

The Role of Civil Society in Civilian Protection

Policy evidence submitted to the FCDO and Civil Societies inquiry, 29 April 2024

Submitted by:

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Preamble

We recognise the concerns of this enquiry that more people are under threat now, including threats of political and communal violence, arbitrary arrest, and sexually-based attacks. We share the view that civil society development and support is key to addressing these threats and that there are many ways in which the FCDO, UK diplomats, and ODA funding can be employed to explicitly support civil society to develop and implement community protection by using Unarmed Civilian Protection, which has been proven to work across the world.

We are expressly addressing the following questions in the call for evidence:

- To what extent has FCDO support for improving the enabling environment for civil society, and direct support for civil society organisations, aided progress towards reaching Sustainable Development Goal 16 - "Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions"?
- What role can the FCDO's work on improving civil society play in broader UK international policy?
- What wider benefits can be harnessed from strengthened civil society?

We recognise that the evidence we have also relates to a greater recognition and understanding of the different roles played by civil society actors and community groups and the challenges they face in growing capacity.

Our evidence is based on the work of Network Plus *Creating Safer Space* (CSS), a 5-year, £2 million GBP international research network, financed by the UK's Arts and Humanities Research Council through the Global Challenges Research Fund. We support research on unarmed civilian protection and self-protection amidst violent conflict and aim to strengthen civilian capacities for nonviolent protection and conflict transformation. So far, our Network has commissioned 26 projects in 11 low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), conducted by over 165 researchers. Project countries have included Cameroon, Colombia, Indonesia, Kenya, Mexico, Myanmar, Nigeria, Palestine, Philippines, Thailand, and South Sudan.

Civil Society and Civilian Protection

Civil society and community leaders play an important role in protecting civilians from violence using Unarmed Civilian Protection. Many are using cultural and traditional practices in places where there is no international mission or presence of protection actors, and many are working in partnership with NGOs who support them to grow in capacity and confidence to de-escalate violence and make people safer.

Our evidence demonstrates that unarmed civilian protection works, and we recommend that through the sharing of case studies and training, and by including Unarmed Civilian Protection

as a recognised approach by civil society, FCDO can help more communities develop mechanisms for locally-led protection from violence.

Key messages

- Civilians across the world protect themselves and others from violence using unarmed, community-centred methods that have been developed over generations and are led and carried out by women and men, mostly without having been trained by outside actors.
- In their protection efforts, local communities harness the experiences and knowledge they have by virtue of living amidst violence; they know what works in their context and why.
- Locally-led forms of unarmed civilian protection (UCP) are found in many different violent contexts, where communities develop context-appropriate responses and early warning mechanisms that make people safer.
- The localization of responses to and prevention of harms from violence must start with the recognition of existing community protection mechanisms and knowledge.
- Helping to scale out locally-led UCP by supporting, funding, and helping to connect these community efforts is a cost-effective way of addressing violent conflict and displacement across the world.

Our research findings

Creating Safer Space research conducted by 26 project teams in eleven countries across three continents has demonstrated that unarmed civilian-to-civilian protection has emerged in a variety of different conflict contexts. 100% of our projects have provided evidence that **local forms of protection work to make civilians safer**. This confirms previous findings of qualitative and quantitative studies regarding the effectiveness of UCP approaches in protecting civilians from violence.

<i>Types of violence</i>	<i>Project country evidence of successful local UCP</i>
Combat between armed actors	Cameroon (Anglophone regions), Colombia, Indonesia (Papua), Myanmar, Nigeria, Thailand (Deep South), South Sudan
Inter-communal conflict, including elections-related violence	Kenya, Myanmar (Rakhine), Nigeria, Indonesia (Papua), Philippines (Mindanao), South Sudan
Violence related to natural resource exploitation, environmental destruction, and land grabbing	Colombia, Indonesia (Papua), Myanmar, Palestine (West Bank), Philippines (Mindanao), Thailand (North), South Sudan (Lakes State)
Dictatorial violence	Myanmar
Excessive force and arbitrary arrest by state police and security forces	Cameroon (Anglophone regions), Colombia, Kenya, Palestine (West Bank), Myanmar, Thailand, US-Mexican border
Targeted killings and attacks, e.g. on social, indigenous, or youth leaders, human rights and environmental defenders, artists, etc.	Colombia, Kenya, Thailand, South Sudan
Criminal, drug-related, and urban violence	Colombia, Kenya, South Sudan, US-Mexican border
Forced displacement and violence against refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs)	Cameroon, Colombia, Indonesia (Papua), Myanmar, Palestine (West Bank), Philippines (Mindanao), Thailand, South Sudan, US-Mexican border
Sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV)	Colombia, Indonesia (Papua), Myanmar, Nigeria, Philippines (Mindanao), South Sudan, US-Mexican border
Climate change-induced conflict	Kenya, Nigeria, South Sudan

Our research shows that proactive nonviolent strategies used by civilians save lives, create safer spaces for communities, change the behaviour of armed actors, reduce violence levels, and interrupt cycles of violence, and it also demonstrates how these strategies are carried out. **This is a global approach rooted in the agency and capacity of civil society.**

Communities and civil society organizations often engage in practices of UCP without calling them such. This makes it difficult to detect local protection mechanisms and infrastructures. Through community-focussed, participatory, and creative research methods, the Creating Safer Space projects uncovered and systematized homegrown protection capacity and practice, much of which entirely undocumented before. **The capacity and creativity of communities to provide protection is evidenced through the wide variety of activities and mechanisms** documented by our projects:

- Communities develop **early warning–early response mechanisms (EWER)**, e.g. through vernacular signs and signals for warning and communication, by using mobile phones and social messaging apps to share and verify information, and by planning for flight and displacement (e.g., designating safe routes, providing safe houses). For example, in Cameroon’s Anglophone conflict, communities identified WhatsApp groups as important means of sharing information about armed actors’ activities and avoiding interactions with them. Rural communities in South Sudan often still rely on traditional signs, e.g. reeds positioned in particular ways, to share information and warn others. In both contexts, whistles also play a major role in early warning, e.g. urging people to flee when armed actors enter a village at night.
- Civilians cultivate a range of **proactive engagement measures**. For instance, they provide protective accompaniment to vulnerable/threatened people or only travel together in groups to keep themselves safer. In Nigeria and Cameroon, for instance, women accompany each other when traveling to the market or working on their fields. Civilians also protect communities and their living environments through civilian presence and permanence, e.g. regarding disputed land. For Palestinians in the West Bank, for example, living and working on their land is part of their identity; protection therefore revolves around the accompaniment of herders to enable them to safely remain on the land. Proactive engagement often also includes protection of and care for nature, such as rivers and forests. In Colombia, for instance, peasant organizations in the department of Antioquia have included the protection of local rivers from hydroelectric power plants and privatization into their efforts of protection from forced displacement.
- Civilians **negotiate and engage with state officials and state and non-state armed actors**, for instance through direct dialogue and by negotiating coexistence with armed actors. In Myanmar after the 2021 military coup, civil society organisations have used established UCP mechanisms to keep civilians safe from heightened levels of state violence and forced recruitment by armed groups. In other contexts, civilians have held a mirror up to the violence through art activism, for example in the case of police brutality against youth in Kenya, or by using cultural activities such as football or theatre to reclaim public space, such as in the case of the many artistic organizations working to create safer space amidst the drug-related violence in the Colombian city of Medellin.

Context knowledge and embeddedness

Across the different research contexts, Creating Safer Space projects found **shared underlying mechanisms**, which make local protection more likely to be successful:

- Nonviolent community protection builds on local agency and knowledge; it is **collective and rooted in communities**. As such, it goes beyond protection from direct physical violence and often includes struggles against structural and cultural violence as well as practices of care for the community, nature, and in some cases the spiritual world.
- **Context knowledge and relationships** are critical to local protection efforts. Communities build on traditional practices, familial relationships, respect for elders, or the social capital (status, networks) of traditional, religious, and other community leaders to negotiate safer spaces for civilians. Among those practicing local UCP are civilians of all genders, age groups, professions, and other backgrounds.
- Communities are immensely **creative in devising protection strategies**. Approaches will differ depending on the specific context, but civilians are savvy at adapting existing approaches to their specific needs or changing threat environments, like those arising from threat actors' learning and adaptation or macro- developments such as climate change.

Civilians motivations for unarmed civilian (self-) protection

Going beyond the existing knowledge base, the Creating Safer Space findings add new insights into the motivations of civilians to take nonviolent (self-)protective action. Not only do violence-affected civilians want their families, communities, and places to be safer, but our research findings also suggest that, far from being victims waiting to be saved by strangers or for national authorities to step up to their protection responsibilities, many violence-affected civilians use their collective and individual agency to draw on traditional mechanisms, learn new skills, develop context-appropriate strategies, and take collective action. Where local volunteers have been trained by outside UCP organizations to enhance their protection capacities, e.g. through civilian conflict monitoring training in Myanmar or civilian ceasefire monitoring in Mindanao, Philippines, research participants did not experience this as a burden but as a form of empowerment in the face of a lack of alternatives.

Three further findings stand out:

- **The centrality of land and nature:** In many communities across the world, practices of protection and care for people and the community are interwoven with practices of protection and care for the land or ancestral territory and for nature. Strategies include, e.g., remaining on the land and opting out of dominant political and economic logics, e.g. by creating peace communities or working towards food sovereignty. This finding was particularly highlighted by research in Colombia, Palestine (West Bank), Indonesia (Papua), and the Philippines.
- **The importance of cultural and traditional practices:** Many local unarmed civilian protection practices are embedded in, and emerge from, traditional and/or cultural practices. These include indigenous and religious forms of spirituality; traditional

practices of care for community and nature; community arts, art activism, sports, and other cultural activities; and the use of rituals and symbols. Our projects show that such practices are essential to the context-specific forms and effectiveness of community protection, yet they are largely absent from protection policies and programmes designed by international agencies.

- **Harnessing vulnerabilities for community protection:** The project findings also suggest that communities can harness what is usually seen as a source of vulnerability— e.g., gender, age, indigeneity, economic marginalization, etc.—for context-specific community protection strategies based on local relationships and knowledge. This explains why ‘unlikely’ protection actors such as women, youth, the elderly, or indigenous spiritual guards can be found at the forefront of some community UCP. In South Sudan, for example, Women Protection Teams have formed which use the status of elder women to solve and prevent conflicts. In Colombia, many marginalized indigenous communities affected by violent conflict have reactivated the traditional indigenous guards, who use a range of classic UCP strategies together with spiritual rituals and social mobilization to protect their communities and draw national attention to their situation.

Research examples

Our research shows that proactive nonviolent strategies used by civilians save lives, create safer spaces for communities, change the behaviour of armed actors, reduce violence levels, and interrupt cycles of violence, and it also demonstrates how these strategies are carried out. For example:

- **In South Sudan**, UCP actors such as Nonviolent Peaceforce, locally-led initiatives, and self-protecting communities have drawn on local relations, practices, and sources of authority to develop community early warning–early response (CEWER) systems, build community mechanisms for protection from violence and conflict resolution, break cycles of violence, and create safer space for civilians.
- **In Papua, Indonesia**, where indigenous Papuans have faced threats from the state military and intense natural resource exploitation, and where there is also inter-communal conflict with migrants from other parts of Indonesia, civilians have built on networks of church and civil society organizations, and on the social capital of prominent leaders, to protect themselves through fleeing, negotiations with the conflicting parties, and advocacy.
- **Colombia**, which has seen decades of violent political and social conflicts, has particularly rich experiences with different locally-led and spontaneous as well as nationally and internationally supported UCP mechanisms, showing the many ways in which safer space for individuals and communities can be achieved amidst different violent contexts, including fighting between state and non- state armed actors, narco-trafficking, natural resource exploitation, and urban violence.

Case study: South Sudan

Three of the 26 Creating Safer Space projects were conducted in South Sudan and have shed more light on the widespread but under-acknowledged local and community civilian protection element, in which communities design and implement their own protection mechanisms. Their evidence adds to that of the Women Protection Teams and Youth Protection Teams, which shows that communities in South Sudan are using a range of methods to make themselves safer and protect others. While some self-protecting communities and local unarmed protection teams have had training from outside organizations such as NPSS, the majority rely solely on local knowledge and creativity as well as traditional community mechanisms to reduce violence in their micro-contexts.

The Creating Safer Space project **‘Understanding Community-level Spontaneous UCP’** was carried out in the capital Juba (Central Equatoria State), where communities face social, gang, and gender-based violence (GBV), and Rumbek (Lakes State), where disarmament has remained incomplete and communities face violence related to cattle camps, GBV, and environmental exploitation, especially logging. The region has suffered from persistent violent conflict over several generations.

- In Juba, the research found three main types of UCP actors: 1) community action groups using some UCP mechanisms; 2) faith-based actors who play major roles in the de-escalation of conflicts; and 3) peace committees who, supported by NPSS, engage in early warning–early response (EWER).
- In Rumbek, the research found four UCP mechanisms: 1) customary and traditional protection practices (see below); 2) protection teams formed by women, youth, and traditional and religious leaders, some supported by NPSS, who use community security meetings and early warning systems to gather and share information to warn people, and have built relationships with a range of actors to develop escape routes and provide accompaniment to people vulnerable to attack; 3) youth groups such as the Rumbek Youth Union using some forms of UCP; and 4) women leaders, especially elder women, who intervene in micro-level conflicts within and between families to prevent violence from escalating.

The project **‘Visualising early warning and preparedness in civilian protection’** paid attention to the signs and symbols local communities use in adapting to insecurity and devising protection strategies. The project focussed its research on the Malakal Protection of Civilians site in Upper Nile State and communities near Juba, which suffer from multiple, often localized violent conflicts.

- All communities who agreed to share their practices used symbols and rituals as part of larger cultures of self-protection, which were multi-purpose — for example, relating to both violent conflict and natural disasters — and embedded in tribal identities. These vernacular protection forms were stronger in rural communities than in peri-urban areas, where the use of traditional knowledge is less common.
- While some of the rituals were also used to prepare young men for conflict, most signs and rituals including song were employed in early warning–early response communication and planning, to spread information, in negotiation and dialogue between conflicting communities, to establish buffer zones between them, to transfer of knowledge about past peace agreements, and not least for spiritual protection from a range of threats including violence, natural disasters, illness, and witchcraft.

Ways we can support communities to overcome challenges

Communities engaged in Creating Safer Space projects also shared challenges they face, among them the following:

- Just like international humanitarian aid, communities' **nonviolent self-protection depends on a minimum of respect for civilians' lives**; indiscriminate violence, especially in situations of great power differentials between warring parties, is difficult to halt or deter.
- Community protection relies increasingly on **mobile communication and social media apps**. Yet not all community members have access, devices can be confiscated, and communication channels can be misused to spread misinformation.
- Local protection measures often **lack small amounts of funding** that would enhance them, e.g. to buy mobile phones or a motorcycle to connect with neighbouring communities and share information.
- Communities **can often benefit from some outside support**, e.g. through international advocacy and solidarity, to grow in credibility and be able to engage with official actors and systems with the aim to move from protection to conflict transformation.

Recommendations

The FCDO should:

1. **Acknowledge** civil-society-based **UCP** and community self-protection **as a credible and important practice in protection policy** that is broadly applicable and effective in a range of situations of armed conflict.
2. **Expand understandings of localization** to move beyond community voices being considered in decisions about international operations or national approaches **to include communities' own protection capacity, agency, and knowledge**.
3. **Highlight good practice in civil-society-based UCP** and share that in high-level reports on protection of civilians (PoC) and within global protection clusters and the United Nations (UN).
4. **Support civil society's protection work** through funding, inclusion in situational analysis, and recognition as one of the components of peace infrastructures and operations.
5. **Ensure that communities are included as decision-makers** regarding how to use funding, who is involved in high-level meetings, and what protection approaches work in any given context.
6. **Support community UCP as a cost-effective** and much-needed contribution to meeting global protection needs by developing and resourcing civil-society-based UCP as well as special platforms and reporting mechanisms for UCP actors in civil society.
7. **Follow the *Creating Safer Space* model** of giving people equitable voice, respecting their knowledge and capacity, and creating learning opportunities through collaboration, to generate experiential knowledge on community protection from violence which can feed into this debate.

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