



Inequality in MINUSMA #2

AN UNTAPPED RESOURCE: AFRICAN FORCES IN INTELLIGENCE GATHERING

Inadequate collaboration and lack of trust impedes the sharing of intelligence between European and African forces in the United Nations peacekeeping mission in Mali (MINUSMA). However, the NATO-based intelligence capability could benefit from the cultural knowledge and language skills of African troops.

In 2014, the UN set up an unprecedented intelligence capability for a peacekeeping operation in Mali, the All Sources Information Fusion Unit (ASIFU). This was done to assist MINUSMA in countering asymmetric threats faced by mission personnel and the local population.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Develop the current intelligence capability into a system that is accessible to all TCCs, not just the European countries that initially established the ASIFU.
- Build mission capacity to draw on regional African TCCs' understanding of the local culture and dialects.
- Provide training to the TCCs to engage in collecting and/or verifying data that can support actionable intelligence production in the mission.

Troop-contributing countries prioritize reporting to their own governments rather than to MINUSMA headquarters

Based on their practical experience in MINUSMA, African troops have the impression that the ASIFU does not share information equally across the mission. Their response is to shut down lines of communication and not share information either.

The ASIFU concept draws on lessons from NATO and US-led military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. Its role is to contribute to a better understanding of key actors, conflict drivers, the local economy and perceptions of key constituencies in Mali. The mission uses this information to produce predictable and actionable intelligence in support of MINUSMA's military activities.

To be effective, the ASIFU requires support from combat and support units, and relies on information from mission assets such as drones, a special operations unit, and so forth. Having access to the capabilities of European militaries, for instance in setting up intelligence units like the ASIFU, is widely regarded as key to strengthening UN peacekeeping. However, experiences from MINUSMA point to several challenges that must be addressed if the mission is to benefit fully from the European contributions and improve performance on the ground.

Sharing information

Access to and sharing of information reflect inequality within the mission in several ways. African soldiers do not have direct access to the intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance equipment and capabilities that the European troop-contributing countries (TCCs) bring into the mission. Furthermore, there is limited acknowledgment of the positive role that African troops can play in the intelligence production process. Both represent missed opportunities, which reflect inadequate collaboration and trust between European and African TCCs.

Intelligence sharing is sensitive to all nations, yet countries with a history of military collaboration are more inclined to trust one another. As stated in an interview with a high-ranking European officer in Mali

in June 2016, 'the ASIFU consists only of the so-called 'skiing nations' [NATO-term for western countries]; from top-level management there is an idea that, if there is going to be intelligence analysis, it has to be within a NATO framework.'

Lack of trust often prohibits information sharing, also among European countries. Indeed, TCCs tend to prioritize reporting to their national intelligence agencies. This is compounded by a UN classification system, where the level of confidentiality is more fluid and open to interpretation than the one that exists in NATO, for instance. Therefore, analysts working in the ASIFU are uncertain about the practical implications of standards of classification. Furthermore, secure communication networks do not exist inside the mission or between the mission and UN headquarters in New York. This means that unauthorized parties may intercept classified data.

The uneven deployment and distribution of analysts and technological assets in the mission impede the effectiveness of the ASIFU and puts the most exposed soldiers in further danger because they do not benefit from the mission's intelligence capacity. According to a high-ranking civilian official in MINUSMA, the mission is facing a dichotomy regarding intelligence capacity: 'On the one hand, they [the mission leadership] are talking about intelligence capacity, and on the other hand, they [the African TCCs] are prohibited from gathering intelligence. Those contingents have no units with an information analysis capacity.'

Data for the sake of data?

The production of data is not in itself a criterion for success. Dependency on technology without adequate human intelligence and local expertise to

interpret the data replicate errors of previous anti-terror programs in the Sahel. A case in point is the deployment in 2004 of remote-controlled airplanes in northern Mali to provide images of the 'local situation' 24 hours a day. The program generated substantial amounts of data, but there was little capacity to interpret it.

In Northern Mali, local media is scarce and scattered; major sources of information are gossip and casual conversation. The antagonistic positions among various peoples, tribes and clans mean that all information must be interpreted in the context that it was collected in before it is passed on. To state the obvious, analysts in the ASIFU cannot take such information and local rumors at face value.

Trained European analysts with access to information may have a thorough understanding of the general conflict environment in Mali. However, they are restricted with respect to where they are allowed to patrol. Furthermore, because of a high threat level, the soldiers that do patrol often do not leave the armored vehicles to engage communities at the local level.

Hence, there is both a gap between the European analysts and the soldiers on the ground and between MINUSMA and the population, the latter of which holds vital information.

In general, deterioration of the Malian security situation in 2016 has limited the possibility of regular patrolling, especially in northern Mali, the most volatile part of the country. This has meant that regular interaction with the local population has decreased overall, which negatively affects the amount and quality of information that can be obtained from ordinary Malians.

As explained by a European intelligence analyst operating in eastern Mali, this is a genuine concern: 'It is important that the troops on the ground understand the conflict in order to pose the right questions. The African soldiers say that the analysts can come along. But they [the European analysts, due to security concerns] are not allowed to.'

African soldiers – an untapped resource

European TCCs are constrained by not speaking the



A military delegation from Bamako arrives in Tessalit in northern Mali for meetings with community leaders and MINUSMA commanders
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local languages and dialects in Mali. Collaboration with the Malian army could be an entry point, but its presence in the North is still highly contested.

This highlights the qualities that the African soldiers in MINUSMA could bring into the mission. Because many of them are from the region, they speak Malian dialects and have in-depth understanding of the cultural environment. Increased involvement, collaboration with and training of African TCCs could be an important link to the local population – an indispensable source of information in the process of producing reliable intelligence.

One obstacle relates to differences in what good reporting practices entail. 'Africans do not write memos, they talk a lot,' said a European officer in Sector West. Indeed, among some African TCCs, an oral report is considered as good as a written report. However, this is not in line with what most European TCCs consider good practice, and hampers cooperation in day-to-day collaboration in the mission.

Whom can you trust?

There are some major obstacles to increasing intelligence collaboration between MINUSMA's TCCs. Due to the evolving Malian security context doing so has only become more diffuse and dangerous. The blurred boundaries between terrorists and other armed groups, drug traffickers and politicians make it particularly challenging to know in whom to trust.

As one European officer in MINUSMA headquarters noted: 'Here, terrorist groups, criminal gangs and drug traffickers want to use the same roads [as armed

groups that are party to the current peace agreement]. These groups are integrated. It is very difficult to say that the good ones are there and the bad ones are there. They fight and collaborate with one another.'

While the African TCCs' affinity to the local population can be a considerable asset to the mission, it is also a source of insecurity. Together with the complex and sometimes opaque collaboration between Mali's warring factions and the many attacks on MINUSMA, this fuels distrust among the TCCs.

From the perspective of a MINUSMA staff member in Sector East of the mission that centers on Gao, this situation raises important questions: 'Either they [African soldiers] have very little to report, because they do little, or they have unofficial ways of communicating among themselves. Many of them speak the same dialect as Malians. They have conversations that do not always appear in MINUSMA reports.' Such a statement emphasizes how prejudices and assumptions about one another affect the trust and relationship between the TCCs, and by extension perceived willingness to share information.

In order to improve the situational awareness of MINUSMA and the quality of the information gathered by the ASIFU, there is a need to draw on all resources available to the mission. Several African officers and soldiers – for instance from Burkina Faso, Niger and Nigeria – speak some of the Malian dialects. Finding ways to include these assets in the analytical work of the mission is pivotal to understand the complex and highly dangerous environment in which the mission works.

Peter Albrecht, Senior Researcher, DIIS (paa@diis.dk); Signe Marie Cold-Ravnkilde, Postdoc, DIIS (smr@diis.dk) & Rikke Haugegaard, Lecturer, Royal Danish Defence College (isk-mk04@fak.dk)

Cover photo: Chadian MINUSMA peacekeepers patrol the area at a checkpoint in Tessalit, northern Mali © UN Photo/Marco Dormino



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