

## Book Review: The New World of UN Peace Operations: Learning to Build Peace?

by Blog Admin

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*Over the past decade, UN blue helmets have been dispatched to ever more challenging environments from the Congo to Timor to perform an expanding set of tasks. But all too often, the UN have been “flying blind” in their efforts to stabilize countries ravaged by war. The UN realized the need to put knowledge, guidance, and reflection on failures and successes at the centre of the institution. Building on an innovative multi-disciplinary framework, this study provides a first comprehensive account of learning in peacekeeping. **Catherine Baker** finds that this book is a useful snapshot of the policy-making process in the largest and most complex of international organisations.*

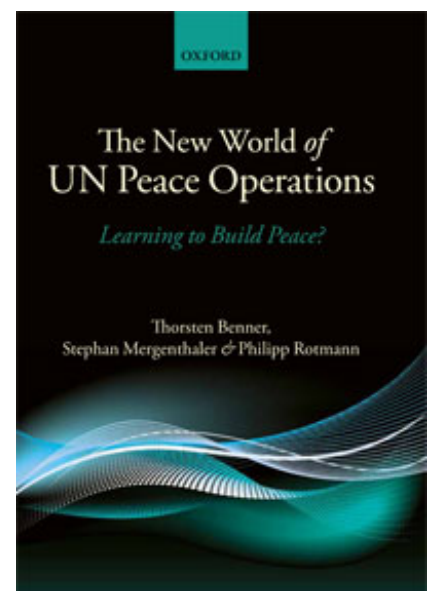
**The New World of UN Peace Operations: Learning to Build Peace? Thorsten Benner, Stephan Mergenthaler and Philipp Rotmann. Oxford University Press. June 2011.**

Is the United Nations capable of learning from its peacekeeping experiences in the field? The recent history of peacekeeping identifies the failures in Rwanda and Srebrenica as turning points that forced the UN to reshape its approach. The narrative of a later phase that [Thorsten Benner](#), [Stephan Mergenthaler](#) and [Philipp Rotmann](#) present in their study of attempts to transform the UN into a ‘learning organisation’ (p. 4) is far less dramatic, but valuable for understanding the nature and the problems of peace operations today.

This study by three researchers from the Global Public Policy Institute in Berlin is a bureaucratic history of how the growing complexity and scale of peace operations forced the UN to improve its procedures. Its focus is on a generation of reformers in peace operations management who challenged the improvisation-led culture of the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO) and tried to establish procedures for organisational learning.

These figures are far lower in profile than Kofi Annan or Lakhdar Brahimi, the coordinator of the Report of the Panel on United Nations Peacekeeping in 2000, yet they also played significant roles in the institutional history of the UN. Among them were Prince Zeid Ra’ad Zeid al-Husseini, David Harland and Salman Ahmed, UN political officers with experience in former Yugoslavia who drafted what became the UN Secretary-General’s Report into the Srebrenica massacre; Mark Kroeker, an incoming Police Adviser who was able to strengthen the UN’s policy on when and how to deploy police; Jean-Marie Guéhenno, the head of the DPKO who promoted reforms to the wider UN bureaucracy; and Sérgio Vieira de Mello, an experienced transitional administrator whose commitment to institutional learning from previous missions was cut short by his death in the Baghdad Canal Hotel bombing in 2003.

Benner, Mergenthaler and Rotmann show that the DPKO Guéhenno inherited in 2000 was characterised by an ‘entrenched organisational core’ (p. 27) that valued quick improvisation and limited resources but resisted critical reflection on its working practices. This dated back to an ‘ad hoc culture’ (p. 28) of UN peacekeeping that had been formed in the scramble to respond to the Suez crisis and that was ‘easily



absorbed and reproduced' (p. 30) by the new managers who joined DPKO as peacekeepers after the Cold War. This resonates with the experiences of UN bureaucracy in Bosnia-Herzegovina expressed by former peacekeepers and civilian staff.

For the UN to learn from field experience at an organisational level it must have procedures for gathering, preserving and reflecting on knowledge – in short, an institutional memory. The structure of UN missions and careers impedes this severely. The authors are right to note the 'extreme turnover' of staff on missions: on average less than 4 years for civilian staff, and only 6 to 12 months for most military and police personnel, who are seconded from their own countries and careers (p. 35). Well-organised handover/takeover periods are necessary for knowledge to even be preserved within one mission. In 2004, a team led by David Harland found that 46 per cent of the field staff they surveyed 'had received no guidance materials or orderly handover' when taking up their post and 50 per cent felt they had had 'to reinvent the wheel "very often" or "all the time"' (p. 44).

Many organisational obstacles thus stand in the way of feeding knowledge to the top of the bureaucracy and, just as importantly, distributing it back out so that it will benefit other missions. The reforms of the Brahimi and Guéhenno generation aimed to overcome these but, the authors found, were hindered by structural factors beyond their control. An effective, learning bureaucracy, they argue, requires 'staff members [who] identify with the organization, get rewarded and see a medium-term future' in order for them to be able and willing to contribute to the organisation's shared knowledge base (p. 221). It seems that UN human resources practices and the short-term contracts offered to field staff did not and still do not incentivise this kind of contribution.

The authors' study is deliberately limited to DPKO, not to any other branch of the UN that participates in multi-dimensional missions. Their work nonetheless offers both a framework and an agenda for extending this type of research, with clear criteria for assessing success in implementing reforms. The research design is issue-led rather than mission-driven, enabling them to follow the trajectories of people and practices on a larger scale.

Four issues – police assistance, judicial reform, reintegration of former combatants, and mission integration – are selected as examples of the scope of contemporary peace operations, and developed through three case studies. In the chapter on police, these are the development of basic standards for so-called Formed Police Units (gendarmeries, confusingly called 'constabulary police' in UN jargon); the creation of a Standing Police Capacity as recommended by Brahimi; and the attempt to create a conceptual shift in DPKO regarding police institution-building and accountability. Quick and effective deployment of police assistance is vital in the early stages of an operation: where this is slow, as in the Kosovo deployment, crime and post-conflict persecution may have worsened, and local civilian confidence in the UN may never be repaired (p. 84).

In 2005, DPKO still had no doctrine of its own on joint police operations with military peacekeepers, use of force by police, or methods of crowd control; the diversity of states that contributed FPUs meant that the organisation had no automatic common reference point. A first-generation doctrine was produced, largely replicating concept-of-operations documents that had been written by the police missions in Liberia and Haiti yet not circulated throughout the organisation. Missions' police commissioners and the member states contributing police were, however, not accountable to DPKO's Police Division, making it difficult to exercise quality control. An incident in Kosovo in 2007 where UN police killed two protestors after firing rubber bullets led to another round of doctrine-writing on formed police which, at the authors' time of writing, was not yet complete.

This outcome appears typical of many efforts to improve organisational learning in the UN. Of the 12 processes studied in this book, more than half ended up incomplete, including 4 that 'fizzled out' during advocacy and 3 that were adopted but not implemented (p. 211). The authors thus warn of 'serious persisting weaknesses in the learning capacity' (p. 211), and confirm their hypothesis that political factors rather than the condition of the learning infrastructure are dominant in determining whether reforms will take place. Professional training, accountability mechanisms and evaluation procedures, they recommend,

must all be overhauled if this endemic problem is ever to improve.

This book is a useful snapshot of the policy-making process in the largest and most complex of international organisations. It gives context to the growing number of bottom-up studies of the everyday cultural and spatial practices of peace operations, though it does not substitute for them. The incomplete outcomes of many of its case studies are the responsibility of those people and institutions who slowed them down, not of the authors. It will be the task of future researchers with a longer view to assess whether or not the hopes placed in the UN by the authors, by UN staff and by at least some of the population in post-conflict societies were able to be fulfilled.

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