MONUSCO	UNIFIL
Is the strategy updated to the current date (2023)?	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Is it currently approved by the HOM?	No[12]	No	Yes	No	No[13]	No
Aligned with current mission priorities	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Key messages identified	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Audiences identified	Yes	Partial	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Crisis communications plan in existence (Anticipate crises scenarios and/or key messages)	Yes	Partial	Yes	No	Partial	Yes
Address mis-dis/hate speech	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Address two-way communication (How will they incorporate national voices?)	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Existence of media plan	Yes	No	No	No	No	Partial
Existence of KPIs (are they SMART?)	No	No	No	No	Yes	Partial
Existence of evaluation	Partial	Partial	Yes	Yes	Yes	No

12.   In one case, mission communications was perceived primarily as a support function engaged in conventional public information tasks, rather than as a substantive section capable of collaborating with other components to strategically align communications for effective engagement with host populations. The missions varied in the degree to which they prioritized audiences and developed relevant messages. While some missions lacked holistic understanding and prioritization of their key audiences, others collaborated to revise and develop key messages, which allowed them to stay

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[11] Missions have incrementally adopted CPAS, with revisions to framework, from 2018 to 2021.
[12] UNMISS approved an updated communications strategy in early 2024, beyond the temporal scope of the evaluation.
[13] MONUSCO approved an updated communications strategy in October 2023.

relevant to the dynamic challenges. MINUSCA and UNIFIL hosted a leadership session with each mandate renewal dedicated to reviewing and revising key messages as a part of the communications strategy. This best practice enabled the mission communications strategy and messages to remain relevant to the current political landscape and guide the mission.

13.   High awareness and satisfaction levels contrasted with the variances in alignment of the mission communications components and strategies with the policy. Most United Nations staff reported awareness and satisfaction with the policy. Sixty-nine per cent of mission staff (68.1 per cent men, 72.6 per cent women) reported to be aware of the SCPI policy. On satisfaction of the same, 95.0 per cent of mission respondents and 81.8 per cent of headquarters (HQ) staff were satisfied with the policy, which was due to be updated in 2023, with a focus on mis- and disinformation. When asked about missions' strategic communications support, respondents reported high satisfaction on programmes and work, radio reach, and radio programming. One exception was the UNHQ perspective of the communications strategies; less than half (42.9 per cent) were satisfied or very satisfied with these guiding documents, mainly because of a lack of responsiveness or pre-emptive messaging responding to crisis situations. External stakeholders viewed these elements with medium to high ranges, 78.6 per cent for programmes and work, 77.3 per cent for radio reach, and 83.3 per cent of radio content. The lack of alignment between strategies and the policy compared against the high levels of awareness and satisfaction with the policy revealed opportunities for improvement.

Sub-results statement 1.2: Missions were proactive in their use of appropriate channels of communications to inform audiences, radio was an important media with some host populations, but most missions were slow to fully pivot to two-way communications.

14.   There remained an outdated conceptualization of what strategic communications means: missions still operated under the old paradigm of public information, meaning a one-way, siloed approach. There were no structured feedback mechanisms, but four out of six missions were found to have shifted gears into informal two-way and integrated engagement with audiences. Radio stations and content, and media engagement were found to be the most prominent tools for appropriate and proactive engagement with audiences. However, there was a dearth of evidence of national voices fed back into mission decision making and strategic communications planning, as a result of communications components and work.

15.   Particularly in multi-dimensional missions covering large geographic areas with lower literacy rates and low digital penetration, there was a reliance on radio stations and content, which proved a powerful tool to provide timely, accurate and impartial information to key audiences. The medium of radio was highly relevant to host populations and served as a voice for the mission and even beyond, acting as a public broadcaster in many respects. Call-in programs featuring national voices were an oft-cited method of engaging in two-way communications. For example, Radio Miraya in South Sudan and Guira FM in Central African Republic (CAR) included debates, panels and roundtable discussions, and in UNIFIL, the radio program, Vox Box, amplified host population voices. Component heads were invited to speak on different issues; for example, UN Police (UNPOL) broadcast weekly on Radio Miraya on topics of safety and security. Further, in UNMISS and MINUSCA, community radio partnerships were in development, which could further extend information and local voices speaking about mission objectives and news in rural areas. However, as of October 2023 in UNMISS, there was a gap between the communications leadership and the radio management, leading to missed opportunities to leverage this important tool further.

16.   Missions that prioritized media engagement, such as MINUSCA, remained attuned to national voices and agendas, facilitating the monitoring and preservation of goodwill with the host population. Other missions that remained inwardly focused encountered difficulty staying close to the needs and priorities of the host population. Media engagement in the form of press conferences or briefings, press cafés, press trips, briefing journalists on background, being available to correct narratives and

take phone calls, etc. were all valuable tools to achieve good working relationships and even trust with the media, according to the missions. Media monitoring was another way for missions to understand how the host population perceived them; evidence was found from four missions that conducted regular media monitoring. MINUSCA hosted weekly press conferences, with integrated civilian and military communications, and invited heads of field offices and government authorities at times. The weekly press conference was one of the most popular programs on GuiraFM, according to group interviews conducted by the evaluation.

B. Coherence: Mission strategic communications were largely coherent yet sometimes slow and inwardly focused, demonstrating an insular approach which limited engagement with national partners. Coordination with UNHQ was adequate, but further structured support is needed.

Sub-results statement 2.1: There was evidence of coherent mission communications; however, opportunities remained to optimize coordination and consistent messaging to consolidate public trust.

17.   Coherence of missions' strategic communications was fostered through practices such as direct senior leadership engagement and support of communications, inclusion of strategic communications personnel as part of the mission planning and decision-making team, and the adoption of a whole-of-mission approach to communications that coordinates and integrates all communication efforts across the civilian and uniformed components of the mission. Notable examples of leadership engagement in strategic communications were observed in MINUSCA, UNIFIL and UNFICYP. This engagement was led by heads of missions committing explicitly to support strategic communications within their senior management compacts.

18.   Despite efforts made towards coherence, internal challenges persisted. Instances were identified where mission leadership lacked necessary openness and transparency, leading to challenges in effectively communicating the objectives of the mission and managing its reputation. Bureaucratic procedures and a lack of clarity on approvals of key messages caused delays in publishing messages effectively. Examples of limited coordination between the spokesperson and the strategic communications section were noted at the mission level, which hindered the cohesive dissemination of key messages. This was primarily attributed to the organizational structure, where in some missions, spokespersons reported directly to the Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG) without a direct line of reporting to the strategic communications chief.

19.   Three out of six mission communications components lacked civilian and military integration, with communications chiefs sometimes not at the table to inform and advise leadership. Within the military, there was sometimes a culture of silence. Force commanders, as members of senior leadership did not always cooperate with the civilian component on communicating about the mission. Further, some military public information officers (MPIOs) lacked the necessary background, experience and skills (including language) to adequately perform their duties, and are often rotated out of the position after six months.

20.   The OIOS survey indicated broad consensus on effective coordination of consistent messaging in mission communications. Despite instances of inadequate coordination between mission leadership and communications teams, most staff (75.0 per cent of UNHQ and 91.2 per cent of mission staff) affirmed the effective coordination. Additionally, 92.3 per cent of UNHQ staff and 89.9 per cent of mission staff acknowledged the effective coordination between DPO and mission communications teams. However, only half of the HQ survey respondents agreed that missions engaged in a timely

manner, a sentiment echoed by certain national partners and media. The delays were perceived in both crisis and routine situations.

21.   The OIOS survey results indicated that most staff agreed that mission communications effectively engaged with relevant external stakeholders. Overall, high levels of engagement were perceived, although slightly lower for vulnerable groups and Member States (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Mission communications engagement with external stakeholders (% great and moderate engagement) (N=164)
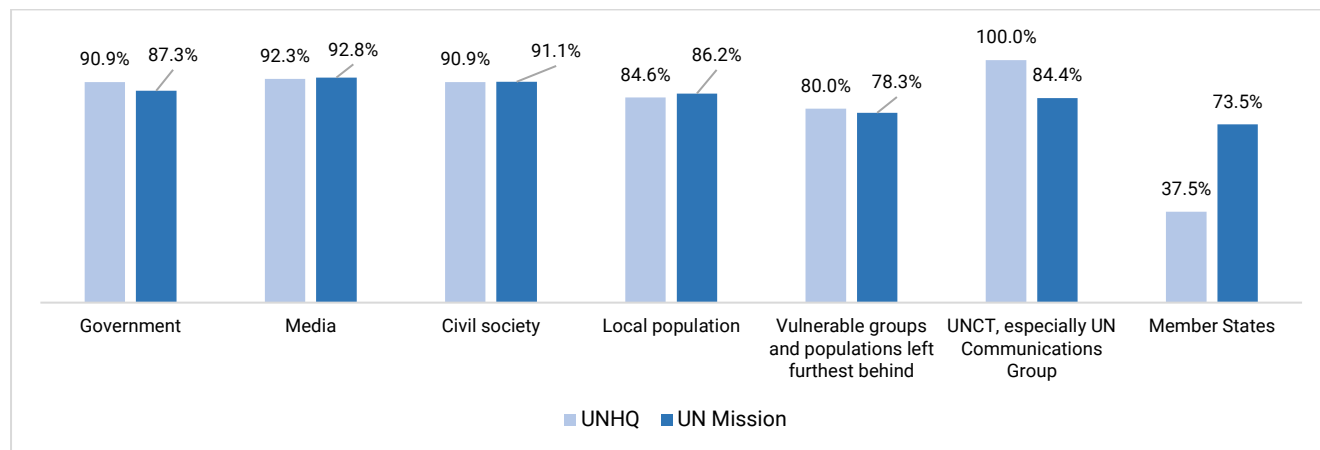
Source: OIOS

Sub-results statement 2.2: Missions engaged with a wide range of stakeholders towards common goals; however, there was no systematic approach to partnerships, including with the media. Relationships remained one-sided, in favour of mission goals.

22.   Missions engaged with various entities, including local media, host governments, fact-checker associations and civil society organizations, to pursue common goals. Support provided by the mission through these partnerships included facilitating press trips, helping fact-checking organizations, aiding government agencies in crafting communication strategies and conducting training sessions on ethics, journalism principles and countering hate speech.

23.   Collaboration with external partners was pivotal in supporting peacekeeping missions to make progress towards disseminating timely and accurate information, enhancing public awareness about mission objectives and achievements, countering misinformation, and fostering public trust using proxy messengers. For instance, in MINUSCA, MONUSCO and UNIFIL, partnerships with media and fact-checker associations have contributed to more accurate reporting. Radio Miraya in South Sudan partnered with the Ministry of Education during the COVID-19 pandemic to broadcast primary lessons on the radio while schools were closed, which was a good example of partnering for common goals.

24.   However, partnerships with external stakeholders often lacked clear structure and tended to prioritize the mission's interests over those of partners. The partnerships were characterized by, among others, a lack of documentation outlining the roles, responsibilities and expectations between the communication teams and local media and civil society organizations, and the absence of formal mechanisms for monitoring the effectiveness of partnership activities or evaluating their impact on local media coverage or public perception. Moreover, members of civil society and the media sometimes felt their own objectives were overlooked, leading to inequitable partnerships, whether real or perceived. Despite the potential benefits of a unified platform like the United Nations Communications Group (UNCG), the UNCGs were largely dormant and ineffective.[14] Missions thus were missing out on the convening power of the United Nations to help shape narratives. Moreover,

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[14] Apart from the COVID-19 response.

some interviewees suggested that sometimes United Nations agencies hesitated to associate with missions, particularly in situations where they were unpopular with the host populations.

C.   Effectiveness: Public trust in peacekeeping missions varied across contexts; strategic communications consolidated trust in one case, but missions allowed it to erode in others, especially in crisis situations.

Sub-results statement 3.1A) The contribution of strategic communications toward building trust with host populations was mixed. Several factors built or eroded this trust, highlighting the need for holistic and people-centred approaches to strategic communications.

25.   In some cases, strategic communications contributed to the consolidation of public trust, mainly through timely media engagement. Missions' strategic communications components were able to influence national media, compared to other audiences such as government and host populations. Strategic communications was not a panacea; preexisting conditions such as commitment to a peace process, engaged mission leadership and an effective force must be established first, before communications could reliably become a "force multiplier". Missions must pursue good offices and agendas of peace processes and mandate objectives, balancing this advocacy and calls for accountability, while maintaining the confidence and goodwill of the relevant parties and national authorities. Political environments changed quickly; missions succeeded when they were nimble and strategic, working with host governments and civil society partners. Traditional missions, without protection of civilian mandates, experienced different obstacles to building trust, and were resourced with smaller communications teams.

26.   Some missions commissioned perception surveys undertaken by independent firms to understand national sentiment and perspectives on peacekeeping. However, the perception survey data was limited. It revealed a variation in public trust levels across the six missions. Table 3 below indicates survey year by mission, with the percentage of respondents that indicated they trust the mission.[15] For instance, data from the MINUSCA surveys showed a gradual rise in trust levels among the host population over time, whereas the UNMISS results indicated a more substantial increase in trust. Expensive and difficult to undertake, perception surveys offered missions valuable information, but it was unclear if, and how, missions fed this knowledge into decision-making.

Table 3. Perception survey data for six missions[16]

Mission	MINUSCA	MONUSCO	UNMISS	UNIFIL	UNFICYP	UNISFA
2017	30%	23%		19%		
2018	34%	20%		21%		
2019	42%	12%		50%		
2020	35%		53.0%			
2021	42%		54.0%			
2022					47%	
2023			88%			

Sources: Mission commissioned perception surveys

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[15] UNMISS asked respondents if they thought the mission was trustworthy, UNIFIL asked about impartiality, MINUSCA and MONUSCO surveys both asked if respondents trusted the mission with security, and UNFICYP survey asked if respondents trusted the United Nations to bring about peace.
[16] Perception survey data in Cyprus was commissioned by the Office of the Special Adviser on Cyprus.

27.   MINUSCA stood out as the sole mission consistently engaged in monitoring and analyzing media coverage throughout the evaluation period. An OIOS analysis of the MINUSCA media coverage revealed a gradual increase in favorable media portrayal of the mission. This trend corresponded with the data depicted in the heatmap above, illustrating a steady rise in public trust towards the mission. Notably, fluctuations in media attention corresponded with significant events, including instances of conflict and the appointment of a new SRSG, with their advocacy for a more robust force posture (Figure 2). By triangulating trust levels with occurrences of protests and demonstrations (Figure 3),[17] the analysis underscores the success of MINUSCA in cultivating trust attributed in part to strategic communications efforts, particularly through regular engagement with the media, exemplified by their weekly press conferences.

Figure 2. Percentage of positive MINUSCA media mentions
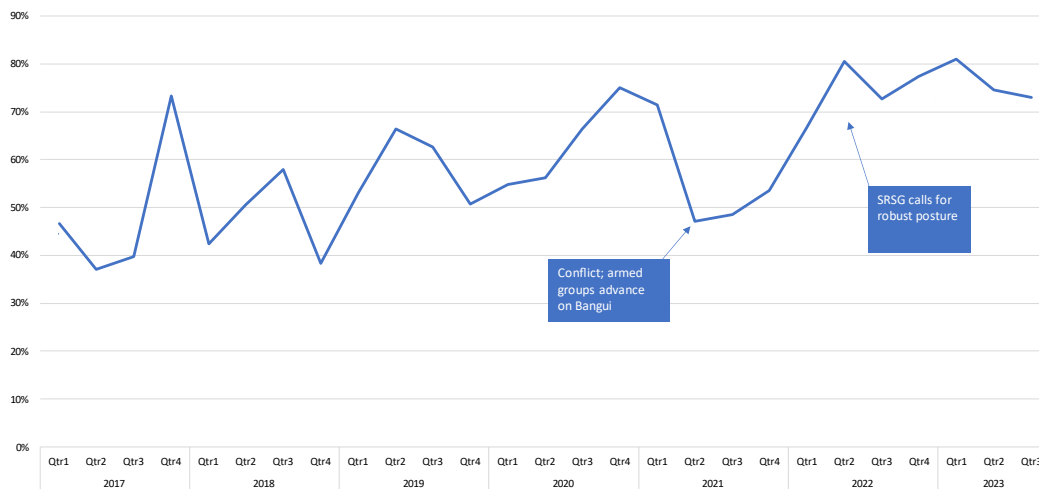
Source: MINUSCA weekly media monitoring report summaries.

Figure 3. Protests against MINUSCA
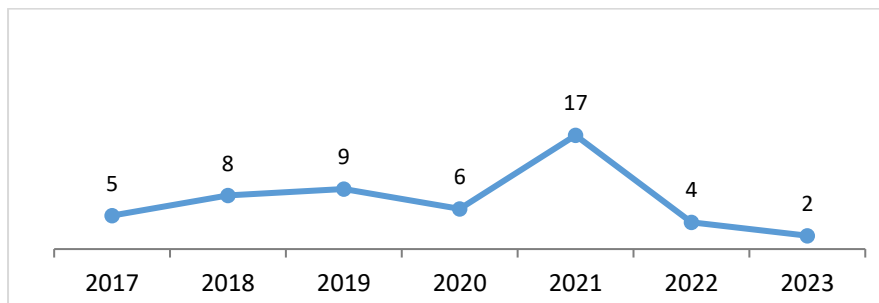
Source: ACLED

28.   Despite these challenges, radio and outreach served as useful tools to build trust with audiences and manage reputations. In an absence of radio stations or programmes,[18] media engagement was the most useful tool.

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[17] Demonstrations were sometimes influenced by other security personnel manipulating vulnerable civilians to protest. https://press.un.org/en/2023/sc15328.doc.htm
[18] MONUSCO, UNMISS, MINUSCA and UNFIL have radio stations and/or programmes.

Sub-results statement 3.1B) Strategic communications efforts contributed to an understanding and awareness of mission mandates and activities, especially through radio and outreach in multi-dimensional missions.

29.   Peacekeeping missions' strategic communications employed several approaches to improve understanding of their mandates and activities, primarily utilizing United Nations radio stations and content and community outreach and advocacy initiatives. Radio programmes featured diverse aspects of mandates such as protection of civilians, elections, gender equality and peace processes. One civil society activist in South Sudan highlighted their involvement in awareness programs on Radio Miraya, such as the weekly Know Your Rights and gender-based violence programmes. MINUSCA's GuiraFM broadcasted "Le Mandat", a programme that features mission peace operations and activities. In case study countries, the evaluation found that those with access to United Nations radio stations were more informed about the mission objectives and activities, and less likely to have inflated expectations that the mission could deliver humanitarian and development aid. In a more in-depth examination of case study missions in South Sudan and CAR, those host communities aware of the protection and security improvements that the mission provided were more likely to understand the mission objectives, pointing to a need for more dissemination of emotive success stories. Use of authentic community voices and people-driven stories would lend credibility to mission communications.

30.   A content analysis was conducted for case study missions MINUSCA and UNMISS on radio programmes to understand the coverage and quality of radio broadcasts on mission objectives. A sample of Radio Miraya episodes in South Sudan indicated a broad alignment of radio content with the four mission mandate pillars. GuiraFM episodes were not availed by MINUSCA.

31.   In addition to radio, community outreach events play a significant role in engaging various groups and disseminating information about mission objectives. These events, including United Nations Peace Days, cultural gatherings, and musical performances, provided opportunities for mission staff to engage with host populations, and importantly, for communities to intermingle with those with differing views or ethnicities. Peacekeeping missions also engaged with the media as a vital component of their strategy to raise awareness about their mandates, objectives and activities. Through press releases, interviews, background briefings and press conferences, missions communicated directly with journalists and bloggers to ensure accurate and timely coverage of their work.

32.   All external stakeholders surveyed confirmed awareness of the mission's main mandate and activities, yet there was room for improvement in awareness raising. Most (86.4 per cent) respondents agreed that the mission could achieve its mandate. However, among surveyed media members, a little over half (52.9 per cent) indicated that host populations were aware of mission mandates, and 57.1 per cent believed that the host population perceived that mission could achieve its mandate.

33.   Challenges such as misinformation and disinformation persisted, underscoring the ongoing need for robust strategic communications efforts to continually reinforce mission mandates and actions within served communities. Misinformation, skepticism, inflated expectations (due to poverty), language barriers and limited access to remote areas hindered broader awareness.

Sub-results statement 3.1C) While proactive and strategic communications efforts helped tame crises and mis- and disinformation attacks, an absence of or delay in communications inflamed them; missions demonstrated differing capacities and approaches to crisis communications.

34.   Three missions out of six had crisis communications plans, which anticipated crisis scenarios and pre-identified key messages, as well as detailed contact lists and roles and responsibilities. These missions were able to navigate and mitigate fallout in some crisis situations, through messaging to the

media and local actors and radio extension and programming. For example, UNMISS quickly erected a radio transmitter to extend Radio Miraya broadcasts to Tambura in 2021; this had a positive contribution in quelling violence. They aired messages of peace and voices of the local community, including elders and women calling for peace. Field communications staff followed up with coverage for international media.

35. An analysis of a crisis communications or mis- or disinformation incident was conducted of the three case study missions, with the following results:

a. **MINUSCA countering misinformation regarding their role in the 2023 constitutional referendum, July 2023.** Despite not having a crisis or mis- and disinformation communications strategy or plan available,[19] the mission was coherent in its anticipation and preparation responding to the misinformation. A whole-of-mission approach was taken that included leadership, at least two leadership meetings, SCPI, the working group on mis- and disinformation, Force, UNPOL, chief of staff's office and field offices. In their response, the mission demonstrated the capacity to proactively communicate through the incident and minimize reputational damage. However, no documented lessons learned were derived from the incident.

b. **UNMISS response to a crisis in Malakal Protection of Civilians Site, May/June 2023.** Internal messages were shared with key players, including mission personnel, United Nations agencies, and international organizations. A public information officer indicated that national staff were a better source of knowledge in a crisis compared to mission intelligence structures. The mission communicated internally and externally, issued five press releases and broadcast news and interviews on Radio Miraya, which was effective given the media landscape. Documentation on learning was developed by the mission, including two recommendations that mainstreamed communications.

c. **UNIFIL communications response to the Irish peacekeeper killed during convoy, December 2022.** The mission followed its own guidelines and addressed the crisis in a timely manner. There was consistency and alignment in the four key messages, which were picked up by international media. The mission experienced a bottleneck in that their main partner, the Lebanese Armed Forces, delayed in countering the misinformation generated locally that the convoy ought not to be operating without them. However, the response was effective in controlling the narrative with international audiences.

36. MONUSCO took the decision not to hold press conferences during a difficult crisis, which eroded trust with the host population. The period of silence from the mission allowed other actors to control the narrative, tarnishing the mission's reputation. Later, the mission hired consultants to counter mis- and disinformation and trained journalists on fact checking.

37. Four missions addressed mis- and disinformation within their communications strategies and associated resources. Recent efforts within some missions increased capacity to address mis- and disinformation and hate speech, with welcome support from a multidisciplinary team at DPO, raising mission-level working groups, developing action plans and hiring consultants in the past two years. Other UNHQ initiatives included a global working group on addressing mis- and disinformation in peacekeeping settings, big data radio mining[20] and a working group on information integrity. Missions engaged with proxy messengers, influential bloggers and journalists, to generate authentic and validated content. However, the response was not sufficient to address the scale of the growing

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[19] While these tools are referenced as annexes in the 2022 communications strategy, they were not provided to the evaluation team, despite multiple requests.
[20] As of 2024, renamed Unite Wave.

problem, which included Member States undermining peacekeeping operations.[21] While there were nascent results emerging from these early efforts, they were encouraging and the whole-of-mission approach was appropriate.

38.   There was agreement across missions that communications teams had increased their capacity to address crisis communications, mis- and disinformation and hate speech, since 2017. However, there was a perception, especially from UNHQ staff, of inadequate staff and financial resources to address and counter mis- and dis-information and hate speech (Figure 4). Crisis communications capacity is perceived as stronger, at 58.3 per cent and 66.2 per cent from UNHQ and mission colleagues.

Figure 4. Capacity to address crises, mis- and disinformation and hate speech
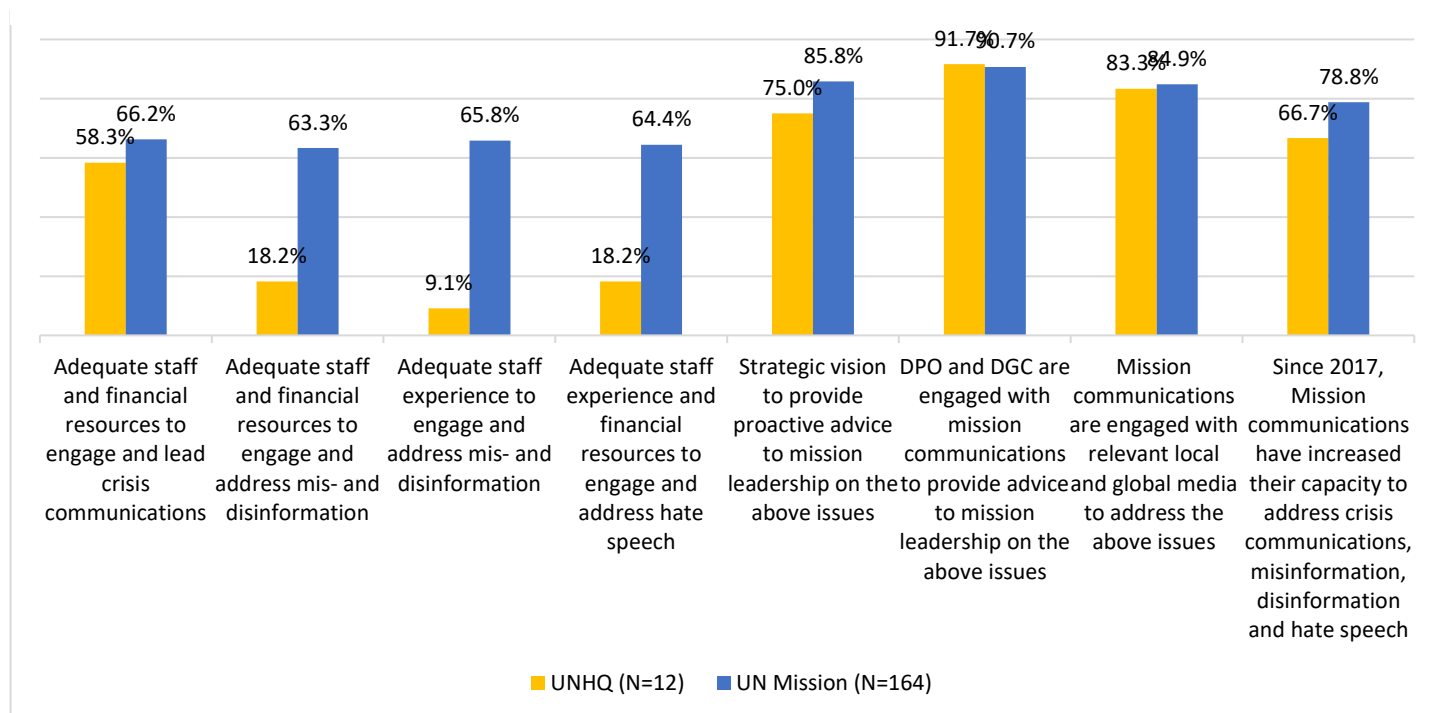
Source: OIOS

Sub-results statement 3.1D) Strategic communications amplified the promotion of dialogue, reconciliation and social cohesion, but further efforts, including continued coordination with civil affairs, are needed to address remaining challenges.

39.   Strategic communications components in missions contributed to fostering dialogue, reconciliation and social cohesion by providing platforms for the host population, states, warring parties and other stakeholders to engage in open discussions. Radio stations and programming provided a valuable platform for interactive dialogue between diverse communities and parties and were a major component in promoting civic dialogue and conversations on peace between national political figures and civilians. Through these channels, the host population, local leaders and parties to the conflict were encouraged to voice their opinions, share their perspectives and participate actively in the peace process. Radio examples included Miraya's weekly Peacemakers and Roundtable programmes, as well as GuiraFM's Listeners programme. During the civil war in South Sudan in 2017,

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[21] Missions noted that Member States Russia and Rwanda undermined human rights and security in MINUSCA and MONUSCO. See: S/2021/569 Final report of the Panel of Experts on the Central African Republic extended pursuant to Security Council resolution 2560 (2020) and S/2023/990 Midterm report of the Group of Experts on the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

communications staff in Yambio field office brought together local leaders to dialogue on the radio with the result of deescalating a hotspot within the environs of a local orphanage center. In CAR in 2018, strategic communications awareness-raising activities on peace between Christians and Muslims contributed to results when residents returned home and successfully reintegrated.

40.   In peacekeeping operations, both civil affairs and strategic communications components shared a goal of community engagement to achieve greater dialogue. While it was clear that strategic communications engaged with civil affairs, there was evidence that this work could be improved upon. There was an absence of documentation shared; only two missions shared annual outreach work plans and few dialogue or campaign concept notes were available, from only one mission.

Sub-results statement 3.2) In some missions, strategic communications increased representation and voices of women and raised awareness on gender equality and integrated with human rights reporting; however, there was no evidence of systematic integration across other cross-cutting considerations.

41.   Four missions (UNFICYP, MINUSCA, MONUSCO and UNIFIL) integrated gender equality objectives into their communications strategies, and there was evidence of this within programmes.[22] Missions amplified the voices and visibility of women by providing platforms for women leaders to speak out and participate in decision-making processes, as well as ensuring representation in media coverage, radio and outreach events. Mission communications were instrumental in raising awareness on critical issues affecting women, including gender-based violence (GBV), sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA), and women's rights. For example, MINUSCA raised the profile of a government agency addressing GBV with its work with the Joint Unit for Rapid Intervention and Repression of Sexual Violence Against Women and Children (L'UMIRR, in French). However, across all missions, there was no evidence available which demonstrated an increased awareness of gender equality outcomes nor the women, peace and security mandates.[23]

42.   Within the two case study missions MINUSCA and UNMISS, as well as UNFICYP and MONUSCO, the strategic communications components emphasized human rights reporting, including radio broadcasts, issuing press releases on human rights violations, monitoring incidents, and engaging with human rights bodies to ensure accountability.

43.   There was limited evidence of disability inclusion and environment and climate change considerations within communications strategies and programmes. None of the missions included disability inclusion within their communications strategies, while only two included environment language. Some communications programmes existed on the topics, including a Radio Miraya show, Able Differently, deaf awareness week events and provision of interpreters, yet overall integration remains limited and inconsistent across missions. The noticeable lack of comprehensive strategies for disability inclusion was despite the existence of a Disability-Inclusive Communications Guidelines.[24]

44.   Survey respondents strongly agreed that missions' communications efforts enhanced communications on the sustainable development goals (SDGs), especially in gender equality and human rights. While United Nations missions (76.9 per cent) and external stakeholders (72.7 per cent) agree on mission communications' effectiveness in addressing environmental and climate issues, only 57.1 per cent of UNHQ respondents shared this view. While mission staff opined that their work

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[22] While UNMISS did not have gender equality language within their strategies, there were examples of gender integration within their activities.
[23] Gender Responsive United Nations Peacekeeping Operations (Ref. 2018.01). (Para. 64)
[24] Disability-Inclusive Communications Guidelines, Department for Global Communications. (2022).

enhanced the communication of the SDGs, further efforts are needed to ensure systematic and inclusive communications strategies on these important priorities.

Sub-results statement 3.3) Prioritization of strategic communications by mission leadership was key to its effectiveness, while inadequate strategic messaging and mis- and disinformation campaigns were significant challenges. Host government reception was an enabling or disabling factor.

45.   Mission leadership focus on strategic communications was the primary enabling factor supporting effective results. The work of the strategic communications component was enabled if the SRSG, head of mission and force commander understood the power of communications and provided guidance to this effect. For example, MINUSCA respondents were quick to point out the SRSG leadership on strategic communications prompted a renewal in positive engagement with the host government. Figure 5 below details other top enabling factors.

Figure 5. Enabling factors that support strategic communications
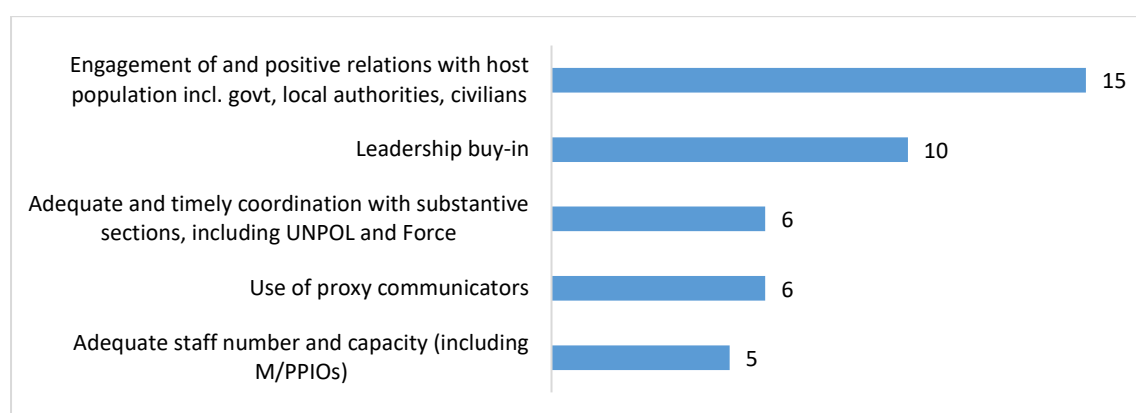
Source: Key informant interviews

46.   Barriers to achievement included a lack of communications strategy and messaging, lack of interest from host government and mis- and disinformation campaigns targeting the mission. It is worth noting that the top barrier identified was firmly within the control of the mission. Most frequently cited barriers averaged across the three stakeholder categories were: i) lack of communications strategy and messaging (48.7 per cent of respondents, mainly HQ), ii) lack of buy-in/interest from host governments (48.3 per cent, mainly external and mission staff respondents), and, iii) misinformation campaigns targeting the mission from international players (40.2 per cent). Misconduct and protection of civilian failures by the mission also limited the achievement of strategic communications, according to interviewees.

47.   Depending on the context, the evaluation found that engagement with the host government and local authority[25] could be an enabling or disabling factor, highlighting the importance of the senior mission leaders optimizing the convening power of the United Nations to build strong working relationships with host nation leaders and conflict parties. Another disabling factor noted by key informants and survey respondents was a stagnant work force in some missions. The communications industry shifted massively in the past years, yet staff sit on posts for years without any upgrade to their capacities.

Sub-results statement 3.4) In one case, a mission spokesperson served as scapegoat for host government expressing their political discontent with the mission.

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[25] In the case of UNISFA.

48.   Communications staff may face host government backlash due to (willful misconstruing of) messaging, with an example where a MONUSCO spokesperson served as a scapegoat for host governments expressing their displeasure with the mission. As a result, the mission decided to limit their communications. In UNMISS, Radio Miraya was accused of operating illegally due to a misunderstanding of the SOFA agreement, which inhibited their programming to a minimal extent. The Miraya issue was resolved in mid-2023. There were a few other instances where mission communications activities or products were misinterpreted, leading to false claims or implications.

49.   Positive unanticipated results included Radio Miraya in South Sudan broadcasting school lessons on the radio, during the period when schools were closed during the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants noted that these lessons helped pupils maintain their studies, despite the closure. Also in South Sudan, an outreach event partnered with the Ministry of Health and the Red Cross to provide a location for vaccinations and HIV testing.

V.   Recommendations

50.   OIOS-IED makes seven important recommendations to strategic communications components in peacekeeping missions and DPO. The recommendations below in Table 4 are aligned with the findings and identified in consultation with counterparts based on the cumulative progress achieved and significance of each immediate outcome in contributing to fostering public trust.

Table 4. Recommendations

Evaluation Criteria & Results Statement	Recommendation (para references)	Indicators of Achievement	Entity (mission or DPO)
Relevance Sub-result statement 1.1: There was significant variability in the extent to which missions' communications strategies and programmes were aligned with the SCPI policy and their own mandates.	**R1. Updated strategy and guidance.** Peacekeeping missions should consistently align communications strategies with mandate provisions and mission strategies. There should be a prioritization of interactive communications channels. (para. 12)	• R1.1 Updated communications strategy with clear messages based on current mandate, with evidence of people-centred, emotive and storytelling communications elements (less jargon, ceremony, and workshops).	• All missions
		• **R1.2 # of mechanisms for the host population to provide feedback on mission activities and perceptions,** such as through perception surveys, digital, radio and outreach engagement or by establishing dedicated forums for exchange with the mission.	• All missions
		• R1.3 Evidence of clear and measurable benchmarks and key performance indicators tailored to assess the effectiveness of strategic communications efforts, including integration of actionable CPAS indicators that can guide the mission communications and provide evidence of interactive communications. 51.	• All missions
		• R1.4 Evidence of radio strategy, including consideration of increased broadcasting in Juba Arabic	• UNMISS
		• R1.5 Evidence of consistency in the title of section: strategic communications and public information.	• UNFICYP • UNMISS
		• R1.6 Communications strategy guidance / template developed for peacekeeping operations	• DPO SCS • DGC

Coherence	R2. Whole-of-mission approach to communications.		
Sub-results statement 2.1: There was evidence of coherent mission communications; however, opportunities remained to optimize coordination and consistent messaging to consolidate public trust.	**R2. Whole-of-mission approach to communications.** Peacekeeping missions should strengthen the whole-of-mission approach to strategic communications, involving all personnel. This requires: i) a clear recognition that effective communications is not the sole responsibility of the strategic communications team but is a collective effort, ii) clear definition of communications responsibilities for mission senior leaders and iii) ensuring that uniformed components of the missions coordinate with strategic communications to actively communicate about their activities. (paras. 19, 20, 41 - 44)	• R2.1 Training conducted for mission senior leadership on strategic communications.	• All missions • DPO SCS
		• R2.2 # of HOM compacts with strategic communications as an objective or a commitment.	• UNMISS • MONUSCO • UNISFA • UNFICYP
		• R2.3 Evidence of concrete collaboration of other mission components with strategic communications, such as through joint activities, shared concept notes, communications focal points and communications training events attended by staff of various substantive components across the mission.	• All missions
		• R2.4 Evidence of actions to familiarize mission personnel familiar with mandate and key messages.	• All missions
		• R2.5 Existence of joint community engagement and outreach results-based work planning with civil affairs, including communications focal points for relevant components, as necessary.	• All missions
		• R2.6 Evidence that the mission is addressing mis- and disinformation with proactive approaches, as appropriate.	• All missions

	R3. Establish clear communications protocols. Peacekeeping missions should create comprehensive guidelines outlining the roles, responsibilities, and timelines for all stakeholders involved in the clearance process of key messages. They should clearly define the criteria for determining the urgency of key messages and establish communications channels for expedited review and approval. These protocols should be communicated to all relevant staff members and training sessions conducted to ensure understanding and compliance. (paras. 19, 20)	• R3.1 Evidence of communications protocols detailing roles, responsibilities and clearance processes within the mission's communications strategy or standard operating procedure (SOP) for clearances of key messages. Missions should also develop, disseminate and regularly update strategies, action plans, guidelines and SOPs for critical strategic communications activities.	• UNMISS • UNIFIL • UNFICYP • UNISFA • MINUSCA
	R4. Ensure civilian and military strategic communications are unified, such as by redeploying a post within Office of Military Affairs (OMA) to ensure military public information officer (MPIO) recruitment and capacity building are adequate. Officers should possess foundational expertise in communications, following the July 2023 OMA Directive on the Integration of the Strategic Communications within the Branches of Military Components and coordinate and report to the strategic communications chief. (para. 19, 20)	• R4.1 Consideration of a Strategic Communications post within OMA, to ensure adequate MPIO recruitment processes exists.	• DPO OMA
		• R4.2 Organizational charts indicating the chief MPIO role with a reporting line to the chief of strategic communications and public information.	• DPO OMA • UNMISS • UNIFIL • MONUSCO • UNISFA
		• R4.3 Evidence of integration of strategic communications measures and messages with mission CONOPS and other military planning and operational documents.	• All missions
	R5. Structure of spokesperson FRO. Mission leadership should redefine the reporting structure to ensure that the office of the	• R5.1 Organizational charts indicating the spokesperson role reporting to the chief strategic communications and public information.	• All missions

	spokesperson (where it exists) maintains dual reporting lines, reporting firstly to the chief of strategic communications and with a second reporting officer in the head of mission (para. 18)		
Effectiveness Sub-results statement 3.2) In some missions, strategic communications	**R6. Cross cutting guidance developed** for strategic communications and public information components to increase their capacity on how to communicate for the advancement of cross-cutting priorities. (paras. 41-44)	• R6.1 Guidance, perhaps in the form of tipsheets, developed for peacekeeping missions to include a leave no one behind lens and cross-cutting priorities (gender equality, human rights, disability inclusion and environment) within their communications strategies and programmes.	• DGC and DPO SCS
increased representation and voices of women and raised awareness on gender equality and integrated with human rights reporting; however, there was no evidence of systematic integration across other cross-cutting considerations. Sub-results statement 3.3) Elevation by mission leadership enabled strategic communications in peacekeeping missions, whereas barriers to achievement included inadequate strategic	**R7.** Take steps to achieve a modern, nimble and agile workforce in line with the Digital Transformation Strategy and UN 2.0 within missions' strategic communications components. (para. 47)	• R7.1 Documentation of actions by DPO, Department of Management Strategy, Policy and Compliance and Department of Operational Support, to address strategic communications mission staff capacity, such as updated job descriptions.	• DPO SCS, DMSPC and DOS

messaging and mis- and disinformation campaigns. Host government reception could be an enabling or disabling factor.			

Annex 1: Management responses[26]

MINUSCA management response

52.　　I would like to express my appreciation to OIOS for the draft report on the Evaluation of the Contribution of Strategic Communications to Fostering Public Trust in Peacekeeping Operations as well as recommendations to the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA). This insightful document not only recognizes the effective use of strategic communications by the Missions regarding their mandates' implementation, the national reconciliation process but also allows reflection on ways to strengthen the existing relations with the host country population.

53.　　During the draft report's information and data collection process, MINUSCA concerned staff could share with OIOS team the Mission's daily work to implement its strategic communications with a particular focus on the people of CAR in a context of persistent mis/disinformation campaigns aimed at feeding public grievances, inspiring mobilization and denigrating the Mission's work impact. MINUSCA's two-way communication is a fact, i.e. listening and amplifying the voice of the communities and the partners either in our interactions during the joint field visits with the country's Prime Minister, the Government and the UNCT or during the Mission's outreach, radio program and communication activities. The report does not really reflect this reality.

54.　　With respect to the five recommendations tailored for MINUSCA, I would like to inform that the Mission endorses recommendations 1, 2, 3 and 4. I will particularly ensure their effective and timely implementation in order to reinforce the impact of our strategic communications and relations with the public, which is a common goal.

55.　　As for recommendation 5 on Structure of the spokesperson FRO, I would like to stress that considering the current mis/disinformation context and critical challenges and the regular interaction required with the SRSG and SLT, the Spokesperson reports to the Chief of Staff as FRO and to the Head of Mission as SRO. This current structure has enabled very positive results including in engagement with key stakeholders and public.

56.　　In order to ensure our continuing support to the report finalization, a focal point will be designated within my officer for further discussions on the matter.

57.　　I would like to thank you again for your usual support.

MONUSCO management response

58.　　The Mission would like to thank the Inspection and Evaluation Division (OIOS-IED) for the many invaluable points which have been raised during the evaluation aimed at improving the relevance, coherence and effectiveness of the strategic communications contribution to fostering public trust.

59.　　The Mission would like to acknowledge the recommendations issued by OIOS-IED and inform about its commitment to implement, in a timely manner, those recommendations and to provide evidence as outlined in the Mission's Action Plan.

60.　　While the Mission generally agrees with the findings and recommendations, there is one area with respect to MONUSCO that we would like to raise. Paragraph 36 stresses the detrimental aspects

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[26] While UNFICYP and UNIFIL did not provide management responses, they did concur with the recommendations and have already submitted their respective action plans.

of not having regular press conferences but does not take into account the many other ways in which it has been possible to interact and influence media. These include regular tweets on key issues which are then picked up by media, regular press releases, media field trips to the eastern provinces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, regular background briefings with key journalists and answering reporter questions. In a context where the Mission has often been subject to mis- and disinformation, we feel this point should take into account the other ways to influence a media coverage, which can be more effective than press conferences.

UNMISS management response

61.   UNMISS gratefully acknowledges receipt off the interoffice memorandum dated 10 July 2024, requesting a formal management response to the Draft Report of the Office of Internal Oversight Services on the Evaluation of the Contribution of Strategic Communications to Fostering Public Trust in Peacekeeping Operations.

62.   UNMISS accepts the recommendation of the Draft Report, while noting that the Mission has already undertaken steps to meet various requirements outlined in the draft report.

63.   Regarding Recommendation 2.5, UNMISS accepts the recommendation however would like to emphasize that UNMISS prioritizes a whole-of-mission approach to outreach and engagement with communities. Through its Communication and Public Information Section, the mission engages with all sections and components, including but not limited to the Civil Affairs Division.

64.   Please find attached the Mission's comments on the recommendations and opportunities for improvement as provided in the UNMISS Action Plan for Implementation of the Recommendations.

65.   Thank you for your consideration and support.

UNISFA management response

66.   UNISFA appreciates and acknowledges the interoffice memorandum dated 10 July 2024, which requested a formal management response to the Draft Report of the Office of Internal Oversight Services on the Evaluation of the Contribution of Strategic Communications to Fostering Public Trust in Peacekeeping Operations.

67.   UNISFA agrees with the recommendations and feedback provided in the Draft Report. The mission has already initiated steps to implement the various recommendations outlined in the draft report and will continue working towards strengthening Strategic Communications efforts to foster public trust.

68.   While acknowledging Recommendation, R1.2 UNISFA would like to highlight its operating environment and limited resources of its public information office to conduct regular community outreach. Additionally, the mission does not have a radio station to complement face to face outreach efforts. As recommended, perceptions surveys which have so far not been conducted by UNISFA, will be considered budget allowing.

69.   Please find the comments by the mission attached on the recommendations and opportunities for improvement as highlighted in the UNISFA Action plan for implementation of Recommendations.

70.   Thank you for your consideration of your feedback and support.

DGC management response

71.   I refer to your memo dated 6 June 2024 in which you transmitted, for our review and response, the draft report of the Office of Internal Oversight Services on the evaluation of the contribution of strategic communications to fostering public trust in peacekeeping.

72.   I am pleased to confirm the Department of Global Communications' acceptance of the report and its recommendations.

73.   As requested, please find attached the completed recommendation action plan template.

74.   Thank you for conducting this important study, which will contribute to our ongoing efforts to support United Nations peacekeeping operations and to foster public trust through strategic communications.

DPO management response

75.   At the outset, let me express my gratitude to OIOS for the resources and efforts dedicated towards evaluating the contribution of strategic communications in peacekeeping settings. We especially appreciated the consistent availability of the OIOS team to engage with us throughout this process.

76.   The importance of strategic communications has increasingly been recognized by the entire peacekeeping partnership. It is a priority in the Action for Peacekeeping initiative and its implementation plan the Action for Peacekeeping Plus. In 2022, the Security Council also held its first ever open debate on the theme of strategic communications, and the subsequently adopted presidential statement recommended the launch of a Strategic Review of Strategic Communication in Peacekeeping. The Review confirmed that while missions are making important efforts to strengthen strategic communications, challenges and gaps need to be addressed in a rapidly evolving political and media landscape.

77.   The OIOS evaluation on this subject is thus timely and helpful. As peacekeepers continue to operate in increasingly dangerous operational environments and within an ever more complex broader political context, it is essential to evaluate the effectiveness of our strategic communications activities to ensure that missions are maximizing their potential in this regard.

78.   Deliberate, measurable, and targeted strategic communications are key to strengthening the understanding of our mandates, managing expectations, generating trust and support, advancing political solutions and protecting civilians while addressing misinformation and disinformation. As part of an integrated approach, strategic communications teams work with other components across the mission to provide opportunities for interactive engagement with key stakeholders, understand protection needs, build trust and confidence with the local populations and support sustainable stabilization and development activities.

79.   In order to meet these objectives, strategic communications teams perform a number of activities as part of a broader communications strategy. In many mission contexts, they organize outreach events, undertake traditional media engagement, distribute promotional materials in local languages to explain mandates, operate UN radio networks to communicate with large, diverse and remote populations and implement digital campaigns to reach multiple audiences. In some contexts, they also conduct public opinion surveys to create more impactful communications strategies to address misperceptions and promote a positive narrative.

80.   Over the past few years, progress has been achieved on several fronts. We are grateful that this has been acknowledged in the evaluation report and that the importance of strategic communications in promoting and implementing mission objectives, including by improving understanding and awareness of mandates and activities, support during crises, and promoting and

amplifying dialogue and social cohesion has been emphasized. Our view is that many of the identified weaknesses are already being addressed comprehensively under the umbrella of priority #6 of Action for Peacekeeping, by making strategic communications a core responsibility for mission leaders, emphasizing a proactive "whole-of-mission" approach to enable the integration of communications teams into all planning, decision-making and risk management processes and responding more effectively to mis- and disinformation. This is being done practically through more general and specialized trainings for leadership and staff, encouraging missions to adopt a proactive communications approach, strengthening guidance and policy, advocating for the necessary additional resources at Headquarters, engaging Member States to deploy qualified personnel and by improving our analysis, visibility and responses to misinformation, disinformation, malinformation and hate speech.

81.   A newly-approved (June 2024) Policy on Strategic Communications in Peace Operations prepared in collaboration with the Department of Peace Operations, Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs and Department of Global Communications (DGC), has codified many of these points and will strengthen coordination and communication processes across peace operations and special political missions. These issues are also discussed annually at the Heads of Strategic Communications and Public Information meeting at which all the Chiefs from Peacekeeping and Special Political Missions come together with Headquarters colleagues from the three departments for a week of trainings, workshops and high-level presentations.

82.   The report nevertheless downplays the complex realities our strategic communications units face on the ground and minimizes the importance of the varying contexts, resources, capabilities, priorities, mandates as well as the political and security environments in which missions operate. Much of the strategic communications work by missions, such as media relations activities, do not lend themselves to easy quantification of impact. For example, one good story in a major media outlet rather than five produced by insignificant channels may be more meaningful than just a purely numerical measure. Informal interactions can help shape reporting or frame a certain narrative but are also complicated to capture as part of a standard output metric.

83.   One of the central arguments of the report is that missions being evaluated largely still operate using traditional methods of one-way communications, instead of pivoting to a two-way approach. We do not agree with this assertion. Missions target diverse audiences using a variety of tools at their disposal, a majority of which, explicitly or implicitly, take into account feedback from target audiences. This could be in-person feedback during events, conferences, or activities organized by the communications teams in collaboration with civil affairs or other components, or e.g. through dial-in UN radio programmes and listener commentary. We agree that two-way communications are important: our missions understand this point and already embrace this principle.

84.   Our view is that the critical role of digital and social media is also largely understated in this report. Digital campaigning and a robust social media capacity capable of pushing out positive messaging in a timely and accurate manner is a critical tool in the arsenal of a modern-day strategic communications unit. All six missions evaluated use social media channels to target local, diaspora and international audiences. Additionally, all platforms, foster two-way communications through user comments and direct engagement with audiences.

85.   The report highlights the significance of strategic communications as a mission critical activity in the modern context of peace operations. It is a leadership responsibility that requires a data-driven, digitally-savvy, proactive, whole-of-mission approach. our ability to explain and build support with key audiences and constituencies is central to our prospects for success. Against the current political

backdrop, this has never been more true, and the role of strategic communications has never been more important.

86.   We look forward to a continued engagement on many of the recommendations to ensure that strategic communications teams are staffed, configured and resourced in a manner that enable our missions to be fit for purpose and ready for tomorrow's challenges. Again, thank you your work on this important issue and we look forward to our continued collaboration.

Evaluation Scope Theory of Change

INPUTS	ACTIVITIES	OUTPUTS	OUTCOMES	
			IMMEDIATE	INTERMEDIATE

POLICY & STRATEGY
SCPI Policy Ref. 2016.11 Communications Strategies

FINANCIAL
Assessed Budget
Project funding/ joint projects

HUMAN
Mission leadership
SCPI staff
Citizens and their stories
Media houses; journalists
Understanding of local cultures, languages, customs, and values

TECHNICAL
UNHQ Policy input and know-how
Partnerships with state institutions, media and civil society
Co-ordination mechanisms with UNCT
Dialogue with the Member States, TCC/PCC
Radio stations
Internet connectivity
Telecommunications

- Organize community outreach events; campaigns, sessions, townhalls, debate panels
- Celebrate international days
- Produce and air radio + TV programs, episodes, talk shows, spots, PSAs
- Maintain radio technology
- Publish news articles on website; take and publish photographs; produce video
- Launch campaigns; posts; publish photos + videos + news on Fb, YT, Twitter, TikTok
- Publish + print magazines, cards, brochures, calendars
- Release press statements and hold conferences + briefings; host press visits
- Train journalists and CSOs; host workshops
- Conduct media monitoring, analysis, Logic AI, Meltwater, etc.
- Conduct annual perception surveys

1) Outreach (community engagement) events and campaigns launched that promote interactive dialogue and peace messaging

2) Radio programs + TV including peace messages, news reports, talk shows, spots, produced and broadcast; **timely warning** on potential threats provided

3) Digital and social media including text, visual, and audio content and maintenance of archive.

4) Print media disseminated

5) Media engaged, press releases, conferences, media trips held

6) Capacity building provided to media and citizens

7) Analysis, media monitored + analyzed; public perception surveys conducted + analyzed

Enhanced understanding of mission mandates, objectives and activities among host populations

Improved capacity for crisis communications and countering mis-disinformation by mission and media partners

Increased dialogue among citizens and between parties to the conflict, including women, youth and marginalized groups

Improved public trust in missions' ability to deliver on mandates and objectives

CONTROL

CONTRIBUTION