

# 100 Voices on Technology & Peace Operations

Supporting the implementation of mandated tasks through digital technologies

## | Online training for peace operations – the ,new normal‘ post COVID-19?

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For the last number of years, peace operations have been under much pressure and scrutiny regarding their effectiveness, funding, coordination and coherence. Reduced budgets and pressure for performance have resulted in a situation where peace operations are expected to “do more with less”. These changes are a reflection of how peace operations evolved as a tool deployed by the international community to deal with conflicts.

In addition to an already constrained environment, the training of peacekeepers has been particularly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Peacekeepers not only had to adapt to a new context that forced them to engage in efforts to contain and control the pandemic on the ground, the postponement of rotation arrangements, as well as dealing with stress management and staff morale caused by the global crisis. Training, a key pillar towards enhancing peacekeeper performance also had to adapt, to ensure the effective performance of mandated tasks.

Training of peacekeepers is a complex enterprise, as defined by the United Nations (UN), it aims at enhancing mandate implementation by equipping military, police and civilian components, both individual and collectively, with the knowledge, skills and attitudes. Peacekeeping training is implemented not only by the UN and other international organisations (like the African Union – AU), but particularly by personnel contributing countries and hundreds of peacekeeping training centres globally.

Considering that much of the face-to-face interactions of troop and police contributing countries (T/PCCs) was disrupted in one way or another, the UN, the AU, member states and the peacekeeping training community all had to creatively respond to ensure that peacekeeping training content and skills development could continue to be delivered effectively. This article reflects on how COVID-19 will impact training of peacekeepers, and what are some of the challenges and opportunities created for the future of capacity building for peace operations personnel.

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## “CLASSIC” TRAINING

Historically, training, as part of an adult learning process, has provided opportunities for physical interaction, where the development of conceptual and practical skills are executed simultaneously. Learning often intrinsically links the ability to absorb new concepts with the interaction with other individuals, exchanging views and promoting socialisation of concepts as a collective affair, not just as an individual process.

Certainly, the use of technology, online tools and distance-based learning approaches are not new (or not entirely new) for peacekeepers. Institutions like the United Nations Institute for Training and Research ([UNITAR](#)) and the Peace Operations Training Institute ([POTI](#)) have been developing correspondence and e-learning tools for peacekeepers already for decades, both in hybrid and blended forms. UN Staff are already familiar with engaging with online training on safety and security for at least 15 years, developed by UN Department of Safety and Security ([DSS](#)), as mandatory training before deployment to Mission areas.

## ADAPTING TO THE PANDEMIC

In response to COVID-19, two fundamental changes in peacekeeping training became more prominent and created a new potential for ensuring that peacekeeping training can become more widespread, timely and targeted to relevant stakeholders.

First, despite much disruption and capacity to conduct face-to-face training, many of the initiatives that do not require interaction were actually fast-tracked in 2020 by the UN and training centres. These include ensuring that knowledge-based training is provided online as part of broader blended and hybrid learning processes. It also allowed a potential for further bringing together participants to the same level and to provide tests to participants before face-to-face trainings.

Secondly, and possibly the most innovative potential for peacekeeping training, relates to the opportunities it brings to enhance components of training that require interaction and promote behavioural change. Despite the large number of online training available, most of it has been done as part of the first layers of adult learning, and particularly its knowledge-based and -oriented components.

The disruption of the pandemic showed that to a certain degree, participants could still be brought together, even if virtually. Platforms like Zoom or MS Teams, possibly unknown to most prior to March 2020, became increasingly utilised as part of active learning and training. By utilising digital platforms, traditional elements of content sharing could still be conducted, further complemented by sharing of experiences and social interaction.

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## IMPLICATIONS FOR METHODOLOGY

However, these also came at a cost and forcing training centres to re-think, not only the needs and development of training curricula, but particularly the implementation and ability of digital processes to meet learning objectives and lead to behavioural change.

The impact on established thinking and implementation of training is thus key. Trainers are now competing for participant's attention in a way that the physical presence would make hard otherwise. As a result, "classroom" training of two weeks or more had to be amended and reduced to shorter online sessions of a couple of hours.

Practical exercises had to be adapted, adjusted or not conducted at all. This was not only due to the absence of classroom interaction, but was responsive to the wave of newly available online platforms that increasingly became used in the training and education sectors in 2020. Normal classroom activities such as breaking participants into groups or engaging with digital whiteboards could now be used virtually and more easily. But it's clear that the skills required to conduct interactive online training are critical and cannot be achieved by simply using the classroom training curricula, and expecting participants to engage automatically.

Peacekeeping training, similar to many other training interventions, is often not designed to address outcomes to be achieved, but rather to share basic knowledge without the application thereof. By enabling training centres to think of innovative ways to execute training, it enhances training institutions initiatives to achieve training objectives, instead of a tick in the box approach. In doing so, training curricula developers should reconsider the most effective approach to ensure that trainees are suitably equipped once the training has been completed.

Online training is certainly cost-effective. For instance, the UN Department of Peace Operations Integrated Training Service has one trainer for every 2,636 deployed peacekeepers, and have had consistently shrinking budgets for the past 10 years.

The increasing shift towards online training interaction has shown that it is possible to reduce costs, save time and effort, and reduce the tremendous burden of the logistics of classroom training. Online training further provides the potential of having an opportunity for faster and more continuous engagements. However, in order to achieve their training objectives, peacekeeping training centres need to consider issues that were not present before. These include the capacity of managing digital training interventions, such as connectivity, adapting exercises to a digital environment and ensuring that trainers have been trained to execute online training successfully.

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## TAKING ADVANTAGE OF NEW OPPORTUNITIES

Training centres therefore need to do stocktaking of internet training delivery capabilities as well as adapting training curricula and trainer skills to enable effective training delivery. Training facilitators need to be enabled to engage with online training as an additional tool to successfully equip peacekeepers to execute their mandated tasks through a new skill set of conducting online training effectively. Training centres need to take time to adapt their curricula, to identify strengths and weaknesses of current execution methods, merge them to the continuous development of face-to-face training.

The digital revolution in peacekeeping training may help to make the very notion of training more dynamic. Once the issue of cost-effectiveness comes into play, one may start seeing training more as an ongoing process than an event. Training that normally would have enormous financial and logistic challenges, may become something of the past. Certain learning objectives can be achieved through pre-planned online learning interventions. This certainly allows participants and facilitators to have a more continuous engagement, not only allowing learning, but also establishing a process of regular mentoring and evaluation of training effectiveness.

It is important to note that online training is not a panacea that will replace all types of training. What changed in 2020, is the scale of the disruption and subsequent change, the fast-tracking the pace of adoption of technology and the new ways in which trainers were forced to adapt to embrace change. Certainly not every training approach, methodology and exercises can be done online. But certainly, training centres require to honestly reflect on how training is designed, and approaches used to meet learning objectives and behavioural changes.

The way that we train our peacekeepers will be key in the process of ensuring that peacekeepers are able to assist societies in addressing their own structural sources of instability and support them to prepare to overcome challenges. By investing in online training technological resources, we can better equip peacekeepers to execute their mandated roles and responsibilities in the most time and cost effective manner.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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