

Executive Summary: Mapping the Security Environment

Commissioned by the UK NGO-Military Contact Group and funded by DfID, the new Tufts research examines perceptions of security among three sets of actors in major crises: the military contingents of peace support operations (PSOs), international assistance agencies (AAs), and local populations. During the early months of 2005 a research team from Tufts University conducted interviews of some 350 persons in individual and focus group settings in Afghanistan, Kosovo, and Sierra Leone. The report is now being finalized and will be available shortly on the Feinstein International Famine Center website (famine.tufts.edu).

The data produced three major findings. First, *perceptions of security differ significantly among the three sets of actors*, who seem to live in three different “worlds.” PSO forces understand security first and foremost in terms of “force protection:” that is, the need for protection of their own personnel from attacks and threats of attack. PSO perceptions of the security needs of AAs and local communities are viewed through those lenses. While AAs are also concerned about insecurity as it impinges on their ability to carry out assistance and protection activities, they are more likely to take risks in fulfilling their tasks. For their part, local communities initially view security as safety from physical harm and abuse but as soon as there is some stability in their circumstances, their views encompass a range of human security concerns, including economic opportunity, political participation, and cultural identity. As one respondent put it: “Peace is jobs and electricity.”

The second major finding is that *perceptions differ significantly within each of the three sets of actors*. National contingents have different understandings of force protection and how best to achieve it, reflecting national military and political cultures. There are also major differences between and among AAs, with many international NGOs seeking security through “blending in” with local communities and UN assistance organizations keeping an arms’ length distance. Local perceptions of security reflect a mélange of factors, including age, gender, economic status, political position, and the like.

Thirdly, *perceptions of security evolve over time*. Local perceptions move quickly beyond physical security, while PSOs and AAs often seem hard-pressed to accommodate to changing needs. At the same time, local communities had little patience for the kinds of discussions of comparative advantage that preoccupy international agencies. They were concerned more with enhancing security, broadly understood, than with distinctions about which institutions would best assist them in the process.

In sum, the study offers an intriguing and provocative look at the wide-ranging security needs of local communities and the uneven extent to which these are understood and responded to by major international institutions. The report points to the value of increased assessment and analysis of local perceptions by PSOs and AAs. Such ground-truthing is essential for effective programming as well as for enhancing the acceptability of outside agencies. It suggests the need for major changes if outside actors are to become more responsive to local priorities. At the same time, the report cautions against drawing too wide-ranging conclusions based on data which, while solid and illuminating, would need to be complemented by further research and analysis.