



Upholding Standards of Training for United Nations Peacekeeping Missions from the Perspective of Officers from Ecuador

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Abstract: The qualitative study described in this article took place with officers from the Ecuadorian Army. Interviews included 12 officers of four ranks who had each served on a minimum of one 12-month United Nations (UN) peacekeeping mission. Data was recorded and transcribed and then analyzed using a qualitative data analysis program. Information from these interviews was organized into four main themes: 1) upholding standards of training; 2) multiple diverse command and control practices; 3) a mission as a cultural exchange; and 4) journey from conflict to peace. This article focuses on the first theme on upholding standards of training. Officers discussed their own preparation and compared it to that of colleagues from other countries.

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They related the lack of required skills displayed by some groups of officers and spoke of the need to guide them to task completion or to shoulder extra responsibilities themselves. Participants related the need for more training in a number of areas including diplomacy, negotiations, and cross-cultural competencies. The vast majority of UN peacekeepers now come from militaries in the Global South. A multitude of analytics find that many of these countries are less peaceful, less democratic, less economically powerful, and have militaries that are less highly trained than the peacekeeping nations of the Global North, which dominated peacekeeping missions in previous decades. These men and women have not been studied to understand their perspectives on the peacekeeping missions they participated in and the leadership they experienced. Assessing the phenomenon of peacekeeping through the lens of these soldiers will aid militaries and the larger UN community to understand and meet the needs of all officers engaging on a mission.

Keywords: peacekeeping, United Nations, UN, complex international contexts, leadership, humanitarian skills, Global South

Introduction

Following the devastating loss of life in the Second World War (1939–45), the United Nations (UN) was formed with the central aim of maintaining international peace and security. This has led to nearly 80 years of relative peace during which few major powers have been at war with one another. Despite this lengthy period of calm and stability, however, today there are 56 active conflicts around the world, the most since the founding of the UN in

1945.¹ The UN has conducted peacekeeping missions for more than 70 years. The early years saw missions staffed primarily by soldiers from Canada and Northern and Western Europe, with the United States making important but inconsistent troop contributions. These countries in the Global North are, by all analytics, considered peaceful, democratic, economically strong, and well militarized. During the past several decades, there has been a significant shift in the top troop-contributing countries to those from the Global South, many of which are less peaceful, less democratic, less economically well off, less highly militarized, and with lower human rights standards.² In conjunction with this, conflicts have become more complex and dangerous, requiring an increasing range of capabilities.³ This shift in personnel has also resulted in an ever-widening gap in the qualitative research that looks at the peacekeeping perspective on leadership and training.

The research question for this study was as follows: What is the leadership experience of peacekeeping among men and women of the Ecuadorian military? The questions posed during interviews with Ecuadorian Army officers were wide-ranging, covering such topics as the ability to adapt to a foreign environment, the strengths and weaknesses of the peacekeeping unit, and the personal motivation to undertake a mission. Despite the range of questions, the officers often brought the issue of training and their own or other peacekeepers' skills into their answers. Forty-five percent of the 22 hours of recorded interviews centered on the topic of training. Clearly, this was the top issue on the mind of all participants, who seemed to share a desire to communicate the need for better preparation for all officers involved in UN peacekeeping missions.

Literature Review

The synthesis of the literature described in this section examines the peacekeeping experiences of soldiers who come mostly from high-income countries. There is little published in peer-reviewed, English-language journals about the observation of leadership from the perspective of officers from low-income countries.

Training

Specific training for a multicultural peacekeeping mission is of paramount importance.⁴ Peacekeeping requires a complex mix of skills including mediation, communication, tactical enforcement, humanitarian aid, reconstruction, and transformational change of institutions.⁵ While there is agreement within the peacekeeping community that some of these skills are being taught, it is also acknowledged that even peacekeeping training is skewed toward combat exercises. Simulations portrayed locals as hostile combatants to be dealt with, when in reality missions include many days of monotonous routine.⁶ Boredom is a significant feature of peacekeeping missions, and the more successful the mission, the greater the boredom on the ground. Training that does not accurately reflect reality leads to unmet expectations. When soldiers perform tasks that are consistent with their competencies, and that they believe are meaningful in fulfilling the UN's goals, they tend to be more content and competent, stay on task, and experience greater mission satisfaction.⁷

Cultural Awareness

Soldiers can experience complete culture shock when deployed to a foreign country.⁸ Cultural awareness was found to be espoused but not robustly taught in peacekeeping training.⁹ Improving a soldier's cultural awareness prepares peacekeepers for what they will experience and may ease the shock of living and working in an entirely new cultural context.¹⁰ It is necessary to develop military leaders who can work across cultures, military organizations, and civilian organizations inclusively and collaboratively.¹¹ Training must include theory, experiential learning, and reflection.¹²

Diplomacy Skills

Peacekeeping operations were found more likely to be successful when combined with effective diplomacy.¹³ Reflective practices can be used to hone skills for conflict resolution.¹⁴ Those who will need such a skill set must be open to learning from experience and conscientiously work through what happened, what the outcome was, and what might have changed the situation in a positive direction. Compassion training can contribute to deescalation and avert violence in favor of negotiation leading to peace settlements.¹⁵ Soldiers desired trust-building workshops to enhance relations with the people, local authorities, and outside organizations, including nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that can help support them.¹⁶

Soldiers felt that because they were dealing with interpersonal issues, they required an entirely different skill set than what they had learned in the military.¹⁷ They felt that the soldiers who were most successful in the peacekeeping arena were those who had other interpersonal relationship experience. Conflict resolution, negotiation, and dispute settlement skills

need to be added to the military competencies to achieve civil-military coordination. Training in mediation leads to increased feelings of well-being among the mediators, which is useful where there are so many cultural and environmental stresses.¹⁸ Alignment was found between the skills needed for mediation and the corresponding areas of the brain used for these activities, which also generates feelings of well-being.

Communication Skills

There is a call for improved communication skills to decrease stress for peacekeepers.¹⁹ Communications skills are essential for articulating the team mission and motivating troops.²⁰ Being prepared for cultural competency, communication, and diplomacy will aid those looking to work in the international theater. When invited to suggest modes of learning, answers included reading materials, communications strategies, skills workshops, and websites.²¹

Human Rights

There is a need for increased education and self-education of peacekeepers. Canadian Army lieutenant general Roméo A. Dallaire, the force commander of the United Nations Assistance Mission for Rwanda during the 1994 Rwandan genocide, later wrote that the mission included “a new generation of troop-contributing nations, who had large and untapped pools of soldiers but who were completely deficient in materiel, sustainability and training specific to complex conflicts and humanitarian catastrophes. Furthermore, such troops sometimes came from nations that had little or no ethos regarding human rights.”²² There have been abuses of civilian women and

children by peacekeepers, as well as looting, which leads to a further need for explicit human rights training.²³ Many peacekeepers expressed no knowledge or education on human rights or the rights of children. UN training needs to include education on building trust with children and understanding a peacekeeper's role in the urgent appeal to serve and protect children, who are the most vulnerable citizens affected by war.²⁴

Gender Awareness

Authors of a study on sexual interactions between civilian women and girls in Haiti and members of the UN peacekeeping force there in 2004–17 concluded that more comprehensive sexual and reproductive health education should be included in the peacekeeping curriculum.²⁵ Sexual violence and/or gender-based inequalities and strong power differentials that have led to inappropriate relationships and illegitimate children left behind result in stigmatization and a lack of self-confidence that have repercussions for resilience and empowerment.²⁶ In the context of peacekeeping, women were discussed in terms of wives and mothers tending the home front or as sex workers. There is also a casual approval of pornography, which demonstrates a need for gender and cultural training.²⁷

Psychological Preparation

Soldiers have experienced intense anticipatory anxiety before deploying on a peacekeeping mission, which points to a need for more robust training and cultural information in the predeployment period.²⁸ Soldiers felt unprepared for what they would see and encounter.²⁹ Physical threats came from the climate, endemic diseases (e.g., malaria, cholera, dysentery, HIV/AIDS), and

difficulty obtaining fresh food and water.³⁰ Soldiers experienced feelings of anger, despair, hatred, and even thoughts of suicide when dealing with unfamiliar subjects such as rape, HIV/AIDS, mutilation, orphans, and child soldiers.³¹

Peacekeepers recognized the need for mental preparation in dealing with stressful events such as seeing people, including children, with missing body parts or seeing bodies burned and abandoned. Standing by and having to watch trauma unfold with no way to help due to the restrictive rules of engagement made soldiers feel powerless and frustrated.³² It is important to learn to design constructive leisure activities to combat boredom and stress during deployment.³³ Practicing mindfulness has the potential to decrease stress, improve memory, reduce both rumination and emotional responses, and increase cognition.³⁴

Civil-Military Engagement

There is a need for a new style of training for peacekeepers that looks at the importance of the relationships between military personnel and civilians.³⁵ The traditional soldier is prepared for warfare but in peacekeeping there is no specific enemy or victory to be had, and the chain of command is collaborative and composite. A soldier's moral autonomy is important, and their core value must be the protection of human life. This is at odds with the warrior training, which allows soldiers to kill when appropriately triggered without going through an exercise of moral and ethical determination.

Soldiers felt that it was difficult to engage not only with people from other cultures but also with nonmilitary actors in civilian roles in NGOs and even in the UN.³⁶ There was generally a lack of trust and a sense that some

civilians have too much power, which created tension between the military and civilian aid organizations. Having a contingent of female peacekeepers contributed to increased trust in the mission and acceptance of the UN presence among local men and women.³⁷ Peacekeepers act as a “third side” in a conflict though soldiers seeing their roles in a myriad of different ways, which results in diverse actions.³⁸ Civil-military coordination and cooperation is paramount, and soldiers need to learn new skills understanding that peace is not solely a mission for the military but also for civilian organizations that possess peaceful aims.³⁹

Soldiers expressed surprise at working with civilian organizations that do not have the hierarchy of command and organization that militaries do.⁴⁰ Military personnel had more civilian contact, including interfacing with NGOs and local populations, when on a peacekeeping mission than compared to conducting regular duties.⁴¹ Peacekeeping missions are often supported by such civilian operations as the International Committee of the Red Cross and Doctors without Borders, and those with a variety of operational experiences will have an advantage in international military settings.⁴² Lack of understanding of the cultural diversity of the people who will be encountered on a mission is often a failure of briefings in international settings. Achieving mission success in international military operations necessitates inclusive leadership, which fosters the building of positive relationships. Civilian-military relations can be shaped by the nature of thought and dialogue about people and environments as a determinant of ethical conduct within the military.⁴³

Coping Strategies

Sources of Stress

Peacekeeping missions thrust soldiers into novel cultures in which they are often tasked to do things that can be unfamiliar and intellectually challenging with a high degree of danger.⁴⁴ Soldiers identified such events as seeing dead bodies, travelling in areas with landmines, witnessing violence, and being injured as things that precipitated stress reactions.⁴⁵ They sometimes witnessed “complete disrespect for human life” and saw firsthand intense and previously unimaginable hate.⁴⁶ Things that led to low morale on missions included food quality, living conditions, mail service, and poor leadership.⁴⁷ Troops from developing countries often arrived in theater without the necessary equipment, which, of necessity, often comes from developed nations along with highly trained and skilled personnel.⁴⁸

Working with children in war-torn countries resulted in feelings of helplessness, failure, depression, frustration, hatred, and even suicide. Many soldiers were overwhelmed by the level of violence against women and children and in dealing with loss of innocence, mass burials, lack of respect for life, limbless children, landmines, lack of play, and children left to fend for themselves. Peacekeepers expressed deep concern about the impacts of war on children but felt limited by mandate, lack of knowledge, cultural awareness, and support from leadership.⁴⁹ They also expressed concern for innocent civilians caught in the middle of the conflicts that are forcing peacekeepers into increasingly volatile situations. Peacekeepers often engage in activities for which there is no clear and credible mandate to do so and without adequate training or the financial and human resources to ensure their effectiveness.⁵⁰

There were stress provoking factors before, during, and after the mission. These included such things as inadequate preparations that prioritized theory over practice, misunderstanding of the selection process, long intervals between selection and deployment, lack of preparation for specific country conditions, issues around payments and reimbursements, incomplete issue of uniforms and equipment, culture shock, inadequate accommodations, health and security risks, climate unknowns, and communication difficulties with both families and the command.⁵¹

Consequences of Maladaptive Responses

There is a high cost to nonadaptive responses to stress, and so developing self-awareness and self-regulation is crucial.⁵² The most important dimensions of stress in soldier adaptation were included isolation, ambiguity, powerlessness, boredom, and feelings of threat, which led to changes in energy level and mood, disturbances in sleep and appetite, and somatic complaints. Soldiers expressed feelings of fear, sadness, rage, anxiety, frustration, resentment, numbness, loneliness, vulnerability, hopelessness, and despair. Psychological challenges led to violations of rules and regulations, such as refusal to wear a uniform, abuse of UN property, poor interpersonal relationships, conflicts with UN personnel, disobedience of orders, theft, excessive use of nicotine and alcohol, some use of illicit drugs, decreased social inhibitions, promiscuous behavior, going on leave without permission, refusing to salute or show respect for officers of other contingents (especially those of color), defying direct orders, abandoning those they were tasked with protecting, and putting themselves before their

mission.⁵³ Dishonorable behavior risks breaking the trust of the local citizens and endangering the effectiveness of the mission.⁵⁴

Mitigating Strategies

Soldiers relied on a range of coping strategies—including humor, exercise, denial, and religion—to deal with their fears and boredom. Soldiers working in teams displayed genuine regard for their colleagues in times of increased stress, with group cohesion and a strong sense of belonging helping them cope, which conferred purpose and direction and helped make sense of the experience.⁵⁵ Working in teams helped buffer them against heightened stress by allowing them to see the demands of the mission as a challenge rather than a series of frustrating events. Shared enthusiasm and collective dedication to the mission can facilitate individual and collective coping skills.⁵⁶

Education and predeployment training were key factors in reducing stress by increasing knowledge and overcoming some amount of mission ambiguity.⁵⁷ Education on the specifics of a mission increased confidence and expectations, which helped inoculate soldiers against depression and distress.⁵⁸ Information on how the mission enhances the lives of the local citizens helped soldiers maintain clear motivation for continuing with the mission. Soldiers felt rewarded by the appreciation of the local people. Developing relationships with the locals, visiting their homes, and sharing skills such as how to build a water pump were helpful events. Working on military tasks and achieving success built confidence. Seeing the country begin to thrive by the time the peacekeepers left, with the economy improving and families safer and more secure, offered gratifying memories for soldiers to return home with. They were rewarded with feelings of appreciation and

fulfillment, which helped them create meaning out of their experiences and conferred pride in their accomplishments.⁵⁹

Personal resilience, encompassing self-esteem, control, and optimism, decreased the perception of threat and the subsequent stress response.⁶⁰ Soldiers employed a variety of coping mechanisms that altered one's mood, increased endurance and pain tolerance, built concentration and self-confidence, and regulated arousal. These included negative thought blocking, imagery, attention control training, self-talk, centering, biofeedback, concentration control, visual-motor rehearsal, relaxation training, music, and physical conditioning.⁶¹ Holistic training to inoculate a soldier's mind for future experiences, such as deep breathing and other mental preparation techniques, as well as basic coping mechanisms, mental imagery, guided relaxation techniques, goal setting, mental skills training, adaptive thinking, stress energy management control, and attention control have all been advocated for.⁶²

Positive ways of combatting stress including maintaining openness in interpersonal communications, dedication to work, discipline and order, respect and fairness in superior-subordinate relationships, regular communication with family, and strict following of appropriate regimes of work, diet, rest, and recreation, as well as organizing and participating in various social, cultural, and sports events.⁶³ Post-deployment introspection, reliving, and replaying the experiences of peacekeeping allowed soldiers to make meaning of and find purpose in their peacekeeping experiences.⁶⁴

Peacekeeper Selection

Combat soldiers are not necessarily the best selectees for peacekeeping missions, in which cooperation with civilian organizations is essential.⁶⁵ Out of all the observed factors for peacekeeping success, the most important is the appropriate selection of personnel.⁶⁶ Soldiers possessing high levels of mental health, mature personalities, intelligence and open minds, and who are communicative, resourceful, lacking in prejudice, wise, brave, courageous, devoted, motivated, persistent, competent, skilled, and well trained, are required for successful peacekeeping missions. Emotional intelligence helps to allow for perspective taking, which allows people to retain sight of long-term goals and allows for better conflict resolution.⁶⁷

Methodology

Twelve open-ended interviews were conducted with Ecuadorian Army officers, nine in person and, due to distance, three online. Each of the officers had completed at least one 12-month UN peacekeeping mission. Participants were sent the questions, both in English and Spanish, two weeks prior to the interviews, which were recorded and transcribed before being evaluated using a qualitative data analysis program. Line-by-line coding was conducted, resulting in approximately 1,000 coded segments. Each of the segments was summarized so that all available text under one subject was easily accessible (table 1). Four themes, each with subthemes, emerged around training, command and control leadership, cultural aspects of a mission, and the role of the UN in the journey from conflict to peace.

Table 1. Summary of topic

Participant	Training needs to focus on the field situations.
Interview #1	This participant felt that it is important to simulate real-life scenarios using actors.
Interview #2	This participant underwent some peacekeeping training in Canada and felt that the practice in pressure situations was valuable and could be improved in the Ecuadorian peacekeeping training.
Interview #5	This participant believes that peacekeeping training must focus on field operations. While it is true that, as observers, peacekeepers monitor and observe situations, but they are in the field and must be prepared for any scenario.
Interview #6	This participant noted that while, in theory, all training leads to perfect solutions, reality is not so kind. Soldiers need more critical and creative thinking. The Ecuadorian officer training is very good. Officers need to visualize, describe, and direct operations on peacekeeping missions. Every person has strengths and weaknesses with deep feelings. The training is good, but nothing compares to actual experience on the ground.
Interview #7	This participant noted that peacekeeping training includes listening to videos and interacting with the instructor in classes. Roleplaying is one of the most important activities, in which some people dress as locals, and the trainees try to negotiate and mediate with them. This is good training to face real situations.
Interview #8	This participant worked to read and study about the situations that peacekeepers may face so that they could analyze and prepare exercises that would have similarities to what they might face. They cannot react like soldiers—they must act like peacekeepers. They need to remove their green (military) helmets and put on their blue (UN) helmets. Otherwise, they could create problems for themselves and their countries. Interpersonal skills are important, and there is a need to put soldiers in pressurized situations that simulate the reality they will face.
Interview #10	This participant noted that the Ecuadorian peacekeeping training is good, but as with everything, it can always be better. Ecuador needs to take advantage of opportunities outside of the country to understand differing perspectives. In the peacekeeping scenarios conducted in the Ecuadorian training, the trainees practiced in English. But on the ground on a peacekeeping mission, of course, not everyone always speaks English. This participant suggested that there needs to be more realistic scenarios.
Interview #11	This participant feels that real scenarios—and difficult scenarios at that—are needed to simulate real situations to improve training.

Note: Eight of the 12 interview participants provided comments relating to the idea that training needs to focus on field situations.

Source: courtesy of the author.

Results

The theme of peacekeeper training represents 45 percent of the data. The theme included the following codes: 1) selection of peacekeepers is critical; 2) peacekeepers need to represent themselves and their country well; 3) peacekeeping training needs to include more language education; 4) training must include preparation for working with civilians; 5) good communication is essential; and 6) tolerance, respect, and professionalism are needed. These describe the officers' experiences with soldiers whose training did or did not meet the UN's standards and how this specifically enhanced or interfered with the ability to work together efficiently and effectively on a peacekeeping mission. Officers' experiences with soldiers whose training fully met the UN's standards created an environment in which officers could work collaboratively on a peacekeeping mission. Conversely, officers expressed their concerns that some soldiers did not have sufficient skills to actively participate in the mission and were unable to fulfill their full obligations to the team, leaving participants to be creative in guiding some soldiers in their task completion and shouldering more responsibility. Officers reflected on their training, which they uniformly described as good, but also recognized training pieces that could be added or enhanced to form a more robust standard. Officers expressed the strong sense of duty and loyalty that they felt representing their country, which was aided by their assessment that their training was very good. More English-language training was considered a critical training piece needed to boost overall mission efficacy. Participants came to understand the importance of interpersonal skills while deployed, with good communication skills being ranked as the most important of these. Officers expressed the importance of having a strong protocol for

peacekeeper selection for soldiers to have successful deployments, with an emphasis on psychological health.

Subtheme 1: Our Training Is Good but Can Always Be Better

This subtheme describes the officers' experience of how their military and peacekeeping training provided the skills they needed to complete an international UN peacekeeping mission and what could be improved. They identified gaps in training and how they may be filled. Officers discussed the immense importance of representing their country well on an international stage, which was aided by their strong preparation for a mission. Also included is the officers' assessment of how well they adapted to a foreign location and how those around them functioned and thrived in an international environment.

Ecuadorian Officers Rated Their Training High

The officers unanimously agreed that their training was good. They felt confident in the skills they had learned in the Ecuadorian military and used their training, both military and peacekeeping, to enhance their performance within the mission. When able to compare themselves to officers from other countries, they felt proud of their abilities and believed that they were motivated to meet high standards. At the same time, they recognized that Ecuador lacked the resources to contribute to funding supplies, with one officer labeling them as the "poor brothers" within the mission. Some expressed the difference it would make to their training to have equipment equivalent to that of their fellow peacekeepers, such as mission radios to

practice communications exercises. However, they felt that their strong military skills compensated for this.

Participants described their positive experiences with the testing and induction training that takes place at the beginning of a peacekeeping mission. Officers encountered minimal challenges when tested for their English-language skills, manual shift-driving skills, and technology skills to put together reports and presentations. Soldiers are given an appointment based on the UN peacekeeping courses completed and the results of their testing. This appointment decision also considers the type of experience the officer had within their country's military. Because Ecuadorian soldiers uniformly tested well due to their comprehensive training, they were often awarded good postings with increased responsibilities. Soldiers recognized that the UN military observer coordinators were looking for high levels of experience but also individuals who could form a strong team within a collegial work environment.

Officers spoke of their ease with technology, while reporting that soldiers from other countries often struggled in this area. Ecuadorians have high levels of proficiency with computer skills, so they are often chosen for specific work, including appointments in headquarters units. Participants talked of their comfort with writing reports, preparing patrol plans, and sending spreadsheets with coordinates and transport times for helicopter flights. All these tasks require skills that they have developed in their home country for decades, as computer skills are taught beginning in elementary school. The officers' training prepared them well for success in their missions.

Participants explained the need for a wide variety of skills within a team site, which makes the initial testing and documentation of results crucial to

the mission. Officers spoke of leaders planning patrols by looking for a combination of soldiers with excellent driving, mechanical, negotiating, and communications skills, including an Arabic speaker where needed, thereby ensuring that everyone felt needed and held responsibility. This demonstrated democratic or participatory leadership, placing value on the knowledge, skills, and diversity of the team. Officers responded favorably when this type of leadership was demonstrated, since it recognized their abilities and assured everyone that the mission would be met with good preparation. In addition, it is perhaps meaningful for those from a collectivist culture to feel a sense of welcome and belonging. Officers spoke of always increasing their skill levels and taking those enhanced skills home with them.

Participants Expressed a Strong Desire to Represent Ecuador Well

Officers were very cognizant of making a strong and lasting impression as excellent peacekeepers representing Ecuador. While they unanimously agreed that it was a heavy responsibility, they all felt capable of being excellent ambassadors for their country because they were confident that their training had prepared them well and that they are valuable soldiers. They spoke about representing not so much themselves but rather their military, their flag, and their country. Many believed from observations that Latinos generally are very hard workers and are known for being able to work independently. These expressions of a shared strong reputation brought a sense of belonging to the larger Latin community and spoke to the collective nature of Ecuador and neighbouring countries. If there were to be a subpar work performance on their part, this unsatisfactory showing would not defame them but instead reflect poorly on their country. This unassailable

sense of the collective society motivated them to work hard for the recognition of their country's armed forces. One soldier stated that their commanding general told them that they were not alone as the entire Ecuadorian Army was with them, and that stayed at the top of their mind.

Participants Adapted Well to Foreign Environments

Officers described feeling very comfortable as they adapted to the foreign environments of their peacekeeping missions, all of which were in Africa except for one in Haiti. They ascribed this relative comfort to their training in the Ecuadorian military, which prepared them for a variety of settings. Within their own country, they had been operated in the highlands, the coastal regions, and the Amazon jungle and had experienced weather extremes. Officers explained that, while on a mission, though roads were in poor condition and at times they were without electricity, water, or other amenities, as a military officer this was not problematic.

Some officers spoke about the ease of adapting to their surroundings because conditions in Ecuador are often harsh and in some instances are more difficult than that on a mission. Officers related that communication systems on their missions were excellent and that they could be in daily contact, even video contact, with their families, whereas in Ecuador they may be posted somewhere that results in them being out of contact with loved ones for a month. One officer expanded that the UN equipment was lighter than what the officer had carried during their entire working life, and since they were often patrolling in a car they felt that the mission environment was very nice. Another officer compared their situation to those around them

without adequate food and water and concluded that they had everything they needed and had been prepared for much worse conditions.

Participants explained that living alone far from family was not difficult, and that they were able to concentrate on work knowing that their families was fine and looked after by the military. A soldier stated that not seeing their daughter grow up for the year they were on a mission was something that they were well aware of and did willingly, reiterating that the experience was voluntary.

This ease of separation from family expressed by most of the respondents may seem to counter the thinking about collectivist cultures. However, this may be related to the excellence in soldier selection and training. It may also be an inherent part of being a military officer, which sees personnel posted in many different places and frequent location changes. Soldiers deploy without their families more frequently in Ecuador than in many Western countries.

Lack of English-Language Skills Hampered the Missions

Participants spoke of entire contingents of peacekeepers who either had no English-language skills or did not attempt to use them despite this being a UN prerequisite. This was a source of irritation for officers and resulted in significant communication breakdowns that they felt were detrimental to the success of the mission. While the Ecuadorians recognized that their English skills were superior to some contingents from other countries, they also admitted that their language education could be enhanced to aid their success on a mission. Good English skills afforded participants advantages on a mission. Several stated that many African soldiers had exceedingly limited

computer and English-language skills, which allowed Ecuadorian soldiers to become staff officers and manage communications inside team sites.

Participants reported entire contingents who only spoke in Arabic. Many noted that this was the biggest weakness of their mission. Officers stated that they often had to do the work for military observers who lacked English skills, explaining that if they could not speak or write in English they were largely unable to do the job for which they deployed. One discussed a situation with the commander of a security battalion from Egypt who could not communicate in English. The Ecuadorian officer felt that this was a difficult and dangerous situation, as this commander worked with a lower-ranked translator who was making some of the decisions for expediency. The officer found this unacceptable. Another experienced the same difficulty with a commander who they attempted to help by using a digital translator, but even this was fraught due to the difficulty of written Arabic. This commander was mostly unable to communicate with his observers.

One participant was promoted to field integration officer but found English a challenge, especially when contacting local authorities, as pronunciation was difficult and being on the phone was more challenging than face to face. They memorized phrases that they used repeatedly, such as “tomorrow we are coming with our patrol,” “the weather is good,” and “the landing area is okay.” Most participants believed that they need to practice with native English speakers prior to deployment.

It was recognized that body language is essential to maintaining a complete picture of important communication, especially where a language barrier exists. Participants wanted increased language skills as well as practice using satellite phones and radios, where nonverbal cues are absent.

They felt that deciphering a wide variety of different accents was extremely challenging, and they often attempted to pick up specific words and phrases and determine meaning through context. Officers expressed frustration at both their own skill levels as well as that of other peacekeepers.

Many officers spoke about learning English on their own. In addition, officers were teaching themselves other languages, such as Arabic, French, and Amharic, to facilitate communication. Many expressed the need for the UN to have its personnel use the same language to increase efficiency.

This range of English-language mastery, from proficient to near nonexistent, likely contributed to more in-group and out-group behavior than may be recognized on a mission. Not being a functional member of the in-group was isolating for those who had limited communication skills. This can lead to abhorrent behaviour, team divides, and misunderstandings in intention.

Subtheme 2: Peacekeeping Requires a Multifaceted Skill Set

This subtheme describes the need for strong interpersonal skills *in addition* to military skills for successful United Nations peacekeeping operations. Maintaining peace agreements requires strong people skills. Open-mindedness, respect, and professionalism are required in this international environment. Strong communication capabilities, aside from specific language skills, are essential to achieve mission goals.

Interpersonal Skills Are as Essential as Military Skills

Officers felt strongly that both military and interpersonal skills are necessary and complementary when working at a UN peacekeeping mission. These

skills included a broad set of behaviours that included emotional intelligence, cultural sensitivity, and interpersonal integrity. Participants agreed that it was values such as patience, tolerance, empathy, honesty, loyalty, and the ability to build trust and strong relationships that were the keys to success on a mission.

Officers discussed strategies for dealing with others in an international environment. They all recognized that cultural barriers made relationships more difficult to establish and increased the chances of misunderstanding. One offered the advice that leaders need to look for the right opportunity to thoroughly explain and maintain one's stance, explaining that one can disagree within a respectful relationship. This stance suggests strong leadership mastery in addition to communications expertise. Officers enjoyed the open-mindedness and open-door policies that they often encountered with leaders who were ready to answer questions, receive information, and support operations.

One officer counseled that it is important to really get to know people they work with, their family situation, their health issues, and their hopes and dreams, and to share that same information about themselves. That way, coworkers will have each other's backs in difficult situations, as they both know that "someone is waiting for you at home." A participant reflected on the need to "take off your green [military] helmet and put on your blue [UN] helmet"—in fact, "put on your blue beret"—which indicates a friendly stance to receive people with a big smile and invites connection.

Exceptional Communications Capabilities Are Needed

Many officers identified excellent communication capabilities as the most important interpersonal skill that peacekeepers could take with them on a mission. This competency was essential both on the job and in connecting with loved ones at home. Communication skills are comprised of many pieces, including active listening, being clear and concise, and employing emotional intelligence, but also the more complex areas of interviewing, mediation, and negotiating. Generally, participants felt that these aspects of communication needed to be more fully developed before undertaking a mission.

Participants were acutely aware of the need to choose their words carefully so that they do not cause offence and to maintain peaceful and friendly relations with the people they lived and worked with. In this way, they practiced important cross-cultural communications while on the mission. In a similar vein, several officers spoke of the need to be very careful when interacting with the opposite sex on the mission to ensure that sympathy could not be conveyed as unwanted attention. They also disclosed that they understood that there was heightened awareness around harassment and that they could easily find themselves in trouble because their words could be misconstrued. Former peacekeepers had warned them of potentially challenging communications scenarios.

Civil-Military Relations Were New to Many

Participants identified that working with civilians was an area in which few of them had many previous opportunities to explore. Officers recognized that it took a different type of interaction to connect with civilians. One participant

spoke about their interactions when a ceasefire broke during their mission. The office was pleased to have the trust of the civilians because they had been there and knew the history of the place and the conflict intimately. Peacekeepers and civilians can and should work collaboratively. Another participant compared a force commander of a UN mission to a president who has to resolve a lot of issues in the mission and be responsible for everyone involved, including civilians, peacekeepers, and military service staff. Officers recognized this multidimensional aspect of UN missions, which required them to learn new skills to forge military and civilian relationships and understand the value of both. Several officers noted the need to leave rude behavior behind to be more friendly and open-minded.

For the participants, the opportunity to be among the people and collaborate with them was new. Communication in other civil-military situations at home was relegated to senior officers with more experience. However, in those situations at home—for example, civilian protests—there is much more scrutiny of interactions by the world media, which was not the case in missions in geographically isolated places. There are lessons that militaries can train younger officers to learn so that they can interface effectively with civilians, which in turn could release some burden from senior officers.

Subtheme 3: A Robust Selection Process Is Required

This subtheme describes the need for militaries to make good peacekeeper choices to deploy the officers best suited to successfully complete a mission while working in a foreign and often hostile environment far from their familiar support system. Officers described the importance of having a robust

selection process in place to choose the most suitable personnel for the role and the necessary attributes, including the importance of having and maintaining good mental health. Officers related some tragic consequences when health was not preserved. Peacekeepers' families remain a strong cornerstone of support when they are empowered to take that role.

Soldier Selection Is an Important Role for Militaries

Officers were very aware that all soldiers do not make good peacekeepers. Their time in a peacekeeping mission informed them of the demands of the operation and when to disqualify soldiers from peacekeeping service if they were not a suitable fit. Participants acknowledged that there could be consequences to sending soldiers without the appropriate temperament, recognizing that they may not respect gender issues, alcohol regulations, and a range of potential pitfalls. This could lead to an international incident that would ultimately be problematic for the Ecuadorian military, which is assuming that risk.

Devastating Consequences of Poor Mental Health When Far from Home

The participants observed numerous peacekeepers, from other countries as well as from their own, who suffered during their time in a foreign environment, far from home and their social support. One officer spoke about a fellow Ecuadorian soldier who suffered severe depression during their mission. The officer arranged to have their colleague moved to work near them but strongly encouraged them to remain with the mission, knowing that Ecuador would lose the peacekeeping position if they returned home. This officer was demonstrating empathic leadership. They were

working hard to understand the thoughts and feelings of another soldier and looking to meet the multiple needs of this colleague. In addition, they were exhibiting collectivist traits by wanting Ecuador to retain this peacekeeping position so that other soldiers could share their experiences.

Another officer related a tragic story about a peacekeeper in an Ecuadorian contingent who died by suicide while on a mission, succumbing to pressures from their family and fellow officers. The participant described the behavior as bullying, as the peacekeeper's coworkers joked about their spouse's behavior back home. Being marginalized from the group resulted in suicide. The participant went on to unpack the constructive leadership needed to put policies in place and, along with constructive communication, achieve some change in behavior. Transforming the normative culture can be difficult, but this officer went on to become a director of the peacekeeping school and was instrumental in change management. The emphasis on recruitment selection and mental health appears to be genuine and well followed, as lessons were learned and solutions articulated after this tragic incident.

Learning Physical and Mental Health Strategies Are Critical

Officers uniformly appeared to understand the importance of maintaining their mental health while operating within an unfamiliar environment for extended periods of time. Learning about strategies for preserving excellent physical and mental conditioning while on a peacekeeping mission, where this is not built into everyday activities, is an essential piece of preparing for a successful mission abroad. Participants talked about the importance of keeping their minds and bodies active. Exercise and sports were popular

activities. Soldiers recognized the need to train and to not spend excessive amounts of times watching movies or scrolling through the internet. Living in a closed compound 24 hours a day for months on end was recognized as a risk factor for mental health issues.

Physical health was always a concern in such inhospitable environments with unfamiliar pests and tropical diseases. Peacekeeping courses do cover rudimentary threats and first aid for tropical illnesses. One participant stated that providing food assistance to the local people was hampered by “insects, malaria, mosquitos, and snakes.” Another disclosed that a peacekeeper in their unit had died of cerebral malaria and that their own use of an antimalarial drug meant returning to Ecuador for medical treatment.

The global COVID-19 pandemic caused additional health and safety concerns, affecting those who were already on a mission in 2020. All the officers on missions at this time were in relatively remote locations. It was consequently easy to isolate, with no new personnel coming into or going out of the mission, and masks and hand sanitizer were not required. This meant that a small number of participants had their mission extended by a few months. A lack of fresh food was a concern. One participant reported that food shipments were stretched to every fourth or fifth week, so fresh fruits and vegetables supplied were depleted in the first week.

Soldiers used many other tools to keep their minds active and ward off boredom and intrusive thoughts. Participants had learned during their education that cultivating interests could be both meaningful and help achieve the UN training goal of maintaining good psychological health. Officers mentioned gardening, learning new cooking skills, reading, studying,

and researching. One participant taught other officers to run a variety of useful computer programs, another built and maintained a comprehensive reference set of weapons, and still another monitored social media to gather information on attacks and drone strikes and ran self-initiated projects to collect data for a command board and for future decision making.

Keeping themselves and their minds occupied and focussed on something of interest allowed the officers to maintain their mental health. They had been explicitly instructed in the importance of this, as well as in not allowing themselves to worry unnecessarily about problems at home that they had no control over or allowing their minds to think dark thoughts. The officers were all aware of the connection between physical health and mental health and endeavored to make fitness a regular daily habit.

Social isolation was something that those not traveling with a contingent had to learn to cope with. While stationed within Ecuador, military officers are used to being posted a long distance from family but are still with a unit of countrymen, speaking Spanish, eating their country's food, and enjoying its culture. Participants related that Ecuador is a small country and that it is possible to see loved ones for holidays or return home in times of need. A posting to a peacekeeping mission is entirely different. Other than the contingents to Haiti, officers traveled across the globe to Africa completely alone or with one or two other officers from their country. Some officers enjoyed missions with other military personnel from Latin America while others did not, which could be isolating.

Officers had the time and opportunity to reflect on themselves and the wider world during their missions. They made a lot of self-discoveries that they were willing to share. Some chose to travel alone on their vacation time.

Combined with opportunities for introspection and self-examination, this provided participants with the time and space for tremendous personal growth.

Families Are a Crucial Source of Support

The support of peacekeepers' families was crucial to the success of a mission. It was recognized by the officers that there was often little time between them being notified of their posting and their deployment. A senior officer spoke of the need to make families aware of everything entailed in a mission and to explain the risks, including that a soldier could die during the mission. Others talked at length about the importance of spouses understanding the responsibilities of remaining in Ecuador with any children. If there are problems at home, they will inevitably spill over to add stress to the peacekeeper in the field. It was reported that at times officers chose to take on a peacekeeping mission because of problems at home. Attempts are made to connect officers about to be deployed with staff and soldiers who have undertaken previous missions. Participants communicated with loved ones at home when they were able to do so. For peacekeeping missions in recent years, this means multiple quick contacts each day. For missions that occurred years ago, talking by phone to their families had been a luxury for a peacekeeper, and they connected only as needed.

Peacekeepers and their families have robust conversations on many topics, but a primary aim is keeping families intact and keeping relations between the home and the mission as smooth as possible. One topic a senior officer spoke of was the need for officers to avoid sexually transmitted diseases. As a leader on their mission, the officer tried to help soldiers

maintain focus on their mission by constantly talking about their families and children at home.

Participants stated that there is a focus on strongly supporting families, following a rigorous selection process. An officer who was a former director of a peace school and had put a lot of work into this area offered that “the soldiers are not the only people in uniform . . . it is important to understand that behind us are the families.” The Ecuadorian military employed psychologists to help families at home while spouses were on a mission and appears to work diligently to support families during these potentially vulnerable times.

In addition to supporting military personnel and their families, officers recognized the role of leadership in thanking personnel and celebrating their achievements. While officers were quick to point out that they volunteered for service out of a sense of duty and not for reward, it is human nature to crave recognition for sacrificing a year away from family and friends, often in harsh conditions. Having opportunities to travel, the participants recognize some of the perks of military service that Western personnel enjoy, including commercial discounts, boarding flights first when in uniform, and the ubiquitous greeting of “Thank you for your service.” Strong leadership recognizes these needs and is called on to fulfill them.

Discussion

Upholding standards of training is a central theme in the leadership experiences of peacekeepers. The Ecuadorian officers discovered during their deployment that their training was good when compared to that of peacekeepers from other countries. This allowed them to feel comfortable

with the work they were given, which in turn resulted in high mission satisfaction. This confidence boosts self-esteem, which generates resistance to anxiety and is indispensable when tackling complex global challenges such as those encountered on peacekeeping missions. At the same time, the officers recognized that training can always be improved. Countries have autonomy over their peacekeeping training and must be knowledgeable of current needs.

Officers expressed frustrations with soldiers whose training clearly did not meet UN standards, and there was confusion about how these officers had earned a place on a mission. Lack of English-language skills, inability to drive manual transmission vehicles, and lack of computer skills all had implications for the mission. Ecuadorian officers were able to compensate for others' lack of these abilities. African peacekeepers depended heavily on other personnel for training and task completion. Inadequately trained troops strain operations, and poor training combined with a lack of equipment requires robust solutions, as these operations are increasingly complex and dangerous.

Officers described the importance of being a good ambassador for their home country and the weight of that responsibility. They did not express that they were deployed as an individual soldier but as an officer of the Ecuadorian armed forces. This is a collectivist mindset and perhaps leads to a stronger work ethic, as the soldier understands that there is more at stake than their own personal success. The participants understood that their performance was a base on which future officers would stand. People hailing from collectivist cultures are acutely aware of their positions within groups

and organizations; however, this is a new understanding in the literature of peacekeeping.

Participants specifically identified English-language skills as an area where they lacked proficiency, despite other militaries exhibiting virtually no proficiency in the language while on a mission. This situation required the time and ability of those with basic English skills to fill the resulting void, but as communication involves both sending and receiving information, this left the mission vulnerable to cascading miscommunications when contingents of peacekeepers were missing this essential skill. Language barriers were stressful for soldiers, and lack of common language impeded a unified understanding. Soldiers often work through translators since they are unlikely to have a working knowledge of local dialects, but the assumption is that peacekeepers have a basic knowledge of the language of the mission and that communications within the operation can take place without the additional interface of a translator, human or digital. There is a gap in the research on peacekeeping experiences that may partly explain this omission from previous literature.

Officers felt that their military training in their home country prepared them well to adapt to foreign environments. The Ecuadorian soldiers expressed satisfaction in their unfamiliar environments despite many hardships. Participants felt that they were sometimes even more comfortable on the mission than they had been in some remote postings in their own country. Only one soldier expressed being unprepared to step off a plane and into the chaos and confusion of gunfire and the overwhelming sensory overload of garbage and disease. Nevertheless, they adapted to the situation quickly. This contradicts the literature, which has shown that soldiers are

unprepared for the conditions they face, including limitations of electrical power, substandard sanitation, and long separations from family. Participants repeatedly stated that as military officers none of these obstacles presented any extraordinary challenges for them. This may stem from the soldiers interviewed for this study hailing from a low-income country, as the standard of living that they have been accustomed to in Ecuador is closer to the conditions found on various UN missions. Personnel in previous studies have generally been from higher-income countries, so there is a larger disparity between the conditions of their home country and that of the mission and therefore the necessary adaptation is greater.

Participants unanimously agreed that both military and interpersonal skills were needed in the international environment. Officers felt that interpersonal skills were of primary importance, as they had learned in the Ecuadorian Army the military skills needed for the mission. An increased number of troop-contributing countries may serve to enlarge the complement of skills and perspectives on a mission and enhances the likelihood that all the necessary aptitudes and abilities are available. Follower readiness is a combination of competency and commitment, while it is crucial for leaders to comprehend the breadth of the cultural diversity of those under their command on international teams.

Conclusions

The data collected in this study points to several salient themes about training for UN peacekeepers. The first is the importance of a rigorous selection process. The participants of this study acknowledged that all soldiers do not make good peacekeepers and that the selection process must be vigorous to

choose the most suitable candidates. The appropriate selection of officers eases stress on peacekeepers, and psychological maturity enhances worker satisfaction. Officers' descriptions of people they admired including those who were open-minded, who communicated well, who were not prejudiced, and who were motivated, wise, and skilled. Officers with good aptitudes for sociocultural understanding are likely to be more successful at peacekeeping.

Officers identified communication as the most important interpersonal skill needed on a peacekeeping mission. In addition to the significant barrier to mission success that the lack of common language skills and communication proficiency posed, soldiers also noted the need for diplomacy skills. There is a need for mediation training and the psychological benefits that such training provides in highly stressful contexts. Appropriate interactions with local communities are facilitated by the cross-cultural education of peacekeepers.

Officers were at times called on to work closely with civilians, be they personnel from NGOs, local authorities, or citizens in their area of influence. Most participants described this as a novel experience that required them to develop new skills. Those with a variety of operational experiences will have an advantage in this context. Being that UN peacekeeping operations seek to protect civilians and their civil liberties, a strong basis for human rights is needed. Leaders were responsible for their own troops as well as local populations, which required a shift in leadership style. It is necessary to develop leaders who can work across different cultures, military organizations, and civilian organizations in both an inclusive and collaborative manner. Conflict-resolution and negotiation skills are needed as peacekeeping competencies to achieve civil-military success.

Families were found to be a crucial source of support for officers, especially in the present age of daily communication with loved ones. However, they can also act as a distraction, as officers were helpless to aid with problems at home, and family issues can be a cause of decreased performance. Soldiers felt that peacekeepers with families back home had a more difficult time during deployment than those who were single. Officers rallied around those who were struggling on a mission, both fellow nationals and those from other countries. They attempted to help them improve material comforts as well as social and psychological well-being. The strength of the military can provide a strong support system.

Participants recognized the need to maintain their mental health while on a mission. Boredom is a significant factor of a peacekeeping mission, and officers intentionally created outlets for their time, energy, and thoughts. In addition to maintaining good psychological health, prioritizing autonomous and lifelong learning, which was demonstrated by these officers, is essential for military leaders in an ever more complex international environment. Soldiers used mental preparation and relaxation training as positive coping mechanisms.

The results of this study confirm the need for the training being conducted by the United States Institute of Peace to occur within continental Africa and extend into Latin America.⁶⁸ The UN peacekeeping manual requires updating to match the needs of troop-contributing countries. How to match the training in-country to the UN instructions and how to accurately confirm that troops meet those standards are larger questions. With the potential for Russia and Ukraine and Hamas and Israel to reach peace agreements in the near future, there is a possibility of renewed interest in

peacekeeping by Western nations, as they see durable peace in these regions as central to their own sovereign interests.

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