

## SPA Policy Brief

# Buying Hearts and Minds, Securing Blue Helmets

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

United Nations Quick Impact Projects (QIPs) are small, visible, low-cost projects implemented in consultation with local communities as part of peacekeeping operations (PKOs). Using geo-located data from the Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, Mali, and South Sudan for January 2017–September 2024, [SPA Assistant Professor of Justice, Law, Criminology and Security Jori Breslawski and J.D. Kathman \(SUNY-Buffalo\) \(2026\) find that higher QIP intensity in a district is followed by fewer attacks](#) on UN peacekeepers by non-state armed groups (NSAGs) in the subsequent month. QIPs, the authors argue, build civilian support for missions, increase civilians’ willingness to provide actionable intelligence, and thereby enable peacekeepers to avoid or preempt attacks. The evidence suggests that QIPs can function as a “soft-power” security asset when paired with information channels and community liaison mechanisms.

### PROBLEM AND STAKES

UN peacekeepers are increasingly targeted in the world’s most violent civil conflicts, with [attacks that kill and injure personnel, threaten mission continuity, and undermine contributing states’ willingness to deploy forces](#). Traditional responses emphasize troop numbers and force posture, yet [heavy reliance on “hard power” can undermine impartiality and civilian protection](#). QIPs are an alternative or complementary instrument intended to build legitimacy and local cooperation; policymakers need evidence on whether QIPs reduce risks to personnel or instead create perverse incentives that increase violence or local contestation.

### THE STUDY

The authors assembled district-month data on 1) QIPs from the UN Peace and Security Data Hub and 2) NSAG attacks on peacekeepers from Armed Conflict Location & Event Data for five PKOs (MINUSCA, MONUSCO, MINUSMA, UNMISS, UNISFA) from January 2017–September 2024. QIPs were operationalized both as logged monthly dollar disbursement and as the logged count of ongoing projects; attacks were binary (defined as any attack) and counted over the subsequent month to preserve temporal ordering. Regression models included district and month-year fixed effects and controls for logged battles, logged peacekeeper troop presence, and the number of armed actors. Multiple robustness checks were conducted.



**Jori Breslawski**  
Assistant Professor  
Justice, Law,  
Criminology & Security,  
American University

### EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

#### **Negative Association with Attacks**

Greater QIP investment—measured both by logged dollar value and logged count of concurrent projects—is associated with a lower probability and lower counts of NSAG attacks on peacekeepers in the following month.

Further, the magnitude is great: moving from no QIP dollars to the maximum logged QIP dollar value observed in the sample corresponds to a ~33% reduction in the probability of an attack in the following month; moving from zero to the observed maximum number of concurrent QIPs corresponds to an even larger reduction. In negative-binomial count models, the maximum logged QIP cost predicts ~43% fewer attacks in the following month; the maximum logged number of QIPs predicts ~53% fewer attacks. Results hold across logistic and count models, after district and month-year fixed effects, and with controls for contemporaneous battles, the logged number of peacekeepers, and the number of violent actors.

#### **Causal Mechanism**

QIPs increase civilians’ material welfare and are designed in coordination with local communities, while their modest size as well as their focus on infrastructure and services reduce plunder risks. This heightens civilians’ willingness to share intelligence about NSAG activities with peacekeepers, who act on such tips—via repositioning, patrol adjustments, early warnings, or interdiction—reducing their exposure to attacks.

## SPA Policy Brief

# Buying Hearts and Minds, Securing Blue Helmets

### Empirical Support

- Regional survey data from Mali show a moderate positive correlation ( $r \approx 0.61$ ) between the number or dollar value of QIPs and civilian satisfaction with MINUSMA—suggestive evidence that QIPs bolster support.
- The pacifying effect of QIPs on attacks is stronger in district-months with greater peacekeeper deployment, consistent with the idea that civilian intelligence yields security returns only when forces are present and able to act on information
- MINUSMA's layered system in Mopti, Mali illustrates how QIPs (e.g., radio infrastructure, job training centers) integrated with communication tools [can facilitate civilian reporting](#) that [prevents or deters attacks](#).

## POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

**1. Treat QIPs as security rather than simple goodwill and investment.** QIPs can be a central element of a layered protection strategy: they provide measurable security dividends for deployed personnel by fostering civilian cooperation, which enhances early warning and situational awareness. Donors and mission leadership should budget and plan QIPs as part of force protection portfolios, not only as development or political outreach.

**2. Preserve design features that maximize local legitimacy.** Small and participatory projects are least likely to be plundered and most likely to build credibility and acceptance. Projects should include community consultation, transparent beneficiary selection, and local maintenance commitments to retain the mechanisms that appear to produce intelligence.

**3. Integrate QIPs with information and liaison architectures.** QIP investments best yield security benefits when integrated with mechanisms to gather, vet, and act on civilian intelligence: Community Liaison Assistants (CLAs), Community Alert Networks (hotlines, radios), rapid vetting procedures, and protocols for force reallocation and early response. Budget bundles that pair QIPs with communications hardware, CLA staffing, and hotline systems are likely to be most effective.

**4. Target spatially and temporally with operational constraints in mind.** QIP targeting should weigh local needs against UN operational capacity. Where peacekeeper presence is sparse, QIPs may still build goodwill but will have limited immediate intelligence returns unless complemented by liaison staff or trusted partners able to channel tips to forces. Prioritize QIPs in contested subnational areas where operational follow-through is feasible.

**5. Use QIPs to strengthen political support for missions.** Security benefits from QIPs provide leadership with evidence to justify QIP budgets to UN headquarters, contributing countries, and donors. Framing QIPs as risk-mitigation and force-protection tools alongside civilian protection objectives can broaden political support.

## OPERATIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS

**1. Institutionalize QIP best practices.** Codify guidance that insists on participatory selection, visible branding, modest project scope, and local maintenance plans (building on the UN Civil Affairs Handbook).

**2. Package QIPs with liaison and communications resources.** Allocate funds specifically for CLAs, community hotlines, community radios, and rapid response capacities within the same programmatic envelope.

**3. Map overlap and capacity.** Use district-level mapping of QIPs, troop presence, and incident data to prioritize districts where QIPs are likely to generate both civilian support and actionable intelligence.

**4. Strengthen implementing partnerships.** When UN physical presence is limited, partner with vetted local NGOs or civil society organizations for implementation and for maintaining community reporting channels.

**5. Monitor indicators tied to the theory of change.** Track civilian satisfaction, hotline usage or tip volumes, CLAs' activity logs, and subsequent operational follow-through to assess whether QIPs translate into information flows and risk reductions.

**6. Build rapid evaluation components.** Embed light-weight pre/post beneficiary feedback, community perception questions, and short operational reviews to inform iterative design and targeting.

## SPA Policy Brief

# Buying Hearts and Minds, Securing Blue Helmets

### LIMITATIONS

The study design remains observational. Time-varying un-observables correlated with QIP deployment and subsequent attacks could bias estimates; stronger causal identification (instrumental variables, phased rollouts, or randomized trials) would increase confidence in effect sizes. ACLED underreports certain events, particularly low-visibility or nonfatal incidents, which could [bias results if reporting correlates with QIP presence](#). Further, direct data on civilian tips, hotline call volumes, and tip-to-action processes are scarce, prohibiting direct tests of the intelligence pathway. Finally, findings are drawn from five African PKOs; effects may differ in other regions, non-UN contexts, or missions with different mandates or operational practices.

### RESEARCH AND MONITORING PRIORITIES

- 1. Collect and analyze tip flow data.** To directly test the core mechanism, operationally track hotline usage, verified tips, and the fraction that leads to actionable responses.
- 2. Causal inference strategies.** Pursue quasi-experimental designs where feasible (e.g., phased rollouts, administrative eligibility cutoffs) to strengthen causal claims and estimate local average treatment effects.
- 3. Comparative replication.** Analyze QIP effects in other mission contexts (e.g., Lebanon, Haiti) and in non-UN stabilization contexts to assess external validity.
- 4. Cost-effectiveness studies.** Quantify the security benefits per dollar of QIPs relative to alternative investments (force protection, ISR, force posture adjustments) to inform allocation decisions.
- 5. Monitor unintended consequences.** Integrate conflict sensitivity assessments and grievance monitoring into QIP M&E frameworks to detect any negative dynamics early.

### CONCLUSION

[Breslawski and Kathman](#) provide robust evidence that UN Quick Impact Projects—when designed to be small, visible, and participatory—can reduce subsequent NSAG attacks on UN peacekeepers in the contexts studied. The paper advances a pragmatic argument: QIPs should be regarded as security assets that generate an “intelligence dividend” by building civilian support and improving information flows. For mission planners and donors, the key implication is to sustain or increase QIP funding while ensuring projects are integrated with community liaison roles and early-warning systems, designed for transparency and community ownership, and monitored to detect both benefits and potential negative spillovers. Strengthening data collection on civilian reporting and embedding more rigorous impact evaluation in QIP programming will sharpen evidence for scalable policy choices.