



UNOCI in Bouaké: between professed neutrality and the perceptions of local communities (2004–2017)

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ABSTRACT

The United Nations Operation in Côte d'Ivoire (UNOCI) was present in Bouaké from 2004 to 2017 against a backdrop of war, territorial division and the resolution of the crisis. This article analyses the evolution of local perceptions of the mission, distinguishing between the impartiality claimed by the organisation and the neutrality as perceived by the local

population. Drawing on Security Council resolutions, United Nations reports, academic research and documents relating to UNOCI's activities, the study shows that these perceptions evolved in line with changes in the political and security context. Between 2004 and 2007, the mission was primarily associated with protection and the hope for peace. Between 2007 and 2011, its involvement in the electoral process, followed by the post-electoral crisis, made its impartiality more controversial. After 2011, UNOCI expanded its local

activities focused on reconciliation and social cohesion. Its withdrawal in 2017 thus left a mixed legacy, comprising fulfilled expectations, criticism and recognition of its role in stabilising the country.

Keywords: UNOCI; Bouaké; neutrality; local perceptions; Ivorian crisis.

Introduction

The political and military crisis that erupted in Côte d'Ivoire in September 2002 marked a major turning point in the country's contemporary history. The insurrection led by the Patriotic Movement of Côte d'Ivoire (MPCI), followed by the formation of the Forces Nouvelles, resulted in a *de facto* partition of the territory between a government-controlled southern zone and a rebel-controlled northern zone. This situation has disrupted the country's political, administrative, economic and social structures. In this context, Bouaké occupies a special place. Having become the main centre of the rebellion, the city finds itself at the heart of the clashes, negotiations and processes aimed at resolving the crisis, whilst the population continues to suffer the long-term effects of the war (McGOVERN, 2011).

In response to this situation, the international community has stepped up its involvement in the Ivorian crisis. Through Resolution 1528 of 27 February 2004, the United Nations Security Council established UNOCI, which began its operations on 4 April 2004. Its mandate covers, in particular, monitoring the ceasefire, disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration, the protection of civilians, human rights, the electoral process and the restoration of security. In Bouaké, UNOCI is thus operating in an area deeply affected by the crisis, where it carries out activities relating in particular to security, disarmament, public information, human rights, inter-community dialogue and social cohesion. The 'Flame of Peace', held in Bouaké on 30 July 2007, represents an important milestone in the process of emerging from the crisis.

However, the history of UNOCI cannot be understood solely through the lens of its mandate and institutional actions. Its presence in a city scarred by war also raises the question of how it was experienced and interpreted by the local population. The organisation claimed to be impartial in the exercise of its mandate, but this impartiality could be perceived differently by local communities and stakeholders. In February 2010, against a backdrop of political tensions, UNOCI was in fact forced to publicly reaffirm its military impartiality in the face of accusations of bias.

This observation is in line with recent research on peacekeeping operations, which is paying increasing attention to local perceptions. SABROW (2017) demonstrates, in particular, that the legitimacy of a peacekeeping operation must also be examined in terms of how the affected populations perceive its presence and actions. In the case of Côte d'Ivoire, the work of McGOVERN (2011) sheds light on the local dynamics of the crisis, whilst RICARD (2016) analyses the role and track record of UNOCI. BEKOE (2018) examines, in particular, the mission's role in the 2010 electoral process and the post-election crisis. GILDER (2020) also emphasises, with regard to UNOCI, the importance of local dynamics in the conduct of peace operations.

Despite these contributions, the way in which the people of Bouaké perceived and experienced the presence of UNOCI throughout the period 2004–2017 remains insufficiently studied from a historical perspective. UN documents provide information on the mission's objectives and activities, and a survey conducted in 2008 had already sought to gauge the population's perception of its activities. However, these sources do not allow for a full account of the evolution of local experiences and perceptions over thirteen years.

This study therefore aims to shift the focus from institutional action to the experiences of local communities. It regards the inhabitants of Bouaké as actors capable of forming their own perceptions of the international presence. The value of this approach is both historical and historiographical. It enables us to study UNOCI as an actor in the recent history of Bouaké, whilst bringing the history of international relations closer to social history and oral history.

Consequently, the central question is as follows: how were UNOCI's neutrality and actions perceived by the people of Bouaké between 2004 and 2017, and how did these perceptions evolve during the various phases of the Ivorian crisis and the post-crisis period?

The hypothesis is that these perceptions were neither uniform nor constant. They evolved in line with the people's actual experiences and changes in the political, military and social context. There is therefore a discrepancy between the impartiality claimed by UNOCI and neutrality as it was perceived and interpreted locally.

The main objective is to analyse, from a historical perspective, how these perceptions evolved between 2004 and 2017. More specifically, the aim is to understand the perceptions associated with the mission's deployment, to identify the factors behind their transformation during the various phases

of the crisis, to examine the role of the issue of impartiality, and to analyse the legacy left by UNOCI's withdrawal.

To achieve this, the study cross-references Security Council resolutions, the Secretary-General's reports, UNOCI documents and press releases, the press and academic literature with oral testimonies gathered from people who lived in Bouaké for all or part of the period under study. These testimonies are regarded as historical sources providing access to the experiences, perceptions and memories of local actors. Comparing them with written sources makes it possible to distinguish between established facts, individual perceptions and perceptions constructed in hindsight.

The period 2004–2017 thus corresponds to the duration of UNOCI's presence, from the start of its operations until its final withdrawal on 30 June 2017. This period is divided into three phases: 2004–2007, marked by the mission's establishment and initial perceptions; 2007–2011, characterised by reunification, the electoral process and the post-electoral crisis; and 2011–2017, corresponding to the end of the crisis, stabilisation and the withdrawal of UNOCI.

The study is therefore organised into three parts: the first analyses the deployment of UNOCI and the formation of initial local perceptions in Bouaké (2004–2007); the second examines the evolution of these perceptions from reunification to the post-electoral crisis (2007–2011); finally, the third part examines how these perceptions were reshaped during the post-crisis period and up to the withdrawal of UNOCI (2011–2017).

1. The deployment of UNOCI and initial local perceptions in Bouaké (2004–2007)

1.1. Bouaké at the heart of the crisis and the international presence

The outbreak of the Ivorian political and military crisis in September 2002 profoundly transformed the city of Bouaké. Having become one of the main command centres of the Forces Nouvelles, the city found itself at the heart of the partition of Ivorian territory and of international crisis management mechanisms. The situation in Bouaké thus formed part of a dynamic of 'neither war nor peace'. This

situation characterised much of the period 2002–2010, marked by alternating episodes of violence, periods of calm and the persistence of high political and military tensions (McGOVERN, 2011: 19).

The establishment of UNOCI, through Security Council Resolution 1528 of 27 February 2004, marked a new stage in the internationalisation of the crisis. Established on 4 April 2004, the mission's mandate included, in particular, contributing to the observance of the ceasefire, the protection of the civilian population, disarmament, the promotion of human rights and support for the peace process. The city of Bouaké quickly came to play a significant role within this framework. The deployment of UNOCI in the north-central region helped to make the city a particularly visible focal point of the international presence.

However, this presence took place in an environment still heavily affected by insecurity. The Secretary-General's second report on UNOCI, published in August 2004¹, highlights several security and political challenges affecting the mission's operations. The presence of peacekeepers therefore does not mean the immediate disappearance of tensions. Rather, it introduces a new actor into an area already occupied by government forces, the Forces Nouvelles and various international actors.

However, these expectations had to contend with the practical limitations of UNOCI's operations. The mission had to act within the framework of its mandate, whilst also navigating the local balance of power. The population might therefore have expected the organisation to carry out more substantial interventions than it was actually capable of undertaking. This situation is important for understanding subsequent perceptions of its actions.

The events of October 2004² already illustrate the complexity of this relationship. On 11 October, the Secretary-General of the Forces Nouvelles sent a request to UNOCI for an investigation into events that had taken place in Bouaké³. At the same time, militant groups from the south threatened UNOCI and LICORNE if they did not ensure that disarmament took place. These events show that the mission

¹ UNITED NATIONS, 2004, Second report of the Secretary-General on the United Nations Operation in Côte d'Ivoire, S/2004/697, 27 August 2004.

² In Bouaké, the demonstrations of **11 October 2004** broke out against a backdrop of tensions surrounding disarmament. Demonstrators attacked UNOCI and Licorne forces, whilst **Guillaume Soro** called for an investigation into the events. Meanwhile, in the south, the **Jeunes Patriotes** exerted pressure and threatened UNOCI and Licorne to ensure that the disarmament process was set in motion. These events demonstrate that

UNOCI was rapidly becoming a **central and contested actor in the crisis**, subject to the conflicting expectations of the various factions

³ UNITED NATIONS, 2004, Letter dated 29 October 2004 from the Secretary-General to the President of the Security Council, S/2004/878, 1 November 2004.

was gradually being placed at the centre of the expectations and objections of the various actors involved in the crisis.

One local resident sums up the situation: “We heard all sorts of things about UNOCI. Some said it was there to protect everyone, but others thought it would eventually take sides. People no longer really knew who to trust.”

The issue of impartiality thus arose very early on. For UNOCI, impartiality is a fundamental principle underpinning its work. For the local population, however, it is assessed more on the basis of the mission’s observable behaviour. Neutrality can therefore be associated with an intervention deemed fair, but also with a lack of intervention perceived as powerlessness or as a form of complacency towards one of the parties involved.

The period 2004–2007 thus marked a phase in which the first local perceptions of UNOCI took shape. These perceptions were not uniform; they combined protection, hope, expectation, incomprehension and mistrust. The ‘Flame of Peace’ ceremony, held in Bouaké on 30 July 2007, subsequently helped to give the international presence a new impetus, one more focused on reunification, reconciliation and disarmament.

The establishment of UNOCI in Bouaké did not result in a single perception of the mission. Rather, it set in motion a process during which local communities gradually assessed the organisation on the basis of its interventions, its limitations and its relations with the various actors involved in the crisis.

1.2. The deployment of UNOCI and the formation of initial local perceptions

The deployment of UNOCI in Bouaké is not merely a matter of establishing a military presence. It also introduces an international actor into the daily lives of the local population. Through its patrols, security operations, public information campaigns and contacts with local stakeholders, the mission gradually becomes a recognisable presence in the city.

This local dimension is important for understanding the evolution of peace operations. UNOCI gradually developed forms of engagement with local communities and stakeholders, even though this focus was not explicitly included in the initial 2004 mandate (GILDER, 2020: 238). The mission’s early years were primarily focused on the ceasefire, disarmament, demobilisation, reintegration and the restoration of state authority. Subsequently, a more pronounced local engagement gradually developed (GILDER, 2020: 240–241).

In this context, security is one of the main expectations associated with the presence of the peacekeepers. After several years of conflict, some residents naturally hope that the arrival of an international force will help to stabilise the city. One resident said: ‘When we saw UNOCI vehicles driving around the city, it reassured us. We thought that if there was a problem, they would step in to prevent the situation from getting out of hand’.

However, the presence of an international force does not necessarily mean that all the population’s expectations can be met. UNOCI operates within the framework of a mandate defined by the Security Council. To do so, it must contend with the political and military realities on the ground. This discrepancy between local expectations and the mission’s institutional capabilities is a key factor in how its actions are perceived.

This observation is consistent with the observations made by (GILDER, 2020: 238) on the evolution of UNOCI. The author shows that, during the early years, local engagement appears sporadically in the mission’s documentation, before becoming more explicit in the period after 2010. In particular, he notes that, from 2006 onwards, UNOCI organised workshops, established sub - d offices, led peace caravans and held public meetings enabling communities to voice certain concerns.

Above all, this shift demonstrates that the relationship between UNOCI and the local population is not static. It evolves in line with the mission’s priorities. In the early years, the local population mainly encountered a force tasked with monitoring the ceasefire and supporting the disarmament process. Gradually, local interactions became more diverse.

Communication is also a key element of this relationship. In particular, UNOCI uses its radio station, UNOCI-FM, to broadcast information relating to the political process and the mission’s activities. The radio station has also established partnerships with local radio stations and helped to disseminate information regarding the electoral process (GILDER, 2020: 241).

This distinction is central to the study. UNOCI may present itself as an impartial force, but local populations assess this impartiality on the basis of concrete situations. An intervention deemed effective can strengthen trust. However, a failure to intervene may, on the contrary, give rise to misunderstanding or mistrust. The perception of neutrality is therefore shaped by the day-to-day experience of the international presence.

We must also take into account the diversity of local perceptions. The population is not a homogeneous group. The expectations of a shopkeeper, a traditional leader, a young person, a woman or a community leader may differ. This is precisely the value of the approach developed by SABROW (2017). It shows that the legitimacy of a peace operation can be understood through the perceptions of the communities it is implemented in.

Finally, the evolution of UNOCI's activities in Bouaké must be viewed within the context of the transformation of the peace process. The 'Flame of Peace' ceremony in July 2007 marked a new symbolic milestone. The ceremony was presented as a moment of reunification, reconciliation and the effective launch of the disarmament process. This change contributed to a gradual shift in the framework within which local communities interpreted UNOCI's presence.

Between 2004 and 2007, initial perceptions of UNOCI were therefore shaped by a variety of experiences. These included the search for protection, expectations regarding security, the flow of information, a lack of understanding of the mandate, and observations of the mission's interventions. The relationship between the international organisation and the local population thus developed gradually. This dynamic became more complex during the period 2007–2011, when UNOCI became more deeply involved in the electoral process and found itself at the centre of controversies linked to the post-electoral crisis.

1.3. Initial local perceptions: between protection, hope, misunderstanding and mistrust

UNOCI's arrival in Bouaké took place in a society deeply scarred by several years of conflict, insecurity and territorial division. The city remained in a state of 'neither war nor peace', characterised by alternating periods of calm and episodes of tension or violence (McGOVERN, 2011: 16). In this context, the deployment of an international force naturally raised significant expectations amongst the local population.

However, the high expectations placed on UNOCI could also lead to misunderstandings. Local communities might have attributed to the mission a greater capacity for intervention than its mandate actually permitted. This difficulty is significant when analysing UNOCI's actions, as its mandate evolved over the course of the crisis. These activities also gradually moved beyond the mere monitoring of the ceasefire

to incorporate aspects of disarmament, reconciliation and local engagement (GILDER, 2020: 226–230).

This situation also helps to explain why perceptions of UNOCI could not be uniform. The mission could be regarded as useful whilst at the same time being the subject of criticism. UNOCI played an important role in the Ivorian crisis, whilst leaving questions unresolved regarding its actions and the achievements of the peace process (RICARD, 2016: 115). The international presence thus appears to be a necessity in the eyes of certain actors, without, however, being free from controversy.

From this perspective, the issue of impartiality is a central concern. UNOCI institutionally affirms its impartiality, but this must be distinguished from how it is perceived locally. For local populations, impartiality is not merely a principle set out in texts. It is assessed on the basis of the mission's observable behaviour and its responses to events.

This distinction ties in with research on local perceptions of peace operations. Sophia Sabrow demonstrates that the legitimacy of an international operation depends, in particular, on how local populations assess external actors and their actions within the context of the conflict (SABROW, 2017). Legitimacy is therefore not solely derived from the international mandate; it is also built through interaction with the local population.

The flow of information also plays a role in shaping these perceptions. In a crisis situation, official information is supplemented by discussions in neighbourhoods, markets, places of worship and family networks. United Nations reports⁴ show that, as early as 2004, rumours regarding the attitude of the impartial forces and the issue of disarmament were already circulating in Bouaké. These rumours contribute to creating an environment in which UNOCI's intentions are sometimes interpreted on the basis of incomplete or contradictory information.

At the same time, UNOCI has sought to develop channels of communication with the local population. In particular, UNOCI-FM radio serves as an important tool for providing information on the peace process and the mission's activities. Communication and local engagement activities are gradually taking on a more prominent role in the functioning of UNOCI (GILDER, 2020: 232–235). This development reflects a growing desire to bring the mission closer to local realities.

⁴ UNITED NATIONS, 2004, Op. cit.

This development is also evident in dialogue and reconciliation activities. UNOCI participates in various initiatives designed to bring communities closer together and foster dialogue between local stakeholders. These initiatives are gradually helping to transform perceptions of the mission. It is no longer associated solely with patrols and security, but also with the pursuit of social cohesion.

The 'Flame of Peace' event, held in Bouaké on 30 July 2007, was a particularly symbolic moment in this regard. The ceremony marked a new stage in the process of reunification, disarmament and reconciliation. UNOCI is helping to support the process and is contributing to the security of the event.

UNOCI's initial perceptions in Bouaké therefore appear to be multifaceted and evolving. They are based on several dimensions. These include the search for protection, the hope of returning to a normal life, expectations that are at times excessive, a lack of understanding of the mandate, the circulation of rumours, and a concrete assessment of the mission's impartiality. They cannot, therefore, be reduced to a simple dichotomy between a population favourable to UNOCI and one hostile to it.

Between 2004 and 2007, UNOCI gradually emerged as an actor that was simultaneously anticipated, observed and judged by the local populations. This relationship underwent a major transformation during the period 2007–2011, when the reunification process, the 2010 elections and, above all, the post-election crisis placed the issue of UNOCI's impartiality at the centre of the controversy.

2. From supporting the peace process to a crisis of legitimacy (2007–2011)

2.1. Developments in the political and security context following the 'Flame of Peace' (2007–2010)

The 'Flame of Peace' ceremony, held in Bouaké on 30 July 2007, marked a symbolic turning point in the evolution of the Ivorian crisis. It followed on from the Ouagadougou Political Agreement of 4 March 2007 and signalled the key players' determination to move beyond the country's division. The Ivorian authorities presented the ceremony as a symbol of reunification, reconciliation and the effective start of the

disarmament process.⁵ UNOCI took part in the event and affirmed its readiness to continue supporting the peace process.

For Bouaké, this development was of particular significance. The city, long regarded as the main stronghold of the Forces Nouvelles, now became one of the symbolic sites of the rapprochement between the former adversaries. The presence of President Laurent Gbagbo in Bouaké, alongside Prime Minister Guillaume Soro, was a highly significant gesture in this regard. The symbolic crossing of the former ceasefire line and the public destruction of weapons lend the ceremony great political significance. The report by the African Union Commission of Inquiry also emphasises that the ceremony symbolises the reunification of the country and the restoration of free movement throughout the territory.⁶

This shift in the political context inevitably alters the conditions under which the population assesses UNOCI. During the early years, the mission was primarily associated with monitoring the ceasefire and securing a divided territory. From 2007 onwards, its role became more firmly rooted in the process of reunification, disarmament and preparations for elections. UNOCI's activities gradually evolved beyond a purely military focus, with an increase in initiatives involving local engagement, communication and support for the peace process (GILDER, 2020: 226–230).

This development may bring about a change in local perceptions. A resident of Bouaké might, for example, say: 'Before the Flame of Peace, we mainly saw UN soldiers as people who were monitoring the situation. After 2007, we began to see them more as peacekeepers.' This comment illustrates the hypothesis of a gradual transformation in the mission's image.

UNOCI's activities are therefore part of a process of transforming its relations with the local population. The mission is developing various means of providing information and raising awareness, and is gradually seeking to strengthen its local presence. We then witnessed the development of dialogue initiatives, public meetings and mechanisms enabling communities to voice their concerns (GILDER, 2020: 232–235). This development can be interpreted as an

⁵ REPUBLIC OF CÔTE D'IVOIRE, 2007, 'Peace Flame Ceremony', Press release of 24 July 2007, Permanent Mission of Côte d'Ivoire to the United Nations, New York. Available at

https://onu.diplomatie.gouv.ci/communiqu.php?lang=en&num=6&p=12&type&utm_source=chatgpt.com

⁶ AFRICAN UNION, International Commission of Inquiry into the events in Côte d'Ivoire since 19 September 2002, Report, § 10.

attempt to bring international action more into line with the expectations of the local population.

In Bouaké, this presence can also take symbolic forms. In June 2007, even before the 'Flame of Peace', UNOCI notably supported the organisation of a football match between Côte d'Ivoire and Madagascar in Bouaké. This event was presented by the mission as a contribution to the process of resolving the crisis.⁷ These initiatives show that UNOCI's activities are gradually moving beyond the military sphere. It is also seeking to contribute to the reconstruction of a shared social space.

However, this positive development remains fragile. The period 2007–2010 was marked by delays in organising the elections and by persistent difficulties relating to population identification, disarmament and the effective reunification of the administration. UNOCI therefore continues to face significant expectations. Its role in preparing for the elections is gradually helping to shift perceptions of the mission towards the political sphere.

This shift helps to explain the controversies that emerged in 2010–2011. The more UNOCI becomes involved in electoral processes and in the certification of the vote, the more likely it is to be viewed not only as a peacekeeping force but also as a political actor. The certification of the 2010 presidential election and the post-election violence placed UNOCI in a particularly delicate position, at the centre of disputes over the election results (BEKOE, 2018).

Perceptions of the mission thus began to shift. The issue was no longer simply whether UNOCI was protecting the population or facilitating disarmament. It also became a question of whether it was acting impartially in a highly polarised electoral context. This transformation paved the way for a shift in perceptions of UNOCI during the post-election crisis.

Overall, the period 2007–2010 constituted a transitional phase in local perceptions of UNOCI. The reduction in military confrontation and the symbols of reunification may have fostered a more positive perception of the mission. However, the continuing difficulties in the peace process and UNOCI's growing involvement in the electoral process contributed to the emergence of new questions regarding its impartiality. The

post-electoral crisis of 2010–2011 would give these questions a much greater significance.

2.2. From reunification to the post-election crisis: UNOCI at the centre of conflicting perceptions (2010–2011)

The period beginning with the 2010 electoral process marked a major turning point in the perception of UNOCI in Bouaké. After several years spent supporting the post-crisis recovery process, the United Nations found itself directly involved in certifying the presidential election. This development came at a time when the elections were seen as the expected culmination of the peace process. UNOCI had gradually increased its involvement in electoral matters, to the point where the certification of the electoral process had become a central element of its work in the run-up to the post-electoral crisis (GILDER, 2020: 242).

In Bouaké, this new direction was viewed favourably by some sections of the population, who associated UNOCI with the search for a definitive resolution to the crisis. The people of , having experienced several years of an international presence, now regarded the organisation as an actor capable of contributing to political stability. The civic and electoral education initiatives carried out by UNOCI were specifically designed to fulfil this aim of bringing the mission closer to the local population and promoting peaceful electoral behaviour. These activities were intended to reduce fears associated with the elections, improve the population's political awareness and minimise the risk of electoral violence. When the mission was perceived as impartial, these initiatives could indeed help to reduce violent behaviour (SMIDT, 2020a: 199–200).

However, this positive perception was soon to be challenged by the controversies arising from the announcement of the results of the November 2010 presidential election. On 3 December 2010, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General, Y. J. Choi, certified Alassane Ouattara's victory, whilst the Ivorian Constitutional Council declared Laurent Gbagbo the winner.⁸ This stance placed UNOCI at the centre of the political confrontation and gradually altered perceptions of its impartiality. Far from enabling a peaceful resolution of the crisis on its own, UNOCI's certification of the elections took place against a backdrop of deep political and institutional divisions (BEKOE, 2018: 147).

⁷ UNOCI, 2007, 'Côte d'Ivoire: UNOCI, UNDP and Didier Drogba raise awareness of peace', 6 June 2007. Available at https://onuci.unmissions.org/fr/news/cote-divoire-lonuci-le-pnud-et-didier-drogba-sensibilisent-la-paix?utm_source=chatgpt.com

⁸ UNOCI, 2010, 'UNOCI Chief Certifies the Victory of Candidate Alassane Ouattara', report on the press briefing by the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for Côte d'Ivoire, Abidjan, 3 December 2010.

From that point onwards, the question of UNOCI's neutrality took on a new dimension. For some sections of the population in Bouaké who supported Laurent Gbagbo, the certification of Alassane Ouattara's victory was interpreted as proof that the international organisation had abandoned its position of impartiality. This perception therefore no longer concerned merely the mission's day-to-day actions, but now directly affected its political legitimacy.

The post-election crisis of 2010–2011 thus highlighted the disconnect between institutionally proclaimed impartiality and locally perceived neutrality. UNOCI officially continued to present itself as a force tasked with protecting the population and contributing to the peaceful resolution of the crisis. Security Council Resolution 1975, adopted on 30 March 2011, notably reaffirmed its mandate to protect civilians and authorised it to prevent the use of heavy weapons against the population.⁹ However, this intervention gave rise to differing perceptions. Whilst some residents saw it as UNOCI becoming involved in the conflict, others, on the contrary, regarded it as a life-saving intervention, particularly because of its role in protecting the civilian population and bringing an end to the violence.

This contradiction is key to understanding the evolution of perceptions in Bouaké. UNOCI could continue to define itself legally as an impartial mission whilst being perceived, by certain groups, as a committed political or military actor. The situation is all the more significant given that Bouaké remained, during this period, a particularly sensitive area. As the former capital of the rebellion and the historic headquarters of the Forces Nouvelles, the city was directly affected by shifts in the national balance of power. Perceptions of UNOCI there were therefore likely to be strongly influenced by the political and military trajectories of the crisis. The local history of the mission cannot, therefore, be separated from the national history of the Ivorian crisis.

Between 2010 and 2011, in local perceptions, UNOCI gradually shifted from being an international actor tasked with facilitating a resolution to the crisis to one directly associated with the Ivorian political contest. This transformation was neither uniform nor definitive. It depended on political affiliations, individual experiences of the crisis and the way in which the population interpreted the mission's actions. The

post-election crisis therefore represents a pivotal moment in the shaping of the local memory of UNOCI in Bouaké.

2.3. The post-election crisis and the questioning of UNOCI's neutrality in Bouaké (2010–2011)

The post-election crisis of 2010–2011 marked a turning point in relations between UNOCI and sections of the population in Bouaké. Until then, the mission had been seen as protecting the population, supporting the peace process and promoting reconciliation initiatives. However, the certification of the results of the 2010 presidential election changed this perception. UNOCI was no longer merely in the position of supporting the political process. It gradually became a key player directly involved in crisis management.

In Bouaké, this shift was particularly evident in early 2011. The city remained a place deeply scarred by years of conflict and by the presence of the Forces Nouvelles. The local population therefore had their own experiences of the crisis and their own expectations of UNOCI. However, as post-election violence escalated in several regions of the country, some local actors began to criticise the mission for its lack of intervention. On 7 March 2011, more than fifty civil society leaders from Bouaké met with local UNOCI officials to discuss the mission's mandate and its role in the face of the violence. Some women from civil society even threatened to stage a sit-in outside the mission's premises¹⁰.

This is historically significant, as it reveals a contradiction between UNOCI's institutional impartiality and the concrete expectations of the local population. For mission officials, remaining impartial meant not supporting one candidate over another and acting in accordance with the mandate entrusted to them by the Security Council. For some residents, however, impartiality should have translated into visible intervention against the violence they were suffering. The disagreement therefore centred not only on UNOCI's political stance, but also on the practical definition of what a peacekeeping mission should entail.

This tension is clearly evident in the explanations given by UNOCI's Head of Political Affairs in Bouaké, Axel Queval,

⁹ UN SECURITY COUNCIL, 2011, Resolution 1975 (2011), S/RES/1975, 30 March 2011.

¹⁰ UNOCI, 'Civil society in Bouaké concerned about recent post-election violence', *Press review of Wednesday 9 March 2011*, citing *Le Mandat*, 9 March 2011.

during the meeting on 7 March 2011¹¹. He emphasised that the mission remains impartial and does not support any candidate. He does, however, acknowledge concerns regarding violence, insecurity, robberies and difficulties with water and electricity supplies in the Centre-North-West region.

The controversy intensified further when UNOCI assumed responsibility for helping to safeguard the election result recognised by international bodies. In a statement dated 11 March 2011, Special Representative Y. J. Choi listed the protection of civilians, the protection of the Hôtel du Golf and the safeguarding of the presidential election result as three of the mission's key tasks. At the same time, he reaffirmed UNOCI's military impartiality and rejected accusations that the mission was transporting or arming members of the Forces Nouvelles.

This dual stance – defending impartiality whilst safeguarding the election result recognised by the international community – nevertheless contributes to complicating the local perception of the mission. For those in favour of Alassane Ouattara, UNOCI might have appeared as an international safeguard against violence. For supporters of Laurent Gbagbo, on the other hand, it might have been seen as having taken sides. UNOCI thus finds itself faced with a paradox. Its actions could be in line with its mandate whilst being interpreted locally as taking a political stance.

The polarisation of perceptions is also fuelled by the circulation of contradictory information. During the post-election crisis, authorities and media outlets aligned with the Gbagbo camp accused UNOCI of supporting Alassane Ouattara, fuelling suspicions about its impartiality. At the same time, ONUCI-FM was subject to interference and jamming, becoming itself a focal point of the media confrontation¹².

This battle over information is particularly revealing from a social history perspective. It shows that people's perceptions are not solely shaped by their direct experience of the peacekeepers' presence. They are also shaped by political discourse, the media, rumours and everyday conversations. UNOCI's 'neutrality' thus becomes a concept that is debated, interpreted and sometimes challenged by local actors.

The demonstration organised in Bouaké on 23 March 2011 against UNOCI's 'passivity' is, in this respect, a particularly

telling indicator. It shows that opposition to the mission is not solely a construct of political leaders; it can also take on a public and local form.

The post-election crisis of 2010–2011 represented less a complete break than a moment of realignment in the relationship between UNOCI and the people of Bouaké. The mission maintained its discourse of impartiality, but this was now confronted with contradictory local experiences. Perceptions of UNOCI thus became a subject of social and political debate. This development marked the beginning of a new phase in its history in Bouaké: the post-crisis period, during which the mission sought to rebuild its local legitimacy through reconciliation, social cohesion and support for reconstruction.

3. From the reorganisation of the mission to the construction of a local memory (2011–2017)

3.1. From the end of the crisis to reconstruction: a new relationship between UNOCI and the people of Bouaké (2011–2014)

The end of the 2010–2011 post-electoral crisis marked the beginning of a new phase in the history of UNOCI in Bouaké. The mission had previously been primarily involved in the peace process, disarmament and the management of politico-military tensions. Its activities now tend to focus more on peace-building and fostering closer ties with the local population. This shift took place against a national backdrop characterised by a determination to restore state authority, re-establish public institutions and promote national reconciliation. The resolution of the Ivorian crisis did not result from a peace agreement negotiated between the main protagonists, but from the military victory of Alassane Ouattara's camp in 2011. This situation weighs heavily on the conditions for the country's political and social reconstruction (PICCOLINO, 2018: 485).

In Bouaké, this new situation is gradually transforming UNOCI's presence. The city is no longer regarded merely as a former centre of the rebellion or as a strategic location in the Ivorian crisis. It is also becoming a focus for intervention in the areas of reconciliation, social cohesion, human rights, justice and public awareness-raising. This development corresponds to what Alexander Gilder describes as a 'local turn' in UNOCI's work: the mission is gradually placing

¹¹ UNOCI, 'Civil society in Bouaké concerned about recent post-election violence', *Press review of Wednesday 9 March 2011*, citing *Le Mandat*, 9 March 2011.

¹² UNOCI, "International press review for Friday 11 February 2011", UNOCI, 11 February 2011; National Human Rights Council of Côte d'Ivoire (CNDH-CI), 2011 Annual Report, section "Broadcast media, UNOCI-FM radio".

greater emphasis on local actors, communities and local-level peace initiatives (GILDER, 2020: 232).

This shift became apparent as early as 2012. In Bouaké, for instance, UNOCI organised awareness-raising activities aimed at the general public and young people. In June 2012, a session organised with secondary school pupils focused on non-violence, human rights and social cohesion.¹³ A few weeks later, as part of the 'ONUCI Tour', the mission visited several towns in the Bouaké department, including Douakankro, to promote dialogue, tolerance and forgiveness.¹⁴

These initiatives reflect a shift in the way UNOCI seeks to build its relationship with local communities. It is no longer simply a matter of ensuring security through a military presence, but also of fostering local ownership of peace mechanisms. This shift is accompanied by an expansion of community outreach activities, community meetings and measures designed to strengthen the participation of local stakeholders (GILDER, 2020: 239).

However, this new relationship does not automatically mean the disappearance of the mistrust inherited from the post-election crisis. The people of Bouaké continue to face security issues, the presence of former combatants and difficulties linked to social reintegration. Rebuilding trust therefore appears to be a gradual process. UNOCI's initiatives may be viewed favourably by some groups whilst giving rise to reservations amongst others.

This ambivalence is crucial. The perception of UNOCI no longer depends solely on its ability to intervene in military crises, but also on its ability to meet the social expectations of local populations. The impact of the UN's peace-building activities depends, in particular, on the mission being perceived as an impartial actor. When this impartiality is recognised, education and awareness-raising activities can help to reduce fears and violent behaviour (SMIDT, 2020a: 199).

The period 2011–2014 thus appears to have been a phase of rebuilding UNOCI's local legitimacy. This rebuilding relied less on military presence alone than on increased engagement with local communities and support for institutions and communities. It paved the way for the final phase of the UN's presence in Bouaké. This phase was marked by the gradual reduction of the mission's operations, followed by the

announcement and implementation of the mission's final withdrawal in 2017.

3.2. UNOCI in everyday life: security, social cohesion and changing perceptions amongst the people of Bouaké (2014–2016)

Following the post-election crisis of 2010–2011, UNOCI's presence in Bouaké took place against a backdrop of gradually stabilising political and security conditions. During the early years of the crisis, UNOCI was primarily associated with security, monitoring the ceasefire and managing political and military tensions. After 2011, its activities increasingly became part of the daily lives of communities. The mission is increasing its engagement with local populations, civil society organisations, young people and community leaders. This approach reflects the development of a genuine 'local turn' in peace operations, based on greater involvement of local actors in reconciliation processes (GILDER, 2020: 233).

In Bouaké, this grassroots presence has thus helped to gradually change the image of UNOCI. The mission is no longer perceived solely through its vehicles, patrols or military installations. It is also involved in activities aimed at raising awareness, fostering dialogue and promoting social cohesion. From 2012 onwards and in the years that followed, community engagement activities expanded, notably through community meetings and initiatives designed to strengthen dialogue between local populations. This shift helps to illustrate how an international organisation can gradually become embedded within local social spheres (GILDER, 2020: 239).

However, one should not conclude from this that the negative perceptions inherited from the crisis have completely disappeared. Political and military stabilisation is not enough to erase the experiences accumulated since 2004. Local communities continue to judge UNOCI on the basis of their lived experience of the crisis, their expectations regarding security and their own assessment of the political situation. Views on the mission therefore remain divided.

This diversity must nevertheless be viewed within the broader context of Ivorian reconstruction. Since 2011, peace-building initiatives have sought, in particular, to operate at the local level. However, 'bottom-up' peace-building cannot be completely dissociated from national power relations. Local actors remain tied to broader political dynamics and the

¹³ UNOCI, 'UNOCI teaches high school pupils in Bouaké the basics of non-violence', *UNOCI News*, 18 June 2012.

¹⁴ UNOCI, 'UNOCI raises awareness of peace and social cohesion amongst the populations of Lataha, Solonadioula, Douakankro and Flatiédougou', 30 July 2012.

choices made by the national authorities (PICCOLINO, 2018: 488). This observation calls for a more nuanced view of the idea that the increase in UNOCI's local activities would necessarily have produced a positive and uniform perception of the mission.

In Bouaké, the expectations of the local population remain high. The end of the fighting does not mean the immediate disappearance of problems relating to insecurity, the disarmament of former combatants, social reintegration and the rebuilding of institutions. Under these circumstances, the presence of UNOCI can give rise to expectations that sometimes exceed the actual limits of its mandate.

The disconnect between the mandate and local expectations is a key aspect of the history of perceptions of UNOCI. The organisation may have regarded its mission as supporting peace-building, whilst some residents expected it to play a much more direct role in resolving day-to-day difficulties. Perceptions of its effectiveness therefore depended less on its legal mandate than on how this was translated in practice into the lives of the local population. UNOCI's local engagement is being strengthened precisely with this in mind. Dialogue initiatives, community meetings and conflict early warning or prevention mechanisms demonstrate a commitment to taking more action at the community level.

However, UNOCI's visibility should not be confused with widespread support for its work. Some residents may appreciate the awareness-raising activities whilst feeling that the mission has not done enough to resolve security issues. Others may retain a favourable view because of the protection provided during the years of crisis. Still others may remain marked by the controversies of 2010–2011.

Perceptions of UNOCI in Bouaké thus appear to be a cumulative memory. Each phase of the crisis leaves its mark, influencing the way in which the population interprets the mission's subsequent actions. Trust built up during certain periods may be undermined by a political or military event, whilst a local initiative may help to gradually restore a more favourable image.

This accumulation of experiences helps to explain why the relationship between UNOCI and the local population cannot be reduced to a simple dichotomy between 'trust' and 'distrust'. Perceptions are varied, evolving and linked to individuals' social experiences. They also depend on their political stance, neighbourhood, occupation, age and personal experience of the crisis.

As the mission's withdrawal approaches, this diversity of perceptions becomes particularly interesting. Indeed, UNOCI is no longer merely an international force present in the country. After more than a decade of presence, it has become part of Bouaké's recent history. Its departure can therefore be interpreted differently depending on the experiences accumulated by the local population.

The announced withdrawal also appears to be an indicator of the gradual normalisation of the situation in Côte d'Ivoire. UNOCI officially concludes its mandate on 30 June 2017, having supported the country for thirteen years. The United Nations presented this closure as the culmination of the process that began following the end of the crisis, whilst emphasising the need to safeguard the gains made in terms of peace, security, disarmament and security sector reform.

The period 2014–2016 therefore represents a significant milestone in the history of local perceptions of UNOCI. It demonstrates that the legitimacy of a peacekeeping operation does not depend solely on its military or diplomatic results. It is also built through daily interactions with the local population, through community outreach and through the mission's ability to meet, at least in part, local expectations. The withdrawal of UNOCI in 2017 will ultimately provide an opportunity to assess how these thirteen years of presence have been remembered by the people of Bouaké.

3.3. The withdrawal of UNOCI in 2017: between assessment, relief and local memory

The withdrawal of UNOCI marks the culmination of thirteen years of United Nations presence in Côte d'Ivoire. Following the crisis that began in 2002, the mission officially concluded its mandate on 30 June 2017. The Security Council considered at the time that Côte d'Ivoire had made significant progress in consolidating peace and stability. It also highlighted UNOCI's contribution to the peace process during its thirteen years of existence.

However, this decision is not merely administrative. It represents an important moment for understanding how the people of Bouaké retrospectively assess UNOCI's presence. After more than a decade, the mission has now become part of the city's recent history. Its departure can therefore be seen as an indicator of how the local population has gradually interpreted its role, its successes, but also its limitations.

The decision to end the mission had been taken by the Security Council in April 2016. Resolution 2284 provides for a phased reduction of the civilian, military and police components and sets 30 June 2017 as the definitive end of the mandate.

Between May and June 2017, the mission was essentially due to complete its withdrawal and transfer certain residual functions to the Ivorian government and the United Nations country team.

In Bouaké, this prospect of departure is interpreted in different ways. For some members of the population, the closure of UNOCI was first and foremost a tangible sign that the period of war and crisis was now a thing of the past. The departure of the peacekeepers is thus associated with the restoration of national sovereignty and a gradual return to a situation considered normal.

This positive interpretation of the withdrawal corresponds in part to the official narrative put forward at the time of the closure. UNOCI itself presents its departure as the result of the progress made by Côte d'Ivoire in terms of peace and stability. In particular, the mission emphasises the determination of the Ivorian authorities and people to turn the page on the crisis and to pursue national reconciliation and social cohesion.

However, this interpretation cannot be regarded as unanimous. The withdrawal of UNOCI also raises questions about the capacity of national institutions to sustain the gains made towards peace. After thirteen years of an international presence, some sections of the population still associated security with the presence of international forces. The disappearance of UNOCI patrols and facilities could therefore be perceived as the loss of a protective mechanism.

This ambivalence allows for a more nuanced assessment of UNOCI's record. The mission is widely regarded as a successful peacekeeping operation, particularly due to the political and security stabilisation achieved prior to its withdrawal. Several challenges remained at the time of the mission's closure, particularly in the areas of security sector reform, civil rights and social cohesion. (CAPLAN, 2024: 111)

This observation is of significant importance for the history of local perceptions. It shows that the assessment of UNOCI cannot be based solely on the date of its departure. A mission may be considered a success overall whilst leaving behind unmet expectations and unresolved problems. Local populations may thus view the mission favourably on some points and critically on others.

The history of UNOCI in Bouaké thus appears as a history of shifting perceptions. It is not a static relationship between an international organisation and a local population, but one that evolves in response to events. The same local populations may have viewed UNOCI as a protective force in 2004, as an

organisation whose neutrality was contested in 2010–2011, and then as a partner in reconciliation after 2011.

This evolution confirms the value of a historical approach grounded in temporality. Local perceptions cannot be understood in isolation from the events that give rise to them. They are shaped by experiences of war, political changes, UNOCI's actions, media narratives and daily interactions between local communities and mission representatives.

The case of Bouaké also highlights the limitations of a strictly institutional interpretation of peacekeeping. Security Council resolutions define UNOCI's mandate, whilst the mission regularly affirms its impartiality. However, what is also important for social history is understanding how these principles are received and interpreted by local communities. The organisation's 'impartiality' thus belongs to the realm of institutional discourse; 'neutrality', in the local context, becomes a category of perception, evaluation and, at times, contestation.

At the end of this process, the withdrawal of UNOCI can therefore be seen as a moment of reconfiguration of the local memory of the Ivorian crisis. The mission ceases to exist as an institutional actor, but its presence remains etched in the memories of local residents, particularly through the events of the crisis, patrols, humanitarian and social initiatives, awareness-raising activities, ONUCI-FM radio, electoral controversies and reconciliation initiatives.

The 2017 withdrawal therefore does not signify the disappearance of UNOCI from the collective memory. Rather, it marks the transition from an international presence that was actively experienced to one that is gradually being remembered. This transformation paves the way for a historical assessment of thirteen years of international intervention in Bouaké.

General conclusion

The study of local perceptions of UNOCI in Bouaké between 2004 and 2017 shows that its presence cannot be understood solely in terms of its institutional mandate. It must also be understood through the experiences, expectations and interpretations of the people who lived through the various phases of the Ivorian crisis on a day-to-day basis.

The analysis reveals how these perceptions have evolved. Between 2004 and 2007, UNOCI was primarily associated with security, protection and the hope of a resolution to the crisis. Between 2007 and 2011, reunification and the electoral process boosted its visibility, whilst the post-electoral crisis sparked deep controversy over its impartiality. After 2011, the

mission shifted its focus further towards reconciliation, social cohesion and local initiatives. Its withdrawal in 2017 thus took place against a backdrop where its image had become more diverse.

The initial hypothesis is therefore confirmed. Perceptions of UNOCI in Bouaké were neither uniform nor consistent. They evolved in line with the political, military and social transformations of the crisis, but also with the people's actual experiences. The study also highlights a discrepancy between institutionally proclaimed impartiality and locally perceived neutrality. A mission could consider itself impartial whilst being perceived as biased by certain groups, particularly during the post-election crisis.

The case of Bouaké thus demonstrates the value of a 'bottom-up' historical approach to international peacekeeping operations. Local populations are not merely the recipients of international action. They interpret it, evaluate it and construct their own representations based on their lived experiences, political discourse, the media and everyday interactions.

Finally, the withdrawal of UNOCI in 2017 does not mean the end of this experience. After thirteen years of presence, the mission remains part of Bouaké's recent memory through recollections linked to the crisis, security, peace-building activities, political controversies and community outreach.

Overall, the history of UNOCI in Bouaké is one of an evolving relationship between an international intervention and a local society. Successively perceived as a protective force, a symbol of hope, a controversial actor and then a partner in peace-building, UNOCI illustrates the complexity of the relationship between international peacekeeping and local perceptions in a society emerging from crisis.

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