Collecting community experiences of conflict

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Making Peacekeeping Data Work for the International Community project

Aim is to help the UN and other international organisations and humanitarian INGOs better use the data available for them to assist effectiveness.

• Grant holders: Professor Roger Mac Ginty, Dr Tanja Müller, Professor Bertrand Taithe and Dr Celia Russell
• 3 year project funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council
• Focus on the incident data collected by the UN/African Union mission to Darfur
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Peacekeeping in Darfur

- Conflict started in Feb 2003, international peacekeeping presence since 2004
- Local reports of security incidents and human rights abuses are collected on an almost daily basis by field officer visits to villages, market places, meetings with community leaders, local organisations and so on
- These form the basis of the mission’s operational dataset
- But how are these data collected and analysed?
About the UNAMID joint mission analysis dataset

- Micro-level incident data
- produced in real time by the mission from the JMAC daily reports, starting Jan 2008
- record the time and place of all incidents reported to the mission
- free text description of the incident
- Thousands of incidents all structured in the same way
- Provide a continuous record of the conflict over years from Jan 2008 to present day
Our methods

- We talked to five former or current peacekeeping field officers with experience collecting incident data in Darfur. We asked about:
  - Training and guidelines
  - How incident reports are collected
  - How incident reports are verified and analysed
- We asked 53 Darfurian refugees living in camps in Chad about their interactions with UNAMID. We asked:
  - If they were aware UNAMID were collecting incident reports
  - If they had had direct or indirect contact, if they knew how information would be used, if there were any consequences.
Djabal refugee camp in Chad

https://www.flickr.com/photos/69583224@N05/8022559679/
How are incidents reports collected?

• Most information was verbally reported
• Around 95% of the incidents reported come from interviews in situ with local people, collected by field officers making physical visits (on almost daily basis) to villages, markets, camps for internally displaced people, hospitals etc

“We used to go outside to collect data every 2-3 days. When there were security tensions, we used to go out every day. . . We used to go to the towns and villages …detention centres and cells, prisons, police centres, hospitals to meet victims. [Human right officers] conduct meetings with government officials at their offices, visit areas under rebels’ control, visit camps of the internally displaced persons and conduct meetings with their leaders and other lay men and women”

• A small fraction of the information base also comes from formal meetings and surveys
https://www.flickr.com/photos/unamid-photo/20592448454
Training and guidelines

• There is a wide range of guidelines on procedures of data collection, verification and evaluation as well as report writing and the language used.
• Nonetheless these guidelines are not easily accessible and a key problem identified in our interviews was the availability of guidelines and paucity in training
• Only two of our five interviewees received timely training in data collection
• One received training two years after starting in post
• The other two received training but not specifically on data collection, even though this was a part of their role
Guidelines for investigating and Reporting Human Rights Violations and Abuses

- Introduce yourself, the organization or group you work for, and the purpose of the interview.
- Stress the issue of confidentiality. Explain what you intend to do with the information.
- Make sure with the interviewee that the information furnished by him will remain confidential.
- Make sure the interviewee name will not be reflected anywhere even in the report.
- Ask permission to take notes and/or to use a recorder or about his willingness for the interview.
Disclosive incident

• “Car Jacking UNAMID Vehicle. On 08 Jan at around 2230 hrs a UNAMID vehicle was carjacked from the residence of □ (UNAMID Engineering staff of □ ) from □ near El Fasher Market area. At about 2145 hrs two unknown gun men knocked his door and once he opened the door they ordered him for the key of the vehicle (TOYOTA Land Cruiser [Buffalo] with Reg. no □) at the gun point. The staff handed over the key of the vehicle and they drove the vehicle to unknown direction. The incident has been reported to the GoS Police and the Security Duty Officer. No harm was caused to the UN person.”
Protecting informants

• There is a widespread perception, identified by both former UNAMID staff and by refugees, that information is not gathered in a way that always ensures the safety of informants.

• 12 of the refugees we interviewed had provided information to UNAMID. 10 of these people reported negative consequences either to themselves as a result.

• 24 of the 53 refugees interviewed reported having experienced, or heard of others having experienced, negative consequences as a result of sharing information with UNAMID.

• The most commonly cited consequences were arrest, questioning, assault and detention.
Verification and analysis

- Most reports especially incidents involving killings, abductions or serious human rights violations are verified by the field office;
- The typical procedure was described by one field officer interviewee:
  ‘Whenever we receive information, say an attack on civilians, the first thing we do is to contact some people we used to deal with as source of information to figure out the credibility of the information received. If the incident or the data related to IDPs’ camps, we contact sheikhs inside the camps. If it relates to area under rebel control, we contact the rebels-military or political commanders. In case of tribal clashes, we contact tribal leaders in the area. We have a kind of contacts database for most of the people we deal with.’
- International NGOs were cited as a trusted source of information for verification
- The verification process relies more on personal relationships than formal procedures:
  ‘verification ‘depend[s] on individual capabilities and personal relations rather than a disciplined clear set of procedures for coordination and information sharing’
- Media sources were also cited as important for verification by all our field officer interviewees, in particular radio, internet sources and newspapers.
Under reporting: importance of personal relationships

- Our interviewees highlighted the significance of personal networks in the collection of incident data.
- Personal relationships are essential to building trust within the politically sensitive context of Darfur.
- Reporting networks are often based on traditional hierarchies.
- This dependence on regular contacts risks limiting dialogue to particular communities and overlooking the experiences or concerns of marginalised groups.
- It also means particular types of incident – like gender based violence - appear under reported.
Under reporting: logistics and physical distances?

“I noticed that they move more during the rainy season. I think this is because there are fewer problems during the rainy season.”

“My understanding was that they collect data to write reports in order to improve the security situation and to stop the war and killings. However they have not come to our village.”

“They [UNAMID] had never stopped in our village”

“There is no presence for the UNAMID in our village.”

As part of the Making Peacekeeping Data Work project, we’ve constructed a dataset based on the security incident dataset but with additional variables including locality.

We are looking for seasonality in the data and correlations with special calendar dates.

We are using spatial analysis to see if the spatial distribution of incidents in the UNAMID dataset is related to distance and ease of access to field office, population density, number of peacekeeping troops in vicinity, number of humanitarian actors in area, physical terrain and so on.
Early findings

• Peacekeepers should move beyond limited individual networks of sources for information on local experiences of violence
• Timely training needs to be given systematically to all those involved in data collection and management
• Some types of incident and localities are under represented in the UNAMID operational incident dataset
• Peacekeepers need to do more to protect confidentiality and reduce any risk to the physical safety of those they interview.
“Like clouds in the summer”

Reliable information is often scarce in conflict regions; politically polarised allegations, exaggerations and unsubstantiated rumours are common.

UN peacekeeping operations have continual presence in conflict regions and attempt to gather and verify information on security incidents and human rights violations in a systematic, coordinated manner to broaden situation awareness and inform a decision making.

Data collection and management involve serious ethical and security challenges yet to be resolved.

Though flawed, the data collected by field officers from local communities constitute a vital source of information from a local level and have tremendous research potential for examining trends and patterns of violence especially if triangulated with other sources of information.
Questions

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