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Prof Lindy Heinecken, Associate Professor in Sociology (Military Sociology), University of Stellenbosch, is presenting the pre-conference workshop at Land Forces Africa on 28 May on "Military leadership and training for a collaborative SADC landward force". Here is a sneak preview in our exclusive interview with Prof Heinecken.

1) The pre-conference workshop on “Military leadership and training for a collaborative SADC landward force”, who is this course aimed at?

This course is aimed not only at military personnel, but all those involved in supporting land forces in their deployments. Why is this so? Today, land forces deploy with many other “forces” involved in either peacekeeping or post-conflict reconstruction and development (PCRD). Most operations today are what we call JIM- joint, international, inter-agency operations and this requires that all actors understand the modus operandi of the different organisations, how they function, their leadership styles, purpose and so forth. This is particularly important for the military, as often they are not the lead organization in planning and executing in PCRD missions and when they are asked to take the lead, need to be know and understand how to manage diverse groups.

2) What specific challenges do the landward forces in Africa face within the next 20-30 years?

The first thing to recognize is that the type of military operations that the landward forces are involved in are not conventional in nature, but irregular wars where they are countering rebel groups who have unclear and divergent political agendas. Often it is not clear whether the motive for conflicts is rooted in deep-seated grievances, the desire for power, or whether it is purely greed. The second, is that these rebel groups typically use guerrilla tactics such as hit and run to deal stunning blows on their opponents, coupled with civil disobedience, social, cultural and economic strategies, as well as disinformation to attack opponents and maximise their political influence. This implies that future landward forces must develop the capacity to deal with these “warfare” tactics. They need to be far more agile, decentralized, flexible and innovative to deal with these types of attacks. The third important aspect is that future deployments will take place in states where even if there is peace, it is a fragile peace because of the lack of state capacity. Peacekeepers will remain the primary instruments to provide security, to demilitarize these societies and to democratize them. The first and primary function of armed forces/peacekeeping forces is to ensure that there is a secure environment. From here good governance, the establishment of the rule of law and the development/provision of services follows.

3) What specific soldier skills are needed and necessary in these envisaged combat and peacekeeping scenarios?

Soldiers train for war and the down train for secondary functions. Feedback from military personnel indicated that more intensive training is necessary to prepare for and deal with unusual hostile situations and for better intelligence. Today, it is not sufficient to merely train military personnel; they also need to be educated. A solid understanding of the legal, political, social and economic terrain is essential, or what has been referred to as the human terrain. This is necessary to enable soldiers to think and act from a "local" perspective. They need to understand the culture, traditions, practices, power structures of the host country they are trying to assist and not to be seen as an intervening force, pushing an agenda down on the population.

4) How difficult is it to maintain standards of military training and appropriate skills development throughout a soldier's service?

The military is structured in such a way that before there can be a progression, members have to attend certain courses. Being in the military involves life-long learning and for the most part, military members are always in a state of training. The challenge is to keep these courses relevant and in line with changes in the security environment. Given the increasing complexity of warfare today, instilling all the skills they may possibly require would be an impossible task. For this reason, most approach military training by instilling generic skills and then topping this up with mission-specific training. This, however, is often inadequate to prepare members for all the actualities on the ground – (1) due to the time available (2) cost of training. Training costs money and this often the first place where cuts are made.

5) What about the requirements of progressing through the ranks?

In the military, each rank level is associated with meeting certain course requirements. What has happened in the South African case, is that many members have been fast tracked through the different military courses, implying that they may be course qualified, but lack the required length of time in the posts. Hence, they lack the experience and time in the rank and this has a marked effect on leadership competence. The military is often guilty (mainly due to political imperatives) of creating a culture of "mediocrity", instead of "meritocracy" – promoting the best suitable person for the job. This has a very negative impact on the development of excellence, morale and the motivation of people.

6) How important is modernizing military skills in conjunction with technology developments?

Depends what is meant by modernization? The wars in Africa do not require highly sophisticated technology. What they require is highly sophisticated intelligence. Rebel forces have gained control against technically advanced modern armed forces using light lethal weapons and transport suited to the terrain (and this could be donkeys)- not tanks. I would say that in Africa, it is far more important to be equipped with the necessary "knowledge" of the terrain, than with sophisticated weapons that cannot be used effectively in counter-insurgency type operations.

7) What is necessary to prepare a consolidated force for the full spectrum of combat situations?

First it is necessary to define what is meant by a consolidated force (is this a cohesive force) and then, what the spectrum of combat situations entail. To build a consolidated cohesive force there needs to be a "military culture" binding all members. This implies that there must be both task cohesion (shared experience and training) and social cohesion (bound together as a team) and a value system that is shared by all concerned. Underlying this is a system of rules and regulations, respected and abided to by all. A lack of discipline and a dysfunctional chain of command is the quickest way to break down cohesion. In order to prepare for a full spectrum of combat situations means to first train for war and then down train from there.

8) How important is leadership development in the army in order to mould a collaborative SADC landward force?

There is a saying that it is better for a lion to lead a herd of sheep than for a sheep to lead a herd of lions. Good leadership can make or break an organization. Leaders who are respected, friendly, fair and firm – even the worst rabble can be turned into good soldiers. Leaders who lack self-discipline, violate the rules, are indecisive, favour some above others are doomed to lose the support and plummet the military into chaos. The following quote by Sun Tzu "When the General is morally weak and his discipline not strict,

when his instructions and guidance are not enlightened, where there are no consistent rules to guide the officers and men and when the formations are slovenly, the Army is in disorder and self-induced chaos” – answers this question most succinctly.

9) What will be your main message to the Land Forces Africa delegates?

Understand that the conflicts in Africa are rooted in the failure of statehood on three levels – the inability to provide security to citizens at all levels; to provide good governance and respect for the rule of law and to deliver public goods to citizens. These basic public functions of states are lacking in Africa and have to be rebuilt. Security precedes good governance and delivery of public goods. In rebuilding failed states, the military should focus on what it is good at and not in trying to perform a broad range of development and reconstruction functions that stretch it too thin and for which it does not have the resources.