Community engagement with armed actors: strengthening protection, prevention and response

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About HPN

The Humanitarian Practice Network (HPN) at ODI is an independent forum where field workers, managers and policy-makers in the humanitarian sector share information, analysis and experience. The views and opinions expressed in HPN's publications do not necessarily state or reflect those of the Humanitarian Policy Group or ODI.

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In Datu Piang, 82 locals from the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) community hurdled challenges of access and security to build a water system benefitting 95 households. Credit: ILO/R. Pablo

Editorial

The theme of this edition of *Humanitarian Exchange*, co-edited with Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) Senior Research Fellow Gemma Davies, is 'Community engagement with armed actors: strengthening protection, prevention and response'. The relationship between armed groups and local populations is often portrayed as either predatory or symbiotic. However, local populations are not just passive actors in conflict and armed groups do not only exploit and abuse civilians. Community engagement with armed groups happens discreetly and, significantly, before any recognised mediation or negotiation processes. As the number of protracted, non-international armed conflicts, as well as the number and range of actors involved in them, increases, it is essential that protection actors better understand the interactions between communities and armed actors.

In the lead article, **Gemma Davies, Pascal Bongard, Leigh Mayhew and Veronique Barbelet** provide an overview of the state of evidence and practice with regard to community engagement with armed actors for protection, prevention and peace. **Marc Linning** looks at the Center for Civilians in Conflict's (CIVIC's) practical application of community-based protection, how it has strengthened communities' engagement with armed actors to reduce conflict-related civilian harm, and the challenges in using such approaches. **Mike Jobbins, Allassane Drabo and Habibou Bako** explain Search for Common Ground's approach to engaging armed groups, emphasising the central role and agency of community stakeholders in peacebuilding initiatives. In interviews with **Carla Ruta**, civil society representatives from Cameroon, Iraq and Lebanon look back on several years of engagement with non-state armed groups on community protection, highlighting different approaches and strategies as well as the risks and challenges associated with implementing them. **Jérôme Grimaud** reflects on his experience of supporting community mediation in the Central African Republic from 2014. Drawing on a wide range of country-based research and experience, **Kiran Kothari and Lauren Meredith** propose a series of steps humanitarian practitioners could follow to better support community negotiations with armed actors.

Based on research in Myanmar, **Ashley South, Jasminpaw, Jacqueline Hpway, Angela Aung, Eileen May, Mi Kun Chan Non and Anne-Meike Fechter** describe how 'protection partnerships' between community leaders, civil society actors and ethnic armed organisations play important protective and mobilisation roles. **Julia Steets** shares the findings from a two-year research project on protection in Iraq, suggesting that practitioners need to understand local political dynamics, break the top-down logic of international aid programmes and find ways to balance power and diversity when supporting community structures. **Ashley Jackson** discusses the dilemmas faced by civilians living in Taliban areas pre-August 2021, and the tactics people used to resist and renegotiate the terms of Taliban control. Drawing on the work of the Creating Safer Space network, **Louise Ridden and Berit Bliesemann de Guevara** introduce the main practices and mechanisms of unarmed civilian protection, give examples of how it works in different contexts and discuss some of the central challenges. **Sukanya Podder** also looks at unarmed civilian protection focusing on the Jos Stakeholders Centre for Peace in Nigeria, an

example of a locally led and owned multistakeholder collaboration working to prevent conflict escalation and violence against civilians. The edition ends with an article by **Beatriz Elena Arias López, Laura Jiménez Ospina, Freddy Giovanni Pérez Cárdenas and Berit Bliesemann de Guevara** who explore non-violent self-protection through artistic and cultural practices developed by community-based organisations in Medellín.

A United Nations peace mural in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Credit: MONUSCO/Abel Kavanagh

Community engagement with armed actors: strengthening protection, prevention and response

Community engagement, protection and peacebuilding: reviewing evidence and practice

Gemma Davies, Pascal Bongard, Leigh Mayhew and Veronique Barbelet

Introduction

Civilians are not just passive actors in conflict, but have agency in developing strategies for self-protection, including through engaging with armed actors. Community engagement with armed actors often takes place significantly before any externally supported mediation or negotiation processes. The interaction between civilian communities and armed actors is complex, can be ambiguous, and changes over time.

The limits of humanitarian protection action are increasingly recognised. The Independent review of the implementation of the IASC Protection Policy[1] found that humanitarian protection primarily focuses on remedial action and environment-building. Many humanitarian and protection actors are not proactively addressing threats to civilians in conflict, with limited focus on preventing or reducing risks of violence, coercion or deliberate deprivation. There is growing recognition of and momentum on the need for a shift in approaches to humanitarian protection, and consideration of how civilian engagement strategies can be supported, or at the very least not undermined. There are opportunities to enhance the effectiveness of these strategies when based on adequate understanding of the complex, dynamic relationships between communities and armed actors, and when approaches are tailored to those communities. Peace actors more proactively engage with threats – including through supporting

1 Cocking, J., McGoldrick, J., Finney, N. et al. (2022) *Independent review of the implementation of the IASC Protection Policy*. HPG report. London: ODI (https://odi.org/en/publications/independent-review-of-the-implementation-of-the-iasc-protection-policy/).

dialogue, negotiation and mediation with armed actors – though not necessarily through the lens of protection. There is growing recognition of the need to build a community of practice between humanitarian, protection and peace actors,[2] and to strengthen synergies between them.

This article provides an overview of the state of evidence and practice on community engagement with armed actors towards strengthening protection, prevention and response. It summarises the outcome of a scoping exercise by HPG as part of the first phase of two years of research focusing on community engagement with armed actors for self-protection, and the implications for humanitarian, protection and peace actors.[3] The scoping exercise involved a review of academic and grey literature, as well as interviews with 15 key stakeholders, highlighting implications for research, policy and practice.

State of evidence and practice

Communities' engagement with armed actors for self-protection

Communities adapt their self-protection strategies depending on context, the type of armed actor and the options open to them. Community self-protection strategies range from flight and opposition to accommodation, engagement, collaboration and support to armed actors. Communities can also leverage the presence of multiple armed actors to improve their security, for example by playing armed actors off against each other or by accepting an offer of protection from one of them. Our research focuses on non-violent community engagement.

A clear finding is the need to carefully define 'community'. However, this is not always easy. Communities are not homogeneous, and different individuals lead the process of engagement with armed actors on behalf of their community. Which individuals take on this role will differ depending on the community in question, and can change depending on the armed actor and conflict dynamics. Who leads or who is present during the engagement process may have implications for which and whose concerns are prioritised.

The line between communities and armed actors can be blurred. Some community members 'double hat', taking on a role both within the community and within the civilian branch of an armed actor, and existing social bonds can mean that the engagement process is organic, with low degrees of visibility. As one practitioner explained, issues of civilian protection can be discussed during something as simple as a family dinner, rather than as a formal negotiation. Examples of issues communities might engage on include negotiating movement for livelihoods, the delivery of aid, release of detainees, removal of mines and local ceasefires.

2 The research refers to humanitarian, protection and peace actors with the recognition that not all humanitarian actors supporting community engagement are protection specialists, and that not all protection actors are humanitarian actors, but can include policy, human rights and protection of civilians organisations, for example.

3 https://odi.org/en/about/our-work/community-engagement-protection-and-peacebuilding

There are also differences between how communities and international actors interpret protection. For the latter, protection is framed in terms of access to rights as per international laws and frameworks. For local communities, customary laws and local values and norms matter at least as much as formal rights.

Factors, actions and actors that affect engagement

External support can strengthen the effectiveness of community engagement with armed actors. But it can also undermine the engagement process. There is no straightforward solution to achieving positive outcomes, as a range of factors can affect the parameters of engagement. For armed actors, the motivation behind the use of violence and the ideology and level of concern an armed actor has for legitimacy can influence its behaviour towards communities. Strategies for engagement must be adapted to the type of armed actor the community is engaging with, and the opportunities and barriers to engagement. For example, with groups that hold radical ideological beliefs (e.g. the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, or ISIS) or are criminally motivated, taking a more personal approach may lead to greater results, by analysing individual commitment to a cause or engaging through family members.

The level of internal community cohesion and capacity can be a key factor in effective engagement for self-protection. A higher level of internal community unity, strong customary organisation and pre-existing respected local institutions or leadership can all improve the effectiveness of engagement. Existing social bonds between armed actors and communities can be key, whether based on shared political interests or kinship, ethnic or family ties. These social bonds mean there is an existing element of trust critical for positive engagement, which external actors may not possess. However, this is not uniform across communities. For some, being embedded with or supportive of armed actors is effective. For others, being able to adopt a position of neutrality is key in maximising their protection.

Opportunities for engagement during conflict are not static: they are shaped by conflict dynamics, which can have both positive and negative effects. For example, if an armed actor obtains greater territorial control or experiences a change in leadership, this may affect how open it is to engagement. As a conflict drags on, the militarisation of a society and the emergence of new elites can diminish respect for the traditional authority figures whose influence is often central in restraining violence.

Opportunities for humanitarian, protection and peace actors

Despite increased attention to civilian self-protection strategies among humanitarian, protection and peace actors, there has been no systemic shift to community-driven approaches to engagement. Obstacles include concerns over neutrality; tensions between international principles and frameworks and local norms and customs; legal implications of support to engagement with proscribed armed groups; and the persistence of top-down approaches. Community involvement in decision-making and participation in programming is also inadequate, despite evidence that local communities can be in a better position to engage with armed actors than external organisations due to their proximity and understanding of conflict dynamics.

This does not mean there is no role for external humanitarian, protection and peace actors in promoting successful outcomes for communities engaging with armed actors for self-protection. Community self-protection strategies by themselves rarely provide the level of protection communities need As such, complementary approaches are called for to generate international and political will to prevent or reduce attacks on civilians. External actors can look to strengthen local capacities for self-protection but should aim to support existing community strategies rather than replace them. There are benefits for humanitarian, protection and peace organisations too: local knowledge can serve as a critical resource when engaging with armed actors through community networks, providing support for sustained access.

There are also opportunities for greater synergies between humanitarian, protection and peace actors in relation to community engagement, given that these different sectors are often working towards the same ends, albeit under different framings and using different approaches. These opportunities are not being fully explored, meaning that different actors may not realise when and where they are contributing to each other's objectives. During a recent panel discussion at the Global Protection Forum 2022,[4] one panellist (a humanitarian) noted that, in contexts where they have worked, peace actors were having a significant impact in reducing protection risks, including violence, through their work on conflict transformation. However, due to programme focus and approaches to monitoring, they were not aware of the immediate humanitarian impact they were having.

This doesn't mean there are no challenges in shifting towards a more collaborative approach to civilian protection. Practically, it is not just about bringing together different sets of actors, but also different working cultures and modes of action. There are also potential risks, for example in politicising protection efforts. Protection issues have helped advance formal peace talks, as in Colombia, where humanitarian actors insisted on the inclusion of protection issues. These included the agreement between the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC-EP) and the government to pilot demining activities and share information on missing persons.[5] But there are also risks if an actor is unwilling to engage in peace talks when protection issues are included.

Gaps in evidence and practice

The approaches humanitarian, protection and peace actors use to support community engagement with armed actors are not well documented or researched, and there is a lack of pooled learning. There is also little programmatic collaboration across humanitarian, protection and peace sectors despite working towards common outcomes. The question is how to overcome siloes and build greater synergies in order to secure better protection outcomes for civilians.

Making improvements to operational practice also requires addressing some of the gaps within the research. First, while there is a body of research documenting community engagement with armed

4 www.globalprotectioncluster.org/events-calendar/community-engagement-armed-actors-strengthening-protection-prevention-and-response

5 www.peaceagreements.org/wview/1845/Final%20Agreement%20to%20End%20the%20Armed%20Conflict%20and%20Build%20a%20Stable%20and%20Lasting%20Peace

actors, the granular details of the engagement process itself are largely missing. There is a need for a greater understanding of how community actors organise and prepare themselves for engaging with armed actors; how community representatives are chosen; what communities discuss and prioritise and how these decisions are made, as well as the trade-offs they must make; and what strategies are effective and under what conditions. Critically, the research will need to consider which voices and priorities are excluded – such as minority ethnic groups, women, older people or people with disabilities – and how such exclusion can be overcome.

Candles lit for 2017's International Day of Peace in Bogotá, Colombia. Credit: UN Photo/Jennifer Moreno

Second, more detailed analysis is needed to understand how conflict dynamics affect the parameters of engagement, and how communities adapt to changes to these parameters. Although there are references in the research to the impact of conflict dynamics, these are more hints than detailed analysis. For example, how do internal dynamics and competition between different armed actors affect protection threats and the ability of communities to engage? This gap in current knowledge around the impact of conflict dynamics extends to external actors. How are humanitarian, protection and peace actors adapting their programming in response to the changes communities face?

Third, there is a need to better understand how geography affects the parameters of engagement. For example, comparative studies looking at urban and rural locations are notably lacking. The physical terrain will determine what protection strategies are preferable to civilians (e.g. displacement) or can determine the availability of options (e.g. displacement versus engagement). Physical proximity between communities and armed actors is also a factor. Does a different form of relationship emerge between the two sets of actors in urban compared with rural settings? Does proximity result in a greater interdependence between communities and armed actors, and how does this shape the engagement process and the trade-offs civilians must make?

Finally, there is a need to understand how community engagement conducted during conflict can lay the ground for, or obstruct, transitions towards peace. Negative experiences have the potential to leave lasting divisions within communities. As some research suggests, negotiations during conflict take place as part of a wider 'ecology' where a downturn in violence in one area may lead to an increase somewhere else.[6]

Conclusions

As a national partner at a panel discussion at the Global Protection Forum stated, community engagement with armed actors is essential for protection. But communities are not homogeneous. Who is involved in community engagement has implications for whose voice, interests and priorities are put forward, how engagement is situated in interactions between armed actors and communities over the long term, and what trade-offs are made. It also raises questions of what power dynamics are at play, and how external actors can understand and shift dynamics to strengthen protection.

Humanitarian, protection and peace actors need to better understand the complex, dynamic interactions between communities and armed actors to inform how they support, engage or step back in order to maximise the potential for such interactions to reduce civilian harm. But the needs of communities, and their agency in shaping their engagement with armed actors, must be central to decisions about if, when and how these actors support engagement.

A holistic, multi-pronged approach is required to effectively reduce protection risks to civilians in conflict, while creating an enabling environment. This requires building greater synergies between humanitarian, protection and peace actors. The benefits and challenges must also be critically assessed, recognising that, at times, well-intentioned interventions can undermine community engagement with armed actors for self-protection.

There is a critical need for humanitarian, protection and peace action to focus on prevention of protection threats, grounding approaches in local contexts and the needs and efforts of communities. We hope that our research will contribute to informing a growing community of practice towards preventing and reducing protection risks.

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6 Kaldor, M., Theros, M. and Turkmani, R. (2022) 'Local agreements – an introduction to the special issue' *Peacebuilding* 10:2, 107–121 (https://doi.org/10.1080/21647259.2022.2042111).

Not just victims: CIVIC's community-based protection approach and practice

Marc Linning

> 'With this jacket I can now approach key stakeholders, to advocate for the rights of women and girls.'
> CIVIC Community Protection Group member, April 2022

The above quote, from one of our recent meetings with conflict-affected civilians in northeast Nigeria, captures the essence of how the Center for Civilians in Conflict (CIVIC) seeks to improve protection of civilians (POC) outcomes following a community-based protection (CBP) approach. This article looks at CIVIC's practical application of CBP in various contexts, and how it has been strengthening communities' engagement with armed actors to reduce conflict-related civilian harm.

CIVIC focuses on supporting conflict-affected communities in their quest for protection. 'Support' here means that we work with (and not on behalf of) civilians. We follow communities' own protection priorities and, jointly with them, explore if and how CIVIC can add to their existing agency, leadership and technical capabilities to address these priorities more effectively. We seek to ensure that civilians have the knowledge, skills and access to advocate for their protection needs, including with armed actors.

Phase 1: Determining added value

Prior to engaging with communities along a CBP process, we conduct in-depth research and consult a variety of local and international actors to get their feedback on whether our intended work in an area and our technical toolbox could be of added value in improving POC outcomes.[7] For example, in Ukraine, following an initial needs assessment, we decided to focus on communities that were not directly on the front line. We determined that our technical expertise and tools focusing on preventive protection work are likely to be most valuable and compatible with communities further away. We also wanted to ensure that we could maintain regular and repeated access to the communities we work with, something that would not be as easy with communities located directly along the front line.

When determining our added value, we employ community engagement officers who know the areas and communities first-hand, often having lived and worked there for years. Their local expertise and access allow us to make a first call on whether the environment is conducive to a CBP approach.

7 For example, we reach out to and consult relevant local civil society organisations as well as United Nations protection cluster members.

CIVIC also applies its own engagement criteria to assess whether state armed actors and their security partners (e.g. allied armed non-state actors) are credible and open to discussing POC issues, for instance looking at actors' record on avoiding civilian harm and the implementation of international humanitarian law, and their strategic and ethical incentives for POC.[8]

Phase 2: Setting up and facilitating Community Protection Groups

If our initial assessments are positive, we then explore if there are other pre-existing community dialogue platforms that could lend themselves to 'host' discussions on POC. Whenever possible, we try to build on existing structures, though in most cases CIVIC has ended up setting up new dialogue platforms from scratch because there were no other compatible platforms, or because we deemed pre-existing platforms insufficiently open to allow safe and inclusive dialogue on POC.

We subsequently dedicate a lot of time to identifying suitable community members to become part of these POC-focused dialogue platforms, which we broadly call Community Protection Groups (CPGs). Due diligence is crucial here to ensure that CPGs are representative of the wider community, and its members are well respected and without ulterior motives. We seek to include all the main community segments, ensuring that, for example, women, ethnic minorities, persons with disabilities or internally displaced persons (IDPs) can meaningfully participate. In particularly conservative societies, where women might feel inhibited to speak up in the presence of men, we have been offering additional women-only sub-groups that first meet on their own, and then join the larger CPG meetings equipped with 'pre-discussed' issues and recommendations on how to address them.

We also proactively reach out to traditional community leaders at an early stage, so that they are not surprised when a new community structure appears in their area. We seek to prevent any misunderstanding on their part and want to avoid any potential instrumentalisation of the CPGs by local powerholders. This is especially relevant when community leaders become CPG members themselves – something we do not encourage in general, but there are contexts, such as Iraq or Afghanistan, where the benefits of their inclusion can outweigh the risks. In these cases we need to be especially vigilant to check that these leaders are not suppressing particular protection issues. For example, would the CPG discuss a protection threat (e.g. being extorted at illegal checkpoints) if the alleged perpetrator is a fellow CPG member and holds a powerful role within the wider community, such as a local authority official? To avoid and prevent suppression of relevant issues, we not only sensitise the CPG to these challenges, but we also ask staff to identify when a well-known or obvious protection issue is not being raised within the CPG.[9]

8 For the time being, CIVIC is not directly engaging armed opposition groups (AOGs). However, the CPGs we set up and work with have in the past conducted their own direct POC discussions with AOGs, e.g. the Taliban prior to their takeover of Afghanistan.

9 Being cognisant of CBP best practices, we try to 'use' traditional community leaders and other local power holders first and foremost as target audiences for CPGs because they can address POC issues via the different roles they play.

This preparation can take several months and cannot be rushed. Going too fast at the beginning risks causing more harm than good, for instance where CPG members lack credibility among the wider community, or where armed actors are not willing to engage with CPGs on POC (and where CPG members might subsequently face repercussions from having raised POC issues with these authorities).

Phase 3: Supporting community protection efforts

Self-protection measures

We always seek to build on, strengthen and expand affected communities' existing self-protection mechanisms. In practice this includes protection risks that communities are tackling exclusively among themselves, i.e. without involving the perpetrators of harm or other armed actors.

Informal early-warning systems and evacuation plans, including for especially vulnerable civilians such as persons with disabilities or the elderly, would be one example. Here, CIVIC might provide a safe space for the community to come together and discuss such mechanisms and offer best practices from other contexts. In some cases we offer limited pinpoint assistance, such as flashlights or mobile phone data, so community members can stay in touch with each other. At the request of CPGs, we have started to provide basic training on how to react when suddenly caught by hostilities and put under fire.

Bringing communities together with armed actors

Self-protection efforts that do not directly engage armed actors can only do so much to reduce threats of harm and attain sustainable POC outcomes. We thus always look for possibilities to bring CPGs together with relevant armed actors to tackle civilian harm and threats at their roots. In preparation for these dialogues, we help communities better analyse their protection risks and subsequently raise them in as persuasive a way as possible.

In scenario-based exercises, CPG members play themselves as well as the armed actor. We seek to provide realistic rehearsals, including military counterarguments to POC that we often hear in our training with armed actors. The goal is to prepare CPGs for their subsequent meetings with armed actors, by staying calm and collected, while also determined and equipped to persuade armed actors to improve their POC behaviour.

Coming in as an external non-governmental organisation with whom both sides (communities and armed actors) have already been working bilaterally can make a real difference in breaking down trust barriers and creating a more open atmosphere for dialogue. Communities have often lost faith in their own state armed forces as their protector, while these armed actors are often very suspicious of communities, especially if the latter belong to the same ethnic group as the groups they are fighting, or if they have suffered heavy losses that they link back to communities providing intelligence to their enemy. Depending on the personalities of both local armed actors and CPG members, CIVIC adapts to the pace both sides are able and willing to go at before feeling comfortable enough to have joint discussions.

Lower-hanging fruit

Before tackling issues directly relating to problematic behaviour by the engaged armed actor, the CPG might decide to start by focusing on less sensitive topics, but where the armed actor might nevertheless be able to take significant action to mitigate civilian harm or threat.

In Afghanistan, one CPG convinced Taliban leaders to allow a telecoms company to establish cellphone service in the district. This came after a two-month period during which the cellphone service had been shut down, severely affecting people's ability to keep in touch with each other. Obtaining the Taliban district commander's approval and commitment not to destroy the cellphone network and towers helped over 80% of villagers regain access to mobile phone services. In Iraq, CPGs, together with CIVIC, have helped civilians deal with the bureaucratic processes involved in accessing financial or material assistance for harm suffered as a result of conflict.[10] In Nigeria, CPGs regularly discuss how the military can better protect community members while out collecting firewood, including through coordinated civilian–military patrols.

More sensitive issues

CPGs also have many priority issues that are extremely sensitive. However, communities normally show no hesitation in bringing them up and demanding solutions from relevant armed actors. A recent good example from Nigeria involves the return and reintegration of former armed opposition group (AOG) members and their families into their original communities. State authorities at times showed limited interest in discussing and planning the return of these civilians with receiving communities, leading some to reject the returnees. CPGs raised the issue with the security forces and local military commanders included relevant CPGs in these reintegration processes, alleviating host communities' fears while increasing the protection of often very stigmatised individuals.[11]

Prior to the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan, CPGs managed to convince Taliban and former Afghan national army commanders to agree to temporary ceasefires so that civilians could go to the market or seek medical care. Each side only agreed to these ceasefires on the condition that the CPG secured agreement from the other.

Alleged violations by armed actors

Last but not least, we support CPGs to address behaviour that violates applicable norms, for instance by helping CPGs understand their rights under domestic legislation, applicable religious norms, international humanitarian law and international human rights law, and with regard to non-binding frameworks such as the Safe School Declaration. The goal is to enable CPGs to relate problematic behaviour to concrete obligations, and then formulate realistic and specific recommendations.

10 In Afghanistan we helped CPGs understand and make use of such assistance per Afghan law/Code 91. In Iraq, we have been examining the accessibility of similar assistance under its 'Compensation Law', helping CPGs and their wider communities to better navigate the issues involved.

11 This is an ongoing challenge, especially when some of these returnees do still collaborate with AOGs and are involved in subsequent attacks causing civilian harm.

In Afghanistan, CPGs regularly shared with warring parties how the conduct of hostilities was harming their communities, and used moral, religious, legal and strategic arguments to persuade them to change tactics, such as regarding the use of heavy artillery in populated areas or the location of checkpoints near schools or hospitals. In Nigeria, after meeting with a CPG and hearing allegations of systematic sexual harassment by some of his troops in a specific IDP camp, a local commander issued an order prohibiting soldiers from accessing the camp after 4pm. The CPG subsequently reported a marked reduction in such harassment cases. At a more systemic level, female members of a CPG in Iraq raised concerns that many women that had experienced conflict-related sexual violence were not pursuing the perpetrators because there were no female staff in the authorities' investigation teams. Women felt that it would be too shameful to discuss incidents with male police officers. The CPG raised this issue with the authorities, and steps were eventually taken to include female staff in investigations.

Once trust between CPGs and the authorities (including armed actors) has been (re)established, it can be possible and useful to expand dialogues and make them accessible to the wider communities that the CPGs represent. In Iraq, CPGs (with CIVIC's support) have developed and facilitated radio shows discussing POC issues with guests including representatives of the security forces and local authorities. Shows are streamed on the radio stations' Facebook pages, with listeners able to comment on the discussion and also raise issues directly and in real time.

CPGs as catalysts for social cohesion

The 'mere' provision of a safe space for different segments of the community to come together as one group, and the facilitation of a discussion where everyone can raise conflict-related problems, can make a big difference in itself. No matter people's ethnic or religious background, no matter whether IDP or host community member, sitting together – united by the shared challenges of living in a conflict area and able to share and discuss each other's grievances – can mitigate long-standing tensions among community segments that otherwise (in cumulative combination with the effects of conflict) might have escalated into further violence and additional conflict drivers. Instead, community members in CPGs often feel that they can jointly do something about their respective challenges, and this can increase the community's agency to address protection issues in the long term. As one member of the Maiduguri CPG mentioned after one of the first meetings:

> We are glad you brought us together. Even amongst ourselves we don't trust each other, but now we see each other as brothers under this initiative.

In Donetsk in Ukraine, one of the civilians we work with following a CBP approach recently said:

> We should have joined together a long time ago. Finally, we can all express ourselves and find out more about our contributions and opportunities.

One of the Community Protection Group members here said: 'We are so happy and never imagined that we could sit side by side with the army to deliberate on security issues bothering us.' Credit: Mark Linning

Challenges

Risk transfer to CPGs

When working with communities under a CBP approach, we must be even more vigilant than otherwise to apply the 'do no harm' principle. Community members we work with often take considerable risks to meet us, and then to directly engage with armed actors (with our support) to discuss POC issues. We try to mitigate risks, for example by using our bilateral access and contacts to inform stakeholders about our work with communities, and to address any misunderstandings. Our staff are available for CPGs beyond our regular in-person meetings, and we provide them with means of communication (e.g. mobile phone data) to stay in touch with each other, us and other relevant actors.[12] When bringing CPG members together we provide for all logistics, such as travel and accommodation, as well as food/drinks, and ensure they don't miss out on other services, such as assistance deliveries by other actors.

Problematic self-protection mechanisms

There is always a risk of communities adopting self-protection mechanisms that stand in tension with international norms or humanitarian principles, including where cultural customs and values prioritise collective protection outcomes at the expense of individual rights. Another risk is that some community segments or even the entire community associate themselves with one party to the conflict and start

12 This is especially important when direct access is a challenge, e.g. because of weather, hostilities, Covid-19 or limited transport availability.

engaging in partial activities (with that party) without realising all the risks this incurs. We try to stay cognisant of and monitor such risks and discuss and navigate them in a sensitive manner, without being perceived as imposing external views and norms.[13]

POC link

In our efforts to genuinely adopt a CBP approach, CIVIC devolves power and the prioritisation of topics for discussion to the CPGs. As a result, it is possible that issues without an obvious direct link with POC top the community's agenda. For instance, the most pressing themes for a CPG might be drunken soldiers speeding in their vehicles, criminal gangs recruiting minors and extorting community members or a lack of rain affecting food security.

While not necessarily within our expertise, we try to see if and how we can support the analysis of these priority issues for the CPGs. In many cases, when digging a little deeper, there is at least a partial link with POC. At times the root causes of these issues are directly linked to an armed actor's failure to meet their protection obligations. By highlighting and explaining these links we can help the CPG develop more concrete recommendations and thus become a more effective protection advocate when subsequently engaging relevant armed actors.

For example, an increase in a community's youth joining criminal gangs might be linked to the state armed forces' long-term occupation of schools and the suspension of regular educational activities, rendering youth more susceptible to recruitment. Increasing hunger might not be a result simply of a lack of rain. A deeper analysis might reveal that reduced food security could also relate to an armed actor's failure to clear fields of mines or unexploded ordnance, or limited efforts to provide patrols so that farmers can more safely access crops located in dangerous areas.

That said, there might always be priority issues for CPGs, the root causes of which lie outside CIVIC's expertise and where we have limited or no technical expertise to offer. In such cases, we either try to bring other actors or organisations into a CPG meeting to provide support (e.g. offer training), or we try to refer the group to another relevant and credible organisation, such as in the case of missing persons or detention-related matters. Not raising false expectations and staying honest about where we have added value and where we have not is crucial. As this article shows, there is a lot we can do to help affected communities become stronger agents of their own protection, and when and where we reach our limits, we look to other organisations to complement and support us and the CPGs.

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13 That said, it is also important to have clear red lines for us at CIVIC and to be ready to decrease or suspend engagements if these are crossed, including for the safety and security of our staff.

Building peace in complex conflict: the common ground approach

Mike Jobbins, Allassane Drabo and Habibou Bako

Introduction

Search for Common Ground (Search) is the largest dedicated peacebuilding organisation in the world, with programmes spanning social cohesion, stabilisation, governance and conflict mediation across 34 countries. We are dedicated to advancing a more lasting and sustainable peace in society and we do this by utilising locally led programmes and inclusive structures at every step of the process. Adequately conducting peacebuilding involves all members of a community, which often necessitates engagement with the very parties that are at risk of or already contributing to violence. This article examines Search's approach to engaging armed groups, drawing from our extensive resource base, long history and experience transforming conflicts across the world.

The world is facing increasingly complex crises, including violent extremism; communal and political violence; lack of trust and confidence between authorities and communities; population displacement; environmental challenges; and pandemics. In regions of high-intensity conflict such as the Sahel, the Lake Chad Basin, Yemen, the Horn of Africa and the Great Lakes, these challenges are largely intertwined. It is more necessary than ever to add a more holistic approach to familiar humanitarian, peacebuilding and development approaches. There is still a need to provide assistance for the manifestations of these crises, but it is only by addressing the root causes and changing the approaches of conflict actors that we can hope for sustainable peace.

African Union and Somali Forces capture strategic positions in fight against Al Shabaab. Credit: UN Photo/Stuart Price

Understand, transform and Do No Harm: the keys to effectively working in conflict zones

Three pillars of Search's peacebuilding approach are conflict analysis, behaviour transformation and conflict sensitivity. Interventions in conflict zones require a moderated approach, based on an understanding of local dynamics and transforming the behaviour of actors to reduce violence. This must be done while taking into account local dynamics so as to prevent harm to local communities.

Conflict scan analysis to understand the dynamics within communities

A conflict scan is not only a critical tool for understanding local dynamics and effectively guiding programme implementation, but it is also a necessary mechanism allowing local communities to co-construct solutions to the challenges they face based on their own histories and experiences. When organisations implement programmes that are not conflict-sensitive, they can produce rather than reduce conflict. These missteps have important consequences for local communities:

> The water infrastructure created in our village to help us has not been integrated into the traditional local governance system, which has led to tensions over management and access to the infrastructure.
> – A community leader in central Mali

Before implementing activities, it is imperative that organisations work with communities to analyse their own challenges and create programmes that respond to the priorities of all relevant stakeholders, especially youth, women and religious leaders. More localised conflicts mean there is a need for a more thorough understanding of local dynamics, specifically the ethnic and inter-community context and the relationship between local authorities and communities. Only by understanding the root causes of these conflicts can organisations effectively craft conflict-sensitive programming, which optimises the quality and responsiveness of community-based interventions.

Transforming the way actors deal with conflict to reduce violence

One of the core insights from decades of conflict transformation experience is that conflict is normal, while violence is not. Recent trends in the Sahel, the Lake Chad Basin, Yemen, Myanmar and the Great Lakes countries show that conflicts are becoming more violent, and that this violence is increasingly occurring off the battlefield and in communities. For example, in Nigeria in 2019, farmer–herder conflicts killed more people than Boko Haram. Despite efforts by governments, the number of victims is increasing and communities' ways of life are being drastically changed. Conflict transformation, our approach of choice, requires taking into account local dynamics by involving communities more fully in peacebuilding as they have the best grasp of the realities in which they live. It utilises a more holistic approach that takes into account the need for acceptance of oneself and the other as part of a culturally diverse community. Better community engagement through tools, such as participatory theatre and media for peace, changes the ways conflict actors perceive themselves, others and their positions in conflict situations.

In Central Africa and Sierra Leone, radio DJs and talk show hosts have played an important role in transforming religious conflicts by engaging directly with members of their communities, dispelling hate and promoting peaceful resolutions to disputes.[14] In Mali, we engage with bloggers and internet users to fight rumours and misinformation that affect peacebuilding, development and humanitarian efforts. These programmes show that the media and new digital technologies are important means of consolidating durable peace for communities in conflict zones (Box 1).

Box 1 Just Future Programme

From 2021 to 2025, Search and its partners are implementing a programme (Just Future) aimed at improving the accessibility, responsiveness and accountability of security and justice institutions and the inclusivity of political decision-making and peace processes in six countries (Afghanistan, Burundi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Mali, Niger and South Sudan). The programme aims to mobilise civil society for collective action and advocacy that contribute to acceleration and localisation, as encompassed in Sustainable Development Goal 16. As part of the programme, Search organised a public broadcast on 27 November 2022 in Gao, northern Mali. The programme brought together local authorities such as the central sub-prefect of Gao, as well as youth, civil society organisations, administrative and communal authorities, traditional chiefs, peace ambassadors and journalists. It included a roundtable discussion, a skit by a local theatre troupe and a comedy play inviting the authorities to encourage the involvement of youth and women in public life. Participants called for more and regular activities of this kind in such a programme, to offer them a free exchange space with all social strata.

The Do No Harm approach

The wrong responses can fuel conflict in already polarised communities. In conflict zones, a conflict-sensitive approach is necessary to avoid fuelling existing conflicts and to truly 'do no harm'. This requires constant engagement with members of communities and a clear understanding of local dynamics at all stages of intervention. For example, after the atrocities in central Mali between February 2019 and March 2020, conventional reporting attributed the massacre to ethnic conflict between Fulani and Dogon communities.[15] Our reconciliation work showed that many other reasons, including rumours and hate speech, contributed to the massacre, so that understanding, rather than an ethnic conflict lens, informed our intervention. These experiences underscore the need to seek locally rooted and inclusive pathways to peace.

14 www.youtube.com/watch?v=IjgPrEAPXts

15 TV Monde (2021) 'Mali : à Ogossagou, la difficile réconciliation dans un village martyr'. News article, 13 November (https://information.tv5monde.com/info/au-mali-la-difficile-entreprise-de-reconciliation-dans-un-village-martyr-432308).

Trust and interdependence as the glue between conflict actors

Communities living in conflict zones fear armed groups, but they also often fear the armed forces that are supposed to protect them. These fears are compounded by tensions among community factions. There is thus a need not only to strengthen collaboration between security forces and communities, but also to create fair and sustainable interdependence between groups in communities.

Building trust between armed forces and local communities

The proliferation of armed groups, including Al Qaeda and the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), has triggered heavy-handed responses from security forces. This has created a situation where civilians are targeted both by violent extremist groups and by state armed forces. Stability depends on security forces holding human dignity at the centre of their approach and having collaborative relationships with communities based on mutual respect and trust. To this end, Search works to strengthen the institutional processes of security forces so that engagement with communities, human rights organisations and others is standardised. This includes facilitating national and regional working relationships between security forces and non-state actors, strengthening relationships between security forces and community members at the local level, and working with governments to enact policies and institutionalise practices promoting effective security engagement with communities. This enables security forces, civilian government agencies, civil society and religious leaders to work together to address threats by resolving the root causes of conflict. The issue of trust and accountability is also relevant to foreign forces operating in-country. Our interventions facilitate collaboration between local communities and international military actors to reduce public resentment and build trust (Box 2).

Box 2 Improving civil–military cooperation

From November 2019 to June 2022, Search and the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP) implemented a programme to improve civil–military cooperation in the Liptako Gourma region. A Malian army officer said:

> The [training] sessions improved my knowledge of how to deal with civilians. First, it allowed me to discuss with my police and gendarmerie colleagues the behaviours that do not facilitate collaboration between civilians and the Fondation pour le Développement au Sahel and to initiate activities aimed at restoring trust.

A warrant officer from the gendarmerie in Burkina Faso said:

> The knowledge acquired from the different trainings allowed the military to be better equipped to approach civilians. We have been able to carry out activities together such as cleaning public spaces.

Building interdependence within communities

Communal tension, which has long been a defining (and unaddressed) feature of conflict-affected communities like those in the Sahel, has resulted in entrenched ethnic divisions, increased identity politics and cyclical violence. Our approach prevents further escalation while laying the foundations for long-term interdependent relationships among people from different groups. As ethnic conflict in the Sahel is so deeply linked to livelihoods, our work, in part, demonstrates how relationships across dividing lines can lead to livelihood dividends by building economic links between farmers and herders, strengthening local trade and opening the value chain on key market segments. For example, in the Lake Chad Basin, through the Economic and Social Inclusion Recovery project, Search's approach demonstrates the possibility of strengthening human capital, social cohesion, and sustainable management of natural resources in targeted territories. The project has improved social cohesion between internally displaced persons (IDPs) and host communities in Jere, Nigeria, and has inspired elders to invite youth to participate in sociopolitical gatherings from which they were formerly excluded. Over the past decade, building interdependence within communities has played a critical role in setting the stage for formal peace negotiations, mediating conflicts over land and natural resources, building consensus around reforms in the context of political transitions, and facilitating violence-free elections.

Increasing community involvement in developing sustainable responses

Search's years of experience have demonstrated that it is crucial to involve communities in the management of challenges that concern them directly. In recent years, insider mediation has emerged as a process to prevent, manage and resolve conflicts by involving trusted local personalities, such as civic, social, religious or political leaders, in local, national and international peace efforts. This approach relies on the influence, legitimacy and knowledge of those individuals who are themselves an intrinsic part of the conflict context. As such, they can engage rapidly and directly with disputing parties from across social divides beyond the reach of international and regional mediation actors. Over the past decade, Search has trained mediators and helped them to resolve thousands of conflicts, including in Burundi, the DRC, Madagascar, Niger, Rwanda, South Sudan, Tanzania, Yemen and Zimbabwe. These local peacebuilders come from diverse backgrounds, allowing them to address a wide variety of conflicts including between farmers and herders, youth and security forces, refugees and host populations, or among different ethnic communities.

Mediators are selected on the basis of criteria defined jointly with all partners. These criteria include their ability to commit themselves voluntarily and to listen to the population, their discretion and respect for the community, their ability to manage conflicts while respecting the principle of neutrality, and their ability to lead public debates and make decisions.

Effective local mediation also requires a better understanding of the needs of mediators, particularly in terms of training and support. In Niger, for example, this mainly involves capacity-building in women's and youth leadership, collaborative approaches to conflict, non-violent mediation and conflict analysis, and gender sensitivity. Successful capacity-building can make local actors true artisans of sustainable peace.

Conclusions and lessons

Despite the importance of emergency interventions to respond to acute needs, it is crucial to frame interventions in the long term. Responding to the root drivers of conflict requires understanding local dynamics and transforming the behaviours of conflict actors. In order to accomplish this, peace-minded organisations must:

- **Adopt context- and conflict-sensitive approaches to programming in communities heavily affected by crises.** The examples above show that taking into account the culture of local communities and including them as genuine actors, not just beneficiaries, by giving them a place in programmes allows for better peacebuilding at the local level. This requires adaptation of traditional intervention tools – local participatory theatre, for example – and co-construction of programmes with communities in unstable and difficult-to-access areas.
- **Adopt multistakeholder and inclusive processes to establish sustainable standards.** To achieve sustainable results, it is necessary to work with all actors, including media regulators, religious communities, victims' advocates and youth, to ensure that they all contribute to maintaining the social peace to which they have contributed.
- **Improve collaboration among peace, development and humanitarian actors.** Actors in the humanitarian–development–peace nexus do not communicate their culture or principles sufficiently, nor do they put the need for sustainable peace at the heart of their actions.
- **Shift funding to more holistic approaches.** The availability of funds plays an important role in shaping responses in communities in conflict. More holistic approaches that address root causes, community-led protection and sustainable peace can strengthen interventions and increase impact. Greater effort is needed to secure funding for holistic responses, and strategies should particularly take into account the nexus when addressing complex conflict areas.

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In their own words: local civil society engagement with armed actors in practice

Carla Ruta

> 'We are civilians, we are brothers, you cannot claim you are fighting for us and at the same time you are killing us.' Message from communities in Cameroon to separatist armed groups

There is increasing recognition by the international community of the key role communities and local civil society actors play for effective community protection and respect of humanitarian norms by armed actors. Nevertheless, more can be done to involve local civil society and community-based actors in the protection agenda. In this article, three representatives from civil society organisations (CSOs) look back on several years of engagement efforts, showcasing different approaches and strategies: direct versus indirect engagement, forms of cooperation with international actors, capacity-building of community representatives, mediation efforts, among others.

Cameroon: Barrister Felix Agbor Nkongho, Centre for Human Rights and Democracy in Africa

Context and reasons for engagement

Conflict between anglophone separatist armed movements and the central government began in 2017. Civilians in the anglophone part of Cameroon have been victims of violations of humanitarian norms by different armed actors, among other attacks by separatist armed groups. At the start of the conflict, communities in favour of the separatists' goals were very supportive and were reluctant to criticise the separatists, whose stated purpose was to fight for the rights of these very communities. This has changed over time with increasing civilian targeting and other violations of humanitarian norms. Some communities have come to fear the separatists, and in many cases have fled their homes.

What challenges did you encounter in engaging with armed non-state actors? Displacement and the consequences of the conflict on the livelihoods of many communities has made the community's prioritisation of engaging with armed groups difficult, particularly where access to food and other means of survival are an immediate challenge. Supporting communities in their engagement efforts often means also providing humanitarian assistance. Conflicting priorities also make it difficult for communities to formulate and agree common messages. While infrequent, there have been cases where communities disagreed with what the individual speaking on their behalf discussed with the armed group and considered it to not reflect the views of the community. Additional challenges have been initial community perceptions of us as pro-separatist or as being 'too moderate'. Some communities don't understand the principle of neutrality and expect civil society and humanitarian actors to take sides. These communities were very hostile at first, and some communities would refuse to talk to our

staff. We had to gain acceptance step by step. We had to adapt. For example, we changed which staff we sent to which communities (people perceived as pro- or anti-separatist), and how we tailored messages so as to be more sensitive to the political views of communities (i.e., when we talk about humanitarian norms, not giving the impression that our goal is to denounce separatist armed groups or, to the contrary, legitimise their fight). This was a learning process for all of us and we have since grown into the work. Now that we have adopted a more sensitive and tailored approach and communities know us, acceptance for our work is very high. A final challenge is that, while in the case of small armed groups communities can easily reach the top decision-makers, with larger armed groups this is a challenge, with leaders of armed groups considered too important to engage with communities, and armed groups seeking to keep their leaders from potential risks and out of the public eye.

Can you give examples of engagement activities? We have been disseminating humanitarian norms in communities and conducting capacity-building activities with community leaders and representatives to support them in their engagement efforts with armed groups on protection issues. We developed dissemination and training materials in English, French and local languages, and with the help of several embassies we drafted a handbook on the conduct of war, which resonated well with armed groups. With international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), we developed training on international humanitarian law (IHL) norms for armed actors. We are also developing new strategies: one idea is to ask comedians and actors from the Cameroon entertainment industry to channel and disseminate messages regarding humanitarian norms, so that these messages spread further and deeper, and are better heard.

Small groups simulating online discussions using post-its during training in Yaoundé, Cameroon. Credit: Dorine Ruter

How were norms accepted by armed non-state actors and what was the impact of engagement? Communities have realised that avoiding or ostracising armed groups is not a solution: 'If you consider them your enemy, then you cannot achieve anything.' Many communities have moved from being in favour of armed groups to being against them to adopting a middle ground. Communities have become emboldened and are telling armed groups, including through social media, that 'enough is enough', and that groups have to stop killing and kidnapping people.

When communities decide to engage armed groups, most of the time they agree on the messages they want to convey and on who is going to be the spokesperson/representative. The most important message they try to convey is that 'we are civilians, we are not part of the conflict, we are brothers, you cannot claim you are fighting for us and at the same time you are killing us'. Communities have also advocated with armed groups to ensure that schools continue to function normally.

In some communities, leaders of the armed group come from the community itself. Community leaders are friends or relatives of the armed group's leaders. This greatly facilitates discussions with the armed group and the chances of a positive impact. In some communities, religious leaders play a central role and have the legitimacy to advocate with armed groups. In others, there are credible community-based organisations that have gained the trust and respect of armed groups and can convey messages from the community.

Messages from communities have been gradually heard and understood by many armed groups. In some areas, armed groups have toned down their violent rhetoric and are now speaking out against attacks on civilians and on schools. We have seen a decrease in violence against the civilian population. Some groups have even laid down their weapons and are now advocating for peace and reconciliation. The main motivation for armed groups to change behaviour has clearly been to gain or maintain legitimacy and community acceptance.

Many factors have led to this behaviour change. But the role of the communities has been key. Capacity-building and training efforts in communities as well as direct engagement by civil society and humanitarian actors have step-by-step been bearing fruit. Communities are now much more skilled and knowledgeable when talking about protection and peacebuilding. The greatest challenge now is to not let the guard down and to continue supporting communities' engagement with armed groups. Many people (fighters and communities) still don't know about IHL.

The ground dynamics of the conflict are also changing. There are new powerbrokers (new leaders, new warlords) who come into play. They also need to be engaged on the protection of civilians. If capacity-building and engagement efforts lack continuity, we are afraid that the gains made will be lost and we will have to start all over again. There is a real need for constant communication on protection and peacebuilding. It is not a one-off thing.

What was your experience of cooperating with international actors on engagement? Several international actors have been engaging and training armed groups on humanitarian norms, and

have conducted capacity-building activities with communities on those norms. They have often worked as a bridge between communities and armed groups. This work has had a positive impact and has contributed to helping armed groups understand that civilians should not be targeted. International actors have tried to respect the realities of the country and have not transferred risks of engagement with armed groups to communities. When there have been tensions between communities and international humanitarian actors, this has been related to other issues. For example, certain communities feel that the international community has not fulfilled its promises, not only in terms of humanitarian aid, but also in terms of finding political solutions to the conflict. Furthermore, communities sometimes don't understand that international actors need to have relations with the state: international actors need the consent of the state to enter the country, and have to respect the rules and regulations of the state. Some communities don't understand that when international actors meet with the state, this does not mean they endorse the attitudes or positions of the state. This perception has led to tensions and humanitarian workers have been attacked in some areas because of this.

What are the main lessons you've learned? At the beginning, our strategy was 'one size fits all'. We have realised that you cannot apply the same strategy with religious leaders as with traditional leaders, for example. Who in a community is the best person to engage armed groups directly can also differ. In some cases, it is a religious leader who is highly respected. In another community, the church might not be very popular. We further translated dissemination and training material into vernacular languages because we realised not everybody understands English sufficiently, and that we can have more impact using local languages. We learned to adapt our strategies to different communities. Some communities are very politically savvy, they want to engage armed groups, participate in the larger peacebuilding process, and they want to be engaged by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) on humanitarian norms. But for other communities, particularly those that have lost their sources of livelihood, this is not the priority. Therefore, when planning to support communities with the engagement of armed groups, before meeting them, you have to do a 'background check': how are the members of the community looking at the conflict (pro-separatists, unionists, etc.), are there divisions in the community regarding the conflict or regarding engagement? Who are the community leaders and what are their priorities? One needs a clear picture on all those questions to fully understand what is of interest to the community.

Lebanon: Zafer Al-Khateeb, Nashet Association

Context and reasons for engagement

In late 2000 and early 2010, there were tensions in Palestinian refugee camps between pro-Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and anti-PLO armed factions. Those tensions at times resulted in clashes. During clashes, fighters did not take precautions to avoid harming civilians, resulting in instances of civilian deaths and injuries. Civilian casualties were mainly due to a lack of education and training of fighters. As a result of such clashes, parents no longer sent their children to school.

Additionally, in the past there had been a strong sentiment by the factions and communities, that Palestinians in the camps need to be prepared to defend themselves in further conflict with Israel. A consequence of this was that Palestinian factions trained youth on how to handle weapons and recruited them into their ranks. In some cases, the youth did not reach the age of 18 years.

What challenges did you encounter in engaging with armed non-state actors? Talking to armed factions directly was very sensitive. We felt we lacked the legitimacy to talk about protection, especially child protection issues. Furthermore, there was a lack of awareness of international humanitarian norms, not only among armed factions, but also within communities. For example, in our communities, boys of 13 years are already considered men. Therefore, the prohibition of recruitment below the age of 18 clashed with local traditions and norms. There was further a political consensus that all Palestinians in the camps are victimised purely by factors external to their communities. To say that Palestinians are victimised by Palestinians was not well received. Never before had attention been drawn to the differentiated impacts that the clashes caused to communities, particularly to vulnerable groups, or on the livelihood of Palestinian communities. Discussing such delicate topics publicly or, even worse, with outsiders from INGOs, which could be suspected of collaborating with Israel, was initially met with great suspicion.

Can you give examples of engagement activities? We started by participating in and organising demonstrations against the clashes. Protesters sometimes even physically put themselves between fighting factions to try and convince them to stop the fighting, despite the potential risks of doing so. We were trying to raise awareness of the risks posed to civilians by the clashes, reaching out to local political representatives, but not much was changing. We therefore used a step-by-step approach. In 2010 we developed a joint programme with Geneva Call:[16] while Geneva Call engaged in direct dialogue with the armed factions on norms related to the protection of civilians, Nashet created a safe space for girls to access education and recreational activities – the Girls' Club. We started with 60 girls from the age of eight. We chose to start with girls, as due to tradition girls often find it more difficult to access NGO programmes because parents fear they would mix with boys. Now the programme is well established, with 250 girls and boys participating. The programme gave us the necessary legitimacy to organise a conference with civil and political actors in the camps. The purpose was to raise awareness on the need for increased protection for people with specific vulnerabilities (children, the elderly, women, etc.) from armed violence, and discuss how this awareness could be increased.

The second step was to organise a roundtable with the armed factions to speak about the protection of civilians, particularly the most vulnerable in our communities to ensure they are not harmed during clashes, and discuss how to ensure clashes don't impede children from accessing education. We were the first to bring all factions around one table, which was quite revolutionary at the time.

We also presented the factions with concrete evidence of violations, making it impossible for them to pretend that they were not occurring. We collected evidence during and after clashes (using smart phones, information from social media, etc.) on harm caused to civilians (deaths, injuries,

16 www.genevacall.org

houses damaged and cars burned, etc.) and on types of weapons used by the fighters, evidencing the disproportionate harm and damage caused by these weapons. We drafted a report recording humanitarian norms violations. The fact that we were able to collect and present evidence to the armed factions in a timely manner made it difficult for the factions to deny that violations had been committed.

We also conducted a broad study on patterns of child recruitment in the camps by the armed factions. The study also addressed the rights of children to play, to move, to be educated, etc. This helped increase awareness, knowledge and acceptance in the camps of international child protection norms. We then organised a conference and invited the different factions to talk about the results of the child protection study and the protection of the most vulnerable groups in our communities (children, women, elders). This led to factions signing a unilateral declaration on child protection in 2013.[17]

How were norms accepted by armed non-state actors and what was the impact of engagement?
When we started working, the different factions were not talking to each other and the divisions were very deep. Neighbourhoods, houseblocks and roads were divided by the different factions exercising tight control of their territories. It was difficult for civilians to move from one neighbourhood to another. Through our activities we helped build trust between factions and served as a space for mediation. They agreed to sit down together and talk to one another.

We further managed to create a space where armed factions agreed to learn about humanitarian norms and discuss these norms with us and among themselves. When we started working, there was little acceptance of humanitarian norms. Armed factions were mainly referencing Islamic norms and did not see the need to take into account international – perceived as foreign – norms. Now, humanitarian norms are well known and understood by fighters and civilians: people know that recruiting children, targeting civilians, schools and cultural sites, etc., is against the law. Communities are now monitoring whether factions comply with the norms. The main message has been: 'You say that you care and fight for Palestinian children and civilians, so how come you hurt people who are not involved in the fighting? How come you use such weapons in this way?'. The fact that the factions started to accept criticism, including from external actors, was a big step. The accumulation of pressure from Palestinian communities more aware of international norms and the outside attention of an INGO (Geneva Call), coupled with the realisation that their actions could make them subject to prosecution before Lebanese courts, contributed to a change in behaviour.

Today, the situation in the Palestinian camps is much calmer. The number of civilians affected by clashes has decreased, child recruitment is no longer taking place and the age of new recruits is verified to ensure they are at least 18 years old. Various factors (political, etc.) led to the current situation. Some factions are no longer active. But the joint efforts of Palestinian communities, Geneva Call and our organisation have certainly been one contributing factor.

17 Geneva Call (2014) 'Palestinian factions in Lebanon adopt a declaration on the protection of children'. Press release, 29 January (www.genevacall.org/palestinian-factions-lebanon-adopt-declaration-protection-children).

What was your experience of cooperating with international actors on engagement? With Geneva Call we had a clear division of tasks and facilitated and supported each other's work. On one hand, Geneva Call would not have succeeded in talking to Palestinian factions directly without an introduction by a local Palestinian NGO: a local NGO that understands the context (risks and vulnerabilities of civilians) and was not afraid to tackle protection of civilians issues or to get involved in discussions perceived as political. Many are afraid. On the other hand, the purely bilateral discussions with armed factions, which were touchier, were mainly done by Geneva Call. Cooperation with Geneva Call really made a change and launched a new dynamic of engagement with the armed factions on protection issues, which also influenced other international actors. For example, in the last couple of years the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) has regularly issued statements on clashes and risks to schools, which it had never done previously.

What are the main lessons you've learned? With the knowledge and experience we have today, we would not wait for the support of an INGO to conduct systematic and direct engagement. Now we have experience of how to talk to factions and how to initiate and conduct mediation. Now we can do it more directly, quickly and efficiently.

Iraq: the interviewed CSO representatives would like to stay anonymous as the information shared is sensitive

Context and reasons for engagement

In territories liberated from the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) by the Iraqi authorities, the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) – militias endorsed by the Iraqi government from different religious, tribal and political backgrounds – now exercise substantial control over the population. The PMF frequently harass the civilian population – particularly returnees – by preventing access to humanitarian or civil society actors and seriously hampering internally displaced person (IDP) returns by instigating complicated return procedures and vetting processes.

What challenges did you encounter in engaging with armed non-state actors? The major challenge we encountered in engaging with any PMF was the risk of being perceived as supporting one particular PMF over another. There are instances where a PMF controlling a district is forced out by another PMF through political manoeuvres and/or simple use of force. Consequently, if we had engaged the first PMF in that district directly, the risk was that we would be perceived as close to that PMF and would not have been given access to the district by the other PMF. Being perceived as not neutral could further jeopardise our other activities in peacebuilding, reconciliation and social cohesion. Thus, we chose to engage the different PMFs primarily indirectly and with caution to avoid damaging the perception people have of our organisation.

We capitalised on our contacts within the local authorities in the districts or representatives of the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) that had good connections with the different PMFs. Our contacts transmitted messages on our behalf to the PMFs. In some cases, we reached out to community leaders to engage with specific PMFs. This was the case, for example, when we faced access challenges to certain

districts. One PMF regularly harassed and even threated to kill or detain our field staff. We reached out to religious and tribal leaders in the community, who talked with the PMF on our behalf and helped us regain acceptance with the armed actor and safe access for our staff.

Generally, many (but not all) local PMFs are receptive to receiving training and being engaged by CSOs to improve their behaviour. This is likely due to the fact that these PMFs emerged from the communities where they are present. They are less ideological and their agenda and goals are focused on their communities. Other PMFs are more difficult for CSOs to engage with. They are more ideological and have more uncompromising views on their objectives and on who their 'friends' and 'enemies' are. This is why they are less inclined to change their behaviour.

An additional challenge to conducting sustained and comprehensive engagement work has been funding. Very few donors specifically support engagement work by local CSOs. Some donors consider this work too sensitive.

Can you give examples of engagement activities? Through local and regional authorities' representatives and community leaders, we have engaged PMFs on a number of issues regarding the protection of civilians. For example, we called on PMFs to stop hampering and delaying the return of IDPs and to simplify the security vetting process. We asked that a unified process be put in place with a single contact point where returnees could submit their application of return and be vetted. This was in the end accepted and implemented. Together with an INGO we also organised training for PMFs on humanitarian norms. Our contacts invited many of the PMFs to this training, which was very successful and appreciated, effectively raising participants' awareness of humanitarian norms.

How were norms accepted by armed non-state actors and what was the impact of engagement? Direct and indirect engagement efforts have achieved tangible results. After the training for the PMFs, we witnessed a change in how PMFs were communicating and behaving with civilians. PMF members were more respectful towards civilians. It is still far from how it should be, but there have been notable improvements. The intervention on IDP return procedures and vetting processes also led to concrete change. With some PMFs, achieving positive changes in behaviour is very arduous. Nevertheless, engaging with them is imperative. Establishing meaningful dialogue is a complex process, and it may take some time to see the fruits of engagement. Many PMFs are now aware that they need to improve their public image. Previously they were a highly visible presence on the street and closely monitored the activities of communities. Now they have started to withdraw from public spaces. PMFs' efforts to gain recognition as official security actors, like the police and the armed forces, gives them an incentive to be perceived as respecting humanitarian norms.

What was your experience of cooperating with international actors on engagement? The only engagement cooperation with an INGO we have had so far, around training on humanitarian norms, was a very positive experience. Joint activities have been impactful.

What are the main lessons you've learned? Our experiences have reinforced our view that the way we are conducting indirect engagement is the best and safest method to engage with these actors effectively without jeopardising the safety of our staff and our other activities. Carefully choosing contacts who can effectively pass on our messages has led to concrete, positive impacts. It is not so much a question of better, but rather a question of doing it more, and more systematically.

Conclusions

The experiences described here show how joint engagement efforts by CSOs, affected communities and international actors can lead to effective behavioural change among non-state armed groups, and concrete improvements in the protection of communities. Each case highlights the importance of listening to communities and understanding their perspectives and priorities. Protection engagement is a long, step-by-step process requiring continuity and perseverance, and the complementary use of different approaches. As one interviewee said, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to engagement on protection issues. Each approach, in order to be effective, must be precisely tailored to and driven by the context, the community, the non-state armed groups in question, and the protection issue being addressed to lead to effective improvements in the protection of communities.

Carla Ruta is Coordinator at Strengthening Community Protection (SCP). SCP is a newly created Swiss NGO with the purpose of enhancing the effectiveness of communities in their negotiations with armed actors for their own protection in situations of armed violence and conflict.

Protecting civilians through humanitarian mediation

Jérôme Grimaud

Community members are the experts in their own protection: they are the ones directly facing violence, they know the threats, when and where they occur, and the actors and motives behind them. Community members are also the first to engage with stakeholders who can influence their protection, usually through informal and spontaneous negotiations.

There is no doubt that humanitarians negotiating on behalf of affected communities – being 'the voice of the voiceless' – can be relevant, for instance when interlocutors have no immediate interest in negotiating with communities, or when community members have no access to the interlocutor they wish to negotiate with. But if this is done on the assumption that communities cannot speak for themselves, it can be a patronising and disempowering process. There is also a risk that humanitarians will be perceived as partial and as taking sides.

Humanitarian mediation can reconcile these different opportunities and challenges. It allows for community members and relevant actors to engage directly in a safe environment, framed by mutually defined and accepted ground rules upheld by the mediator. In this process, the humanitarian actor acts as a neutral and impartial facilitator of a process from which mutually acceptable solutions emerge.

What is humanitarian mediation?

Humanitarian mediation is defined as

> an inclusive and voluntary process addressing humanitarian concerns in emergency contexts in which a neutral and impartial humanitarian actor facilitates the communication and the collaboration between stakeholders involved in and/or affected by conflicts, in order to assist them find, by themselves, a mutually acceptable solution.[18]

It has four specific objectives:

- preventing or mitigating violence;
- preventing forced displacement and facilitating voluntary returns;
- improving access to aid and basic services; and
- enhancing respect for basic rights.

A humanitarian mediation process follows 10 steps and 10 principles. The steps begin with:

1. Conflict analysis, often involving a training workshop with key stakeholders.
2. Separate meetings with parties involved and/or affected by the conflict (pre-mediation).

If, and only if, the parties are willing to engage in the mediation process, then:

3. Mediation opening and agreement on ground rules.
4. Sharing each party's experience, story and concerns.
5. Defining the agenda and the problems to be discussed and resolved.
6. Exploration of the agenda.
7. Generating solutions.
8. Adoption of commonly acceptable solutions.
9. Agreement and plan of action.
10. Follow-up sessions, sometimes coupled with a crisis management mechanism.

18 Humanitarian Mediation Network (2018) *Humanitarian mediation and dialogue facilitation: a reference guide for training participants*, p.7.

The 10 principles are:

1. Support without advising.
2. Question without evaluating.
3. Understand without endorsing.
4. Frame without influencing.
5. Listen: hear, look, feel.
6. Share the process, verify, validate.
7. Promote inclusion and participation.
8. Reaffirm your role, engage the parties.
9. Feel the pulse, be in the moment.
10. Build and generate trust.

Throughout this process the mediator maintains their role as a neutral and impartial intermediary and facilitator, and to embody the principles during the process and in front of the parties. This is the keystone of the trust between the parties and the mediator, and of the trust of the parties in the process itself.

Humanitarian mediation is an *inclusive* process involving not only belligerents, but all segments of society affected by conflict and able to contribute to the decision-making process. It is also *voluntary*: parties and participants come to the mediation by choice, with a clear understanding of what the process is about and the ground rules that frame it. No incentives or per diems are paid. And it is *empowering*: stakeholders and participants own the outcome of the process and the decisions made.

The first step of a humanitarian mediation process is a conflict-sensitive analysis inspired by the Do No Harm framework.[19] This is conducted through workshops with relevant stakeholders, often met separately first, such as community members, civil society organisations, authorities, and armed actors. Initial conversations enable the mediator to assess the readiness and willingness of the stakeholders to engage and to abide by agreed ground rules. It also enables stakeholders to assess whether the process is appropriate and relevant to their situation and interests. Participants engage in the process voluntarily, with full knowledge of what the process is about and how it will be conducted. They agree, prior to the mediation process, to the rules and guidelines that will frame the discussion. They also agree that any agreement should reflect the priorities and concerns of all participants, and not be harmful to the parties involved or a third party not present in the mediation. The mediator ensures that the process is safe and secure, that it safeguards the equality and dignity of everyone around the table and that all voices are heard and taken into account.

Humanitarian mediation differs from political mediation in several ways. Participants are not prominent national political/armed group leaders, the issues at stake are not political, and the process of mediation is purely facilitative, meaning that it is in line with the humanitarian principles of neutrality, impartiality and independence.

19 The Do No Harm Project (2004) *The 'Do No Harm' Framework for Analyzing the Impact of Assistance on Conflict: A Handbook.* Cambridge, MA: CDA Collaborative Learning Projects.

Humanitarian mediation differs from social cohesion programming, which mainly aims at fostering or reconstructing the social fabric after an episode of violence. Humanitarian mediation primarily aims at improving the protection of civilians through prevention and mitigation. In other words, it is a problem-solving process intended to improve safety, security, freedom of movement and access to basic services. For the same reasons, Humanitarian Mediation also differs from peacebuilding, which is a multifaceted and much longer-term process.

There is, however, no contradiction between humanitarian mediation, social cohesion and peacebuilding. In fact, these interventions are to some degree complementary approaches. All of these approaches might use mediation as a process to reach different goals. In addition, a humanitarian mediation process leading to a significant reduction in or an end to violence can give way to a longer-term process aimed at reconstructing the social fabric and establishing durable peace.

Humanitarian mediation is a confidential process. It is also worth stressing that humanitarian mediation is an informal, voluntary process that is not a substitute for formal justice. Even if the process leads to a significant reduction in violence through a local agreement, it does not provide participants with immunity for acts or crimes for which they could be pursued and sentenced.

Humanitarian mediation in the Central African Republic

The Central African Republic (CAR) has experienced a repeated cycle of coups since its independence in 1960. In March 2013, Michel Djotodia led the Séléka – a coalition of rebel groups from the disadvantaged Muslim north – in overthrowing President François Bozizé. What began as a political coup, soon resulted in intercommunal violence. In response to the lootings, abuse and arbitrary detention and killing of civilians by the mainly Muslim Séleka, Christian self-defence militias, referred to as the 'anti-Balaka' (anti-machete), formed. The anti-Balaka not only targeted Séléka combatants, but also civilians from the Muslim minority who were suspected of sympathising with or supporting them.[20] In less than a year, thousands of people were killed and hundreds of thousands forcibly displaced. By early 2014, an estimated 40,000 Muslims were trapped in seven enclaves throughout the country, with a total restriction of movement, no access to basic services, and constant threat of attack. Despite the launch of French (Sangaris) and African Union (MISCA) military operations, and their subsequent replacement by 12,000 United Nations peacekeepers (MINUSCA) deployed to protect civilians and support the political process, violence remained widespread.

Several organisations, including the Danish Refugee Council (DRC), the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and the Norwegian Refugee Council, have carried out humanitarian mediation (known then as 'emergency mediation') interventions. Using the systematic neutral and impartial third-party facilitative mediation model,[21] interventions were carried out in the enclaves of Boda, Berberati, Carnot (West) and Dekoa (Centre), and in the PK5 neighbourhood of Bangui.

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20 It is important to note that although the conflict pitted Muslim and Christian communities against each other, the conflict was not religious in nature.

21 Humanitarian Mediation Network (2018) *Humanitarian mediation and dialogue facilitation: a reference guide for training participants*.

The longest mediation process, in Boda, lasted over a year. When the mediation team, comprising one European and one Central African mediator, reached the area, Boda was the second-largest Muslim enclave in the country, with over 15,000 civilians and self-defence group members trapped there. The process started with a conflict-sensitivity analysis, which drew on the outcomes of a 'training session' organised with multiple actors from the Muslim and Christian communities. From this initial phase it was clear that levels of grievance and hatred were such that there was no willingness from either community to enter into dialogue. Even use of the word 'mediation' was unacceptable for many as it implied dialogue with the 'enemy', and possibly forgiveness and reconciliation. There were also tensions within communities themselves, with disagreements on how to deal with the crisis.

Disengagement, disassociation, reintegration and reconciliation (DDRR) programme in Central African Republic. Credit: UN Photo/Herve Serefio

But it was also clear that all the actors who had participated in the training (militia and self-defence groups included) shared a common concern: security for themselves, their loved ones and their communities. There was a willingness to discuss this shared concern, though not jointly. Separate but parallel dialogue processes were therefore organised in the two communities on how to improve security in Boda. These processes involved community members and leaders, self-defence groups, representatives of the local authorities and representatives of international forces. These separate dialogues led to plans of action which, when implemented, led to reduced violence in Boda. In parallel, workshops were implemented in both communities on conflict management, targeting influencing groups (including women's groups). As violence decreased, one participant suggested that the minutes of the separate meetings should be shared across communities. At the same time, informal contact between communities gradually resumed, though conducted discretely and kept secret, and a first joint meeting was finally organised. By early 2015, life in Boda began returning to normal, and in 2017 UN troops were withdrawn from the town.

In 2018, three years after the process ended, an evaluation was conducted in Boda that included Interviews with more than 80 people who had participated in or observed the process. The interviews showed that the mediation/dialogue process and the training were instrumental in reducing violence and improving freedom of movement. As one woman noted:

> The dialogue contributed to decreasing tension [...] During the crisis we were not talking to the Muslims but thanks to those meetings we started talking again and it help[ed] [in] calming the spirits [...] Even Between Christians we had problems, including with anti-Balakas. The meetings allowed us to find agreement between us first before we could reconcile with Muslims [...] We couldn't be together at the market but now we are together.

Interviewees also stressed that the mediators had remained neutral and impartial. As one said:

> It was us who were deciding. All the decisions were coming from us. They were only giving the floor to everyone and remained neutral. It was us who did the work.

Similar processes were implemented in other enclaves and areas of CAR (Bambari, Bangui PK5 and Boy-Rabe, Bocaranga, Carnot, Dekoa, Mongumba, Ndelé and Obo) mostly focusing on protection concerns, sometimes on access, often with the two overlapping. These followed the same methodology, but adapted to local dynamics (in most instances, direct dialogue between communities was possible from the start). The outcomes of these processes led to significant, and mostly long-lasting, reductions in violence. As the Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation (IAHE) of the response to the crisis in CAR noted, 'Humanitarian mediation led to reduced conflict, increased access, and Protection of Civilians (POC)'.[22]

The organisations involved in humanitarian mediation processes in CAR were not mediation specialists at that time: rather, they became engaged because they saw a need for these interventions in a context where communal violence was at the core of the protection crisis and was also hindering humanitarian access. In addition, very few or no actors were involved in local mediation processes during the early stages of the crisis, and there was internal capacity (trained mediators) within these organisations. Even so, the decision to get involved was not straightforward, and there were internal disagreements about mandate ('Should we be doing this? If not us then who? What if no one does it? Do we have the capacity to do it?'); about neutrality and impartiality ('Can we be neutral in such a context? Should we involve armed groups in the dialogue? What are the risks of letting people decide by and for themselves? What are the institutional risks of being seen as mediating between communities?'); and about the meaning of protection ('Are humanitarians there to protect or to provide assistance to victims?'). It took strong leadership and a focus on the need for protection and freedom of movement to overcome these objections and decide to act where and when needed.

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22 ibid., p.91.

Conclusion

Improving protection of civilians affected by conflict necessitates a solid understanding of the context, based on communities' own experience and analysis. It also means mobilising appropriate strategies: protection by presence, early warning systems, negotiations for protection, civil–military coordination and, at times, evacuation. Humanitarian mediation is one additional proactive protection approach and possible strategy in emergency settings. It has proven to be effective in CAR, leading both to a reduction in violence and improved freedom of movement and access. The approach is currently being promoted by the Danish Refugee Council and the Norwegian Refugee Council in Mali, Burkina Faso and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The Danish Red Cross and the International Committee of the Red Cross have conducted pilot projects in South Sudan.[23]

Several obstacles remain to the development of humanitarian mediation. The first of those obstacles is the misperception that mediation is always political in nature. A second obstacle is that mediation skills take a lot of training and practice. The third is growing risk aversion among humanitarian organisations, which prevents them from acting where they are most needed. Last, and sadly most important, is the reluctance of humanitarian organisations to let go of power. Humanitarian mediation promotes the autonomy, self-determination and ability of community members to decide, for and by themselves, what is good for them and what their future should look like – a starting point and a keystone which, despite official statements and repeated commitments, is far too often overlooked.

There are several reasons to support the development of mediation in the humanitarian sector. First, it addresses the most pressing need of populations at risk in conflict settings, namely physical security and freedom of movement. Second, it is an empowering process in line with the inclusion and participation agenda, which promotes mutual understanding and a culture of dialogue, and allows people to address their own concerns and priorities and find solutions that are the most appropriate for them. Third, it has a very light footprint, both in terms of interference in local traditions and values, and in terms of logistical resources. Fourth, it improves acceptance and access for humanitarian actors, as they are genuinely seen as neutral and impartial. This is an aspect worth emphasising: the four core humanitarian principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence,[24] which the large majority of humanitarian actors abide by, are similar to the principles of third-party, neutral and impartial mediation. Humanitarians and mediators share the same ethical framework. They share the same DNA. Humanitarian mediation is an opportunity for humanitarians to do more in the field of protection and act directly to reduce violence affecting civilians. It is also a responsibility.

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23 The Center for Humanitarian Dialogue also has, besides its involvement in private diplomacy, a range of interventions in the field of humanitarian mediation.

24 UNOCHA (2022) *Humanitarian Principles* (www.unocha.org/sites/unocha/files/OOM_Humanitarian%20 Principles_Eng.pdf).

Humanitarian support for community negotiations with armed actors: Save the Children's experience

Kiran Kothari and Lauren Meredith

Along with many humanitarians negotiating with armed actors, Save the Children (SC) is exploring ways to better support and work with communities. Drawing on their frontline experience of protection and child protection, and previous work alongside community organisations in Iraq and Sri Lanka, staff in SC's Relations with Armed Actors and Negotiations Unit are working with regional and field colleagues to structure and facilitate humanitarian dialogues with ate and non-state armed actors for access to services and protection activities. With SaferWorld, we have also explored various modes of cooperation with local civil society and individuals.[25] From conversations with community partners in Syria, we learned how communities coalesce into groups during crises, and how we can be more trusting of each other in such situations.

Drawing on our organisation's breadth of experience, we began working with colleagues at the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) on research into community negotiations for self-protection. We consulted many other organisations and experts to learn from their experiences and explore how we can better support communities in crises. We sought to learn from our own experiences and from our colleagues across the humanitarian field before consulting communities. Questions we asked included: would more cooperative ways of working allow for increased leadership and influence for crisis-affected people over humanitarian action? Would it mean more influence over how local and international crisis response resources are accessed by and used within communities?

During research in 2021 in Colombia and South Sudan,[26] community members were asked about their experiences in negotiations with armed actors to access goods, services and other resources and to

25 See Martini, A. and Stephen, A. (2020) *Turning the tables: insights from locally-led humanitarian partnerships in conflict-affected situations*. London: Safer World (https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/document/turning-tables-insights-locally-led-humanitarian-partnerships-conflict-affected-situations). For background see SC's presentations of the Community Negotiations desk research at 2021 Global Protection Forum (www.globalprotectioncluster.org/old/2021/10/05/engagement-with-armed-actors-exploring-modalities-for-community-led-negotiations-for-protection-and-access/) and the findings from the field research and steps developed at Global Protection Forum 2022 (www.youtube.com/watch?v=nmKzWRcc21g). Colleagues contributing to this research at different stages include Timo Mueller, Robert Jones, Sergio Triana, Fernanda Almeida, Lauren Meredith, Måns Welander, and from NRC, Hannah Jordan and Nicolás Álvarez Muñoz.

26 Almeida, F., Meredith, L. and Triana, S. (2022) *Community-led negotiations and access in Colombia and South Sudan: evidence brief*. Stockholm: Save the Children (https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/document/community-led-negotiations-and-access-in-colombia-and-south-sudan-evidence-brief/).

address protection concerns, and how humanitarian organisations could best support community-led negotiations.[27] Based on the findings, the following steps were outlined;[28] with further refining, they could support and inform negotiations with armed actors by communities and humanitarians.

Steps in a community negotiations process based on findings of desk and in-country research

It is important to understand why communities need to engage in negotiations and the specific risks they may face, so the first step is intended to identify specific protection concerns, challenges with access to resources, goods and services, and individual risks (Table 1). While protection and access challenges vary from community to community, the research identified key areas of concern in the communities the research focused on: in this case, the recruitment and use of children and a lack of access to healthcare and education. Our in-country research highlighted that communities negotiate for access to resources, goods and services and for protection reasons, but were more likely to engage in negotiation as a last resort, when faced with physical danger.

Table 1 Context analysis

Protection	Access	Risks
What protection risks are there? What does the community perceive as the main protection risks?	What resources, goods and services does the community struggle to access? What is the main reason for the restricted access?	Identify the role of humanitarians and their assistance. Is humanitarian presence boosting risks or minimising them?

Source: 'Community-led negotiations and access in Colombia and South Sudan: presentation'. Slide 42.

Communities, just like humanitarian actors, engage in some form of risk analysis prior to deciding whether to engage in negotiation. Civilians make informed assessments, take calculated risks and modify their tactics based on a detailed reading of the situation and their 'lived knowledge'. While these continuous risk analyses can contribute to safer programming, communities' informal approaches could be systematised to further draw out the main threats. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Oxfam noted that 'individuals were at risk of being targeted with violence or intimidation when the official project period finished'. Programming had to account for this, but the community made

27 Almeida, F., Meredith, L. and Triana, S. (2022) 'Community-led negotiations and access in Colombia and South Sudan presentation'. London: Save the Children (https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/document/community-led-negotiations-and-access-in-colombia-and-south-sudan-presentation/).

28 Triana, S., Meredith, L. and Almeida, F. (2022) 'Presentation and discussion: local reconciliation and mediation in Colombia'. Webinar, 18 August (https://frontline-negotiations.org/events/speaker-series-webinar-presentation-and-discussion-local-reconciliation-and-mediation-in-columbia/var/ri-o.l-all/).

the final decision regarding which mitigation measures they wanted to put in place.[29] This tool can help support the systematisation of risk analyses in both assessing when to take certain actions and engage in negotiations during and following interventions from humanitarian organisations, and ensuring that communities are involved in the final decision-making process.

The second tool analyses community capacities, leadership structures and social cohesion as well as relationships with armed actors and other potential entry points for engagement (Figure 1). Interviews with community members, particularly in Colombia, suggest that many communities are highly organised, with internal leadership structures and community committees. Interviewees mentioned that community meetings allowed community members to present concerns for leaders to address. Approximately half of the survey respondents said that they trusted their community members and were willing to work collectively to address shared concerns. This sentiment was also expressed during interviews.

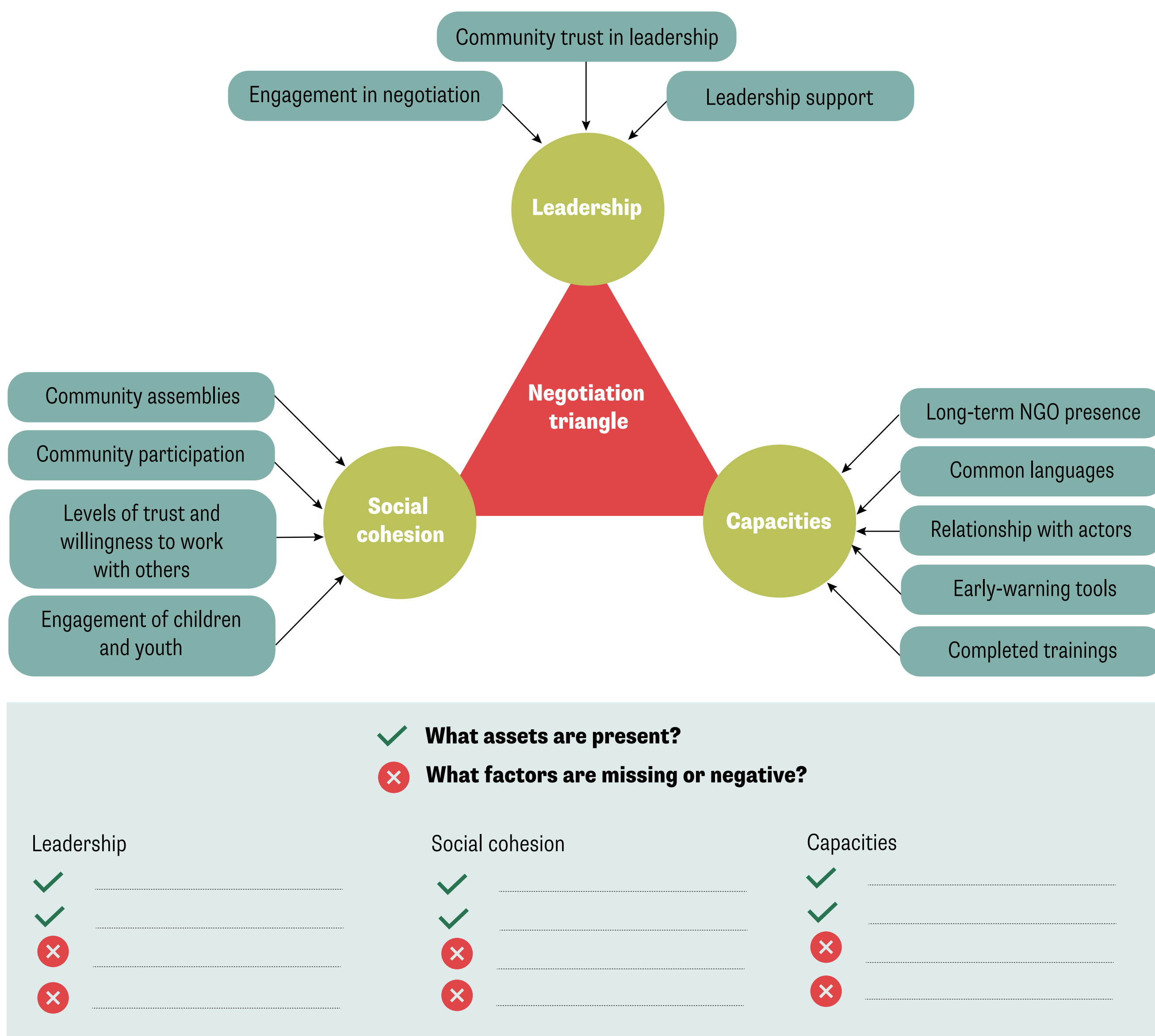
The degree of community organisation and social cohesion varies depending on the context. Communities in South Sudan, while organised to some extent, generally reported lower levels of social cohesion than in Colombia, meaning that members are less trusting of each other and less willing to work collectively to address shared concerns.

Youth reported that they were more willing than older members to work collectively with their community, and are seen as important bridges among community members. Developing an understanding of the degree of social cohesion within a specific community can help humanitarian actors determine what support to community structures might be needed prior to specific negotiations with armed actors.

Shooting a documentary about efforts by the UN Organization Stabilization Mission in the DRC (MONUSCO) to reduce the impact of the conflict on children. Credit: MONUSCO/Sandra Penan

29 Green, D. (2014) 'How can aid agencies help citizens reduce risks and fight for their rights in the middle of a war zone?' Oxford: Oxfam.

Figure 1 Community capacities and skills



Source: 'Community-led negotiations and access in Colombia and South Sudan: presentation'. Slide 43.

Lastly, it is important to recognise the degree of interaction between communities and armed actors. In Colombia, almost all community participants suggested that the armed groups in their regions were 'well known' or 'moderately well known' to them, while in South Sudan most suggested they were 'not well known'. Several interviewees in South Sudan believed that being close to and having languages in common with armed groups would be beneficial. As one participant put it: 'You cannot fight with your friend'. Research conducted by others suggests that communities rely on pre-existing relationships such as kinship and family ties to start a dialogue with armed actors.[30] In the DRC, negotiations 'depend heavily on the degree to which the armed group has social ties with the local community and the intensity of

30 Yousuf, Z. 'In the midst of violence: local engagement with armed groups'. Accord Insight (www.c-r.org/accord/engaging-armed-groups-insight/midst-violence-local-engagement-armed-groups).

violence they perpetrate'.[31] With newly arrived armed groups there is much less scope for negotiating measures to limit attacks. Armed groups with deep ties to communities, and which were concerned about their reputation and legitimacy, were particularly receptive to communities' needs.[32]

Strategies to support communities should be co-designed by communities and humanitarian organisations based on the strengths, weaknesses and desires of those communities. Drawing from the context and communities' capacities analysis (Table 1 and Figure 1), this tool helps humanitarian actors to work with communities to identify their specific needs and avenues for humanitarian support (Figure 2).

Communities interviewed in our research asked for support in strengthening existing community capacities, preferring a collaborative approach to humanitarian aid. Specifically, communities requested that humanitarian organisations provide accompaniment, mediation and follow-up after negotiations, rather than direct intervention in negotiations. One Colombian interviewee noted that they believed that just the presence of a humanitarian organisation at community-led negotiations improved the outcome. In Oxfam's 2016 study of the sustainability of community protection structures, the absence of an 'animator' was frequently cited as a key challenge: '[O]ften, the support most valued by community members, and which can have the strongest impact upon both process and outcome sustainability, involves a large amount of staff time, but not necessarily high activity costs'.[33] Animators (in these community protection structures supported by Oxfam):

> accompany protection structures throughout the lifespan of a project. They organise general assemblies, train committee members and local authorities on protection topics and support protection structures in their different activities, including in advocacy and awareness raising activities.

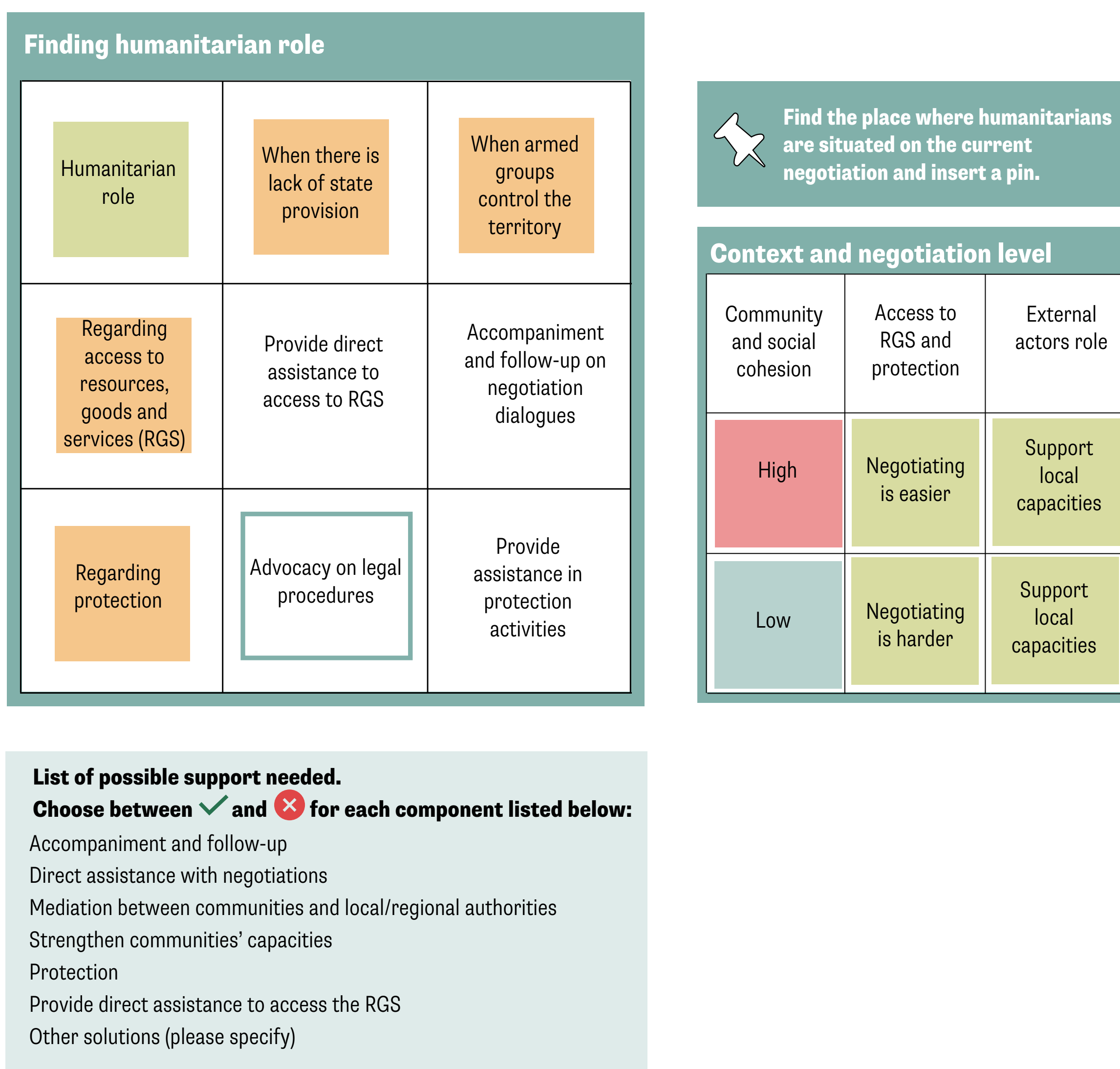
Thus the support that would be most valued by each community may vary, and this tool provides a list of questions to help humanitarian organisations to work with communities in defining their wishes and needs.

31 Van Damme, S. (2012) 'Commodities of war: communities speak out on the true cost of conflict in eastern DRC'. Oxford: Oxfam (https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/commodities-of-war-communities-speak-out-on-the-true-cost-of-conflict-in-easter-252424).

32 Suarez, C. (2017) '"Living between Two Lions": civilian protection strategies during armed violence in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo' *Journal of Peacebuilding & Development* 12(3): 54–67 (https://doi.org/10.1080/15423166.2017.1372796).

33 Lindley-Jones, H. (2016) *'If we don't do it, who will?' A study into the sustainability of Community Protection Structures supported by Oxfam in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)* Oxford: Oxfam (https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/if-we-dont-do-it-who-will-a-study-into-the-sustainability-of-community-protecti-620149/).

Figure 2 Humanitarian roles



Source: 'Community-led negotiations and access in Colombia and South Sudan: presentation'. Slide 44.

It is important to recognise that civilians should initiate, lead and manage their own negotiations.[34] Communities should lead in conducting negotiations and framing decisions. In Colombia, for example, Masullo argues that the

> successful functioning of peace communities (or 'peace zones') requires high levels of autonomy and local ownership. External actors should always be careful not to undermine grassroots ownership and autonomy.[35]

34 UNHCR (2014) 'Community-based protection: survey findings and analysis' (www.unhcr.org/ngo-consultations/ngo-consultations-2014/CBP-Survey-Findings-Final-June2014.pdf).

35 Masullo, J. (2015) *The power of staying put: nonviolent resistance against armed groups in Colombia*. Washington DC: International Center on Nonviolent Conflict (www.nonviolent-conflict.org/resource/the-power-of-staying-put-nonviolent-resistance-against-armed-groups-in-colombia/)

Evidence suggests that, while humanitarian action should support technical capacity-building for any programmatic partnerships with local organisations, the nature and form of capacity-building support is a key factor in whether the partnership is successful, and that, to succeed, local organisation needs – at the very least – to decide the focus and form of capacity-building.[36] Capacity strengthening should be seen as a two-way process, whereby communities also offer value in explaining contexts, culture and how to work in particular environments, but this is not widely recognised by international agencies.[37] This tool allows for a conversation between communities and humanitarian organisations to address their needs and objectives.

Humanitarian organisations must also be mindful of their own red lines and principles when working with communities. As part of a negotiated compromise (between armed actors and civilians), civilians might have to spy for one armed group on another,[38] or may decide to deceive armed actors, for example by sending fake letters supposedly from one armed actor to another, threatening attacks if abuses against the population do not stop. Many countries have also criminalised any form of dialogue with proscribed armed groups. When defining their roles, humanitarian organisations must also determine whether the proposed support contravenes humanitarian principles or the organisation's own policies and make it clear to the communities why they can or cannot provide support on certain negotiation strategies or compromises.

Figures 3 and 4 are close to the Centre of Competence on Humanitarian Negotiation (CCHN) tools set out in CCHN's field manual for negotiators. Both focus on the negotiation strategy, defining the goal of the negotiation as well as the negotiation parties. These tools should consider findings from steps 1, 2 and 3, and can help draw together a coherent plan for negotiations.

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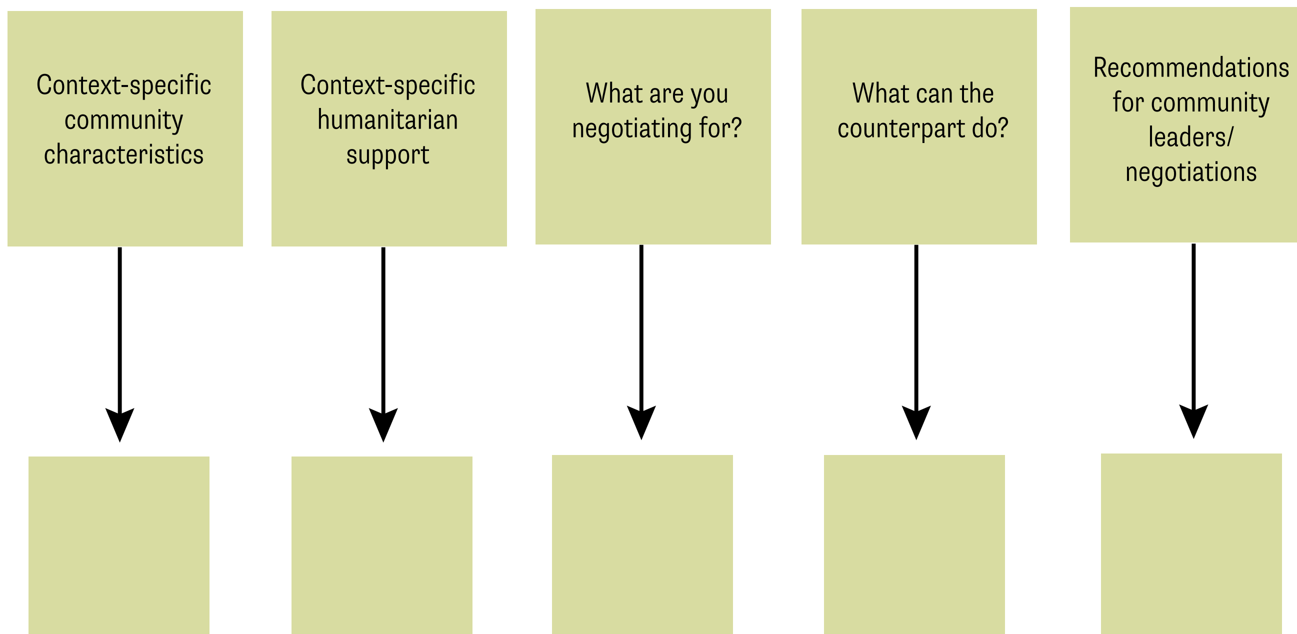
36 Antequisa, C. and Featherstone, A. (2014) *Missed again: making space for partnership in the typhoon Haiyan response*. Oxford: Oxfam (https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/missed-again-making-space-for-partnership-in-the-typhoon-haiyan-response-336897).

37 Wall, I. and Hedlund, K. (2017) *Localisation and locally-led crisis response: a literature review*. ALNAP report. London: ODI (www.alnap.org/help-library/localisation-and-locally-led-crisis-response-a-literature-review).

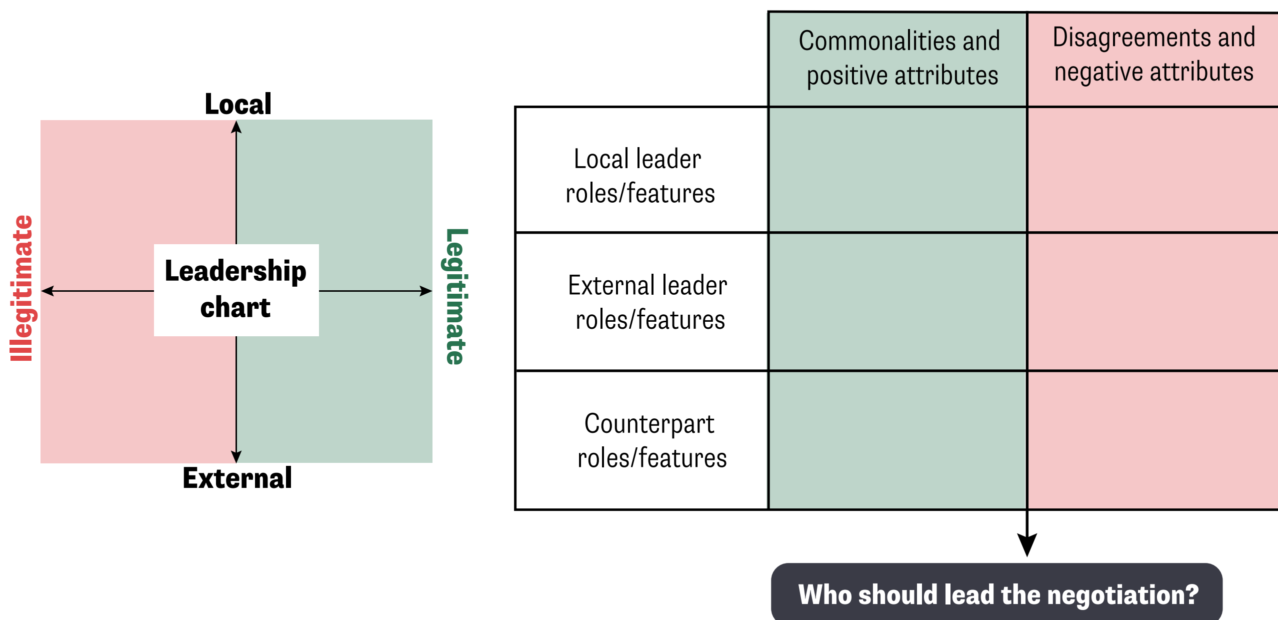
38 Jose, B. and Medie, P.A. (2015). 'Understanding why and how civilians resort to self-protection in armed conflict' *International Studies Review* 17(4): 515–535 (www.jstor.org/stable/247585650).

Figure 3 Preparing for negotiating with the counterpart: recommendations for communities and humanitarians in the community space



Source: 'Community-led negotiations and access in Colombia and South Sudan: presentation'. Slide 44.

Figure 4 Defining the negotiator and the counterpart



Source: 'Community-led negotiations and access in Colombia and South Sudan: presentation'. Slide 46.

Our next steps: working with communities on protection and education

From our review of research and experience, it is clear that we (humanitarians) must recognise that civilians are independent and have often developed their own strategies for protection. Even in high-intensity armed conflict as in Syria and Yemen, civilians seek to protect themselves and resist. Civilians develop a strong understanding of armed actors, learn which strategies work through trial and error and over time, and grow sceptical about the willingness and ability of international actors to come to their aid. Communities draw on a range of practical self-protection tactics, including neutrality, avoidance, accommodation, concealment and flight, submission, cooperation, contestation and witnessing and confrontation.[39] These strategies have three overarching goals: physical safety, sustenance and life-sustaining services.[40] These are goals we as humanitarians share.

The set of steps outlined here aim to provide additional means of analysing and planning negotiations, and where possible to better support communities in their negotiations with armed actors. Even where humanitarians conduct humanitarian negotiations separately on other distinct issues, some awareness of the compromises that communities are reaching will be essential if we are not to undermine their own negotiation efforts. More work needs to be done to clarify how humanitarians and communities can cooperate, especially when community or civilian strategies to cope with armed actors contradict humanitarians efforts.

Strategies to support communities have to be tailored to the context and to the intensity of the conflict. Communities may seek a range of support, from accompaniment to mediation and post-negotiation follow-up, rather than direct intervention in negotiations. Strategies should be jointly identified by communities and humanitarians based on the objectives, strengths and weaknesses of the community. Humanitarians often partner with communities through capacity-building efforts, but the form that such capacity-building takes will affect whether partnering is successful or not.

Both humanitarians and communities need to agree on the form and focus of such support so that the understanding between them is clear. This becomes important when such relations are tested. For example, in protracted conflicts, during phases when violence intensifies, the pressure on communities and humanitarians to make unprincipled or unwanted compromises with armed counterparts increases. During such phases, the principles and laws that humanitarians work with, that are intended to protect civilians, are often violated. And communities may make compromises that involve such violations. In such circumstances, how might we as humanitarians responsibly support communities in their dialogues when they significantly diverge from norms we want to see upheld? How do we manage community expectations that a decision to collaborate with humanitarians will result in protective outcomes? As humanitarians are able to more satisfactorily manage such risks, we will be better placed to pursue such negotiations.

39 Suarez, C. and Black, D. (2014) 'Surviving violence: transgressing categories and boundaries in armed conflicts' *Stability: International Journal of Security and Development* 3(1) (https://stabilityjournal.org/articles/10.5334/sta.dw).

40 Barrs, C.A. (2010) *How civilians survive violence: a preliminary inventory.* Virginia: The Cuny Centre (www.oxfam.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2011/08/Casey-Barrs-supporting-documentation-How-Civilians-Survive.pdf).

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This article draws on research and analysis from previously published documents, including:
Almeida, F., Meredith, L. and Triana, S. (2022) 'Community-led negotiations and access in South Sudan: evidence brief'. Stockholm: Save the Children (https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/document/community-led-negotiations-and-access-in-colombia-and-south-sudan-evidence-brief/) and
Almeida, F., Meredith, L. and Triana, S. (2022) 'Community-led negotiations and access in Colombia and South Sudan: presentation'. Stockholm: Save the Children (https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/document/community-led-negotiations-and-access-in-colombia-and-south-sudan-presentation/). These publications arose from the joint project implementation by SC and the NRC.

Protracted displacement, local economies and protection: communities and ethnic armed organisations in Myanmar

Ashley South, Jasminpaw, Jacqueline Hpway, Angela Aung, Eileen May, Mi Kun Chan Non and Anne-Meike Fechter

Myanmar in crisis

Myanmar is a country of 55 million people, with another 5–8 million driven into exile, mostly in neighbouring countries (including one million Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh). About two-thirds of the population come from the majority Bama group; the rest of the population is made up of dozens of ethnic minority (or 'nationality') communities.

Relationships between communities, civil society networks and armed actors in Myanmar are complex, contested and variable. Since the military coup of 1 February 2021, which brought the brutal and illegitimate State Administrative Council (SAC) junta to power, the people of Myanmar have bravely resisted military violence. Many of those opposing the junta have roots in civil society and Ethnic Armed Organisations (EAOs), dozens of which have been struggling against the Myanmar military for decades.

By August 2022, 1.5 million people had been forcibly displaced and at least 3,000 killed by the Myanmar Army since the coup. There were half a million internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the southeast

alone.[41] Since then, the number of civilians brutally killed and tortured by the military regime has increased significantly. These include ethnic nationality Karen and Mon communities, where the Protracted Displacement Economies (PDE) team and local partner groups are undertaking research under exceptionally difficult and dangerous conditions.

Tipping points: Covid, conflict and climate change

The devastating impacts of Covid in Myanmar exacerbate the increasingly serious challenges presented by rising temperatures and erratic rainfall. Even before the coup, communities and local economies were highly stressed. The resilience with which they respond to threats is extraordinary. One of the main themes identified in the PDE research is the importance of faith-based and ethnolinguistic networks. These are key elements in 'social capital' – resources which allow individuals, families, communities and ethnic nations to absorb, adapt to and sometimes transform the hazards they experience, in order to survive. For most communities in Myanmar, protection begins at home, with civil society organisations (CSOs), national non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and EAOs all playing important roles. As international humanitarian access is very limited, local actors are at the forefront of protecting human rights and helping to ensure the survival of communities. Not surprisingly, given the SAC's continued attacks on civilians, including several well-documented massacres, many are struggling to sustain basic security and livelihoods. Pre-existing economic problems had already been exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic. In most of the research areas, livelihoods are primarily based on subsistence agriculture, supplemented by some access to markets. Communities require support to develop more sustainable local economies.

The resilience of communities is shared and enhanced by CSOs and EAOs. Following the coup, several of Myanmar's longer-established EAOs have provided shelter to a new generation of Burmese democracy activists from towns and cities, who have fled the SAC's violence but continue the struggle for democracy. Inspiring partnerships have developed between EAOs and 'Generation Z' and other civil society activists, newly politicised and empowered by their opposition to the junta. In a number of areas, longer-established EAOs are supporting young people from the towns and cities to resist the military junta. In Sagaing and Magwe regions and elsewhere, anti-coup forces have established local People's Administrative Bodies providing basic governance and services in areas subject to Myanmar Army attacks. Across Myanmar, newly established People's Defence Forces are successfully engaging junta forces on the ground.

Rural communities are another key set of stakeholders. Even before the coup, there were at least a quarter of a million IDPs in the country – testimony to the failure of a previous peace process that began in 2012, which was not adequately supported by the National League for Democracy (NLD) government. Since the government was ejected by the SAC, things have gone from bad to worse for many of Myanmar's ethnic communities.

41 An overview and needs assessment of Myanmar's humanitarian crisis, period: February 1, 2021 following the military coup until July 2022 (9-8-22).

Following the coup, the Karen National Union (KNU, the main Karen EAO) joined in solidarity with the people, providing support and refuge to anti-junta activists, and launching successful attacks on Myanmar military bases occupying ethnic areas. As a result, Karen and other ethnic nationality civilian communities have been the target of repeated attacks by the Myanmar Army, including hundreds of airstrikes which have killed large numbers of people and displaced tens of thousands.

In southeast Myanmar organisations such as the KNU and New Mon State Party (NMSP) are perceived by local communities as protecting the ethnic nation from incursion by the Myanmar Army, which is experienced as a violent, alien and predatory force. The NMSP has had a ceasefire with the Myanmar military since 1995. The ceasefire has provided significant physical protection to communities in NMSP areas of control and influence, although, since the coup, the party has been criticised by activists for not taking up arms again against the junta.

In addition to offering a relatively protected space, many of Myanmar's EAOs provide health, education and other services to conflict-affected communities. For example, the KNU and NMSP education department separately administer almost 1,500 schools, providing exemplary mother tongue-based and multilingual education to some of the most vulnerable and marginalised students in the country. EAOs such as the KNU and NMSP also offered help in the Covid crisis. The KNU, for example, designated many of its 100-plus health centres as Covid clinics. While international donors were relatively generous, the Myanmar government and army provided little support to these efforts. On several occasions, the Myanmar Army even destroyed EAO Covid control points and treatment centres. As it did around the world, the pandemic had a detrimental effect on local communities. Many lost jobs and access to basic resources.

Across much of the country, EAOs are protection actors. However, in other cases EAOs have aligned with the junta. This does not necessarily mean they share in the SAC's abuses, but in many cases armed groups have poor human rights records.

Many civil society groups work in partnership with EAOs, or in other cases operate 'below the radar' to deliver life-saving services. Where possible, they work with communities to support local livelihoods. They also play important roles in advocacy, documenting and speaking out about the plight of communities. Ethnic CSOs often work in partnership with EAOs, helping to develop policy and implementing programmes to support and protect communities. In most cases these local organisations have access to conflict-affected communities that international agencies do not. Gender dimensions are important to these dynamics, with women under-represented in EAOs but often playing important leadership and other roles in civil society.

Voices of localisation

Three case studies from our research illustrate some of these themes. Locations selected reflect the diverse settings in which long-term displaced people live, the challenges they face and the resourceful strategies they adopt.

The Mon case study features people who were repatriated from refugee camps in Thailand in the late 1990s, as well as other more recently arrived IDPs, most of whom are relatively securely settled in areas under NMSP control. The Myaing Gyi Ngu context allows insights into the lives of IDPs who have fled the war zones into an area controlled by the Myanmar military authorities and pro-junta militias, in an area strongly influenced by Buddhist monks. The northern Karen case study focuses on IDPs in hiding in war zones, and more settled villages which often act as temporary hosts in the KNU's Taw Oo District.

Mon ceasefire zones

The NMSP (founded in 1958) has had a ceasefire with successive governments since 1995. It was the first EAO in Myanmar to denounce the military coup and side with popular protests against it. The NMSP has not gone back to war with the military. Rather, it has sought to provide a secure environment in its demarcated ceasefire zones, protecting local Mon communities (including long-term resettled refugees and IDPs) from state incursions and military violence. As a 59-year-old villager said, 'We are safe here [because the NMSP has a] security guard.' A 37-year-old woman agreed: 'It is peaceful here under NMSP control'. However, travel beyond NMSP areas is difficult and dangerous, with access to markets a particular challenge for farmers.

The NMSP has provided land to most resettled IDPs and refugees. With limited international funding, the party's Mon National Education Committee delivers a highly successful education service in its areas of control and adjacent zones of 'mixed administration' (where the Myanmar authorities also have influence). Although some CSOs and activists have criticised the NMSP for not fighting the junta, a party leader pointed out that 'most Mon civilians do not want to return to war and displacement, which they experienced many times in the past'. Many communities struggle to secure basic livelihoods, with very limited support. The NMSP works in partnership with Mon CSOs to provide community development in this remote area; the party also operates 33 in-patient and out-patient clinics.

Myaing Gyi Ngu IDP settlement

This area is under the day-to-day control of ethnic Karen Border Guard Forces (BGF), which operate under the authority of the Myanmar Army. These groups have a poor human rights record, and have on many occasions launched attacks on civilians as well as rival EAOs. In Myaing Gyi Ngu itself, communities do not report frequent violence. However, there are mixed views among residents about 'requests' to work on local infrastructure and other projects. There are also reports of BGF forces taking villagers to use as frontline porters. The Myaing Gyi Ngu area is strongly influenced by local Karen nationalist monks, who are generally opposed to the KNU and other EAOs. Undertaking work in this context is very challenging, given that researchers, local communities and CSO workers risk being arrested and tortured by the SAC if they are seen to be 'politically active'.

Informants spoke about receiving food donations from the monks, and parcels of land. A 42-year-old woman talked about the support received from the monks, and through some international NGOs. Although she would like to, she couldn't go home because 'if we go back to our village, we will have to

serve in the military' (referring to forced conscription and portering). A 44-year-old woman talked about moving to Myaing Gyi Ngu in search of protection from violence in the conflict zones. She feels protected by the monks' chanting of Buddhist scriptures: 'this area would be unsafe without the chief monk'.

An informal network of CSOs and national and international NGOs has provided services to communities in and around Myaing Gyi Ngu since the coup, including training and livelihood support. This has included work with potentially marginalised groups like young women, to build skills and capacities. Aid providers have to negotiate access with the BGF and other powerful actors (often informally with key individuals) in a volatile situation. It is risky for community actors to work in this area, but they do so out of solidarity with the villagers. Several international agencies have left Myaing Gyi Ngu since the coup because of the unstable political and security situation.

Taw Oo (Toungoo) District – in the conflict zone

Taw Oo is one of seven districts under KNU administration. Prior to the renewal of Myanmar Army attacks after the coup, the district had experienced some respite from decades of armed conflict following a 2012 ceasefire with the government. The situation since the coup has been characterised by extreme violence. In this context, the KNU is widely perceived as protecting villagers from the Myanmar Army. A 69-year-old farmer told researchers that 'we have protection from our Karen army … If they are not near to us, we will get abused [by the Myanmar Army]'. As in NMSP areas, the KNU provides basic health and education services, which are trusted by the community and adapted to local needs. One middle-aged farming couple explained that 'we trust the KNU will protect us'.

Some villagers remain in their old settlements (especially the elderly), while many others have been forced to flee from air and land attacks. Relatively secure host communities do what they can to receive fleeing civilians, who generally belong to the same ethnolinguistic and mostly Christian networks. Despite limited resources and amid great insecurity, the KNU and partner CSOs provide food, health and education services to civilians, including emergency relief for IDPs. Ultimately, however, the heart of self-protection consists of communities helping themselves and each other, sharing food, information and moral/spiritual support.

Conclusion

Our research with local communities, civil society groups and EAOs shows the importance of community agency and 'protection partnerships' with CSOs and EAOs. The challenges and achievements of localisation and resilience are illustrated in the three case studies. Protection means physical security, but also protection of longer-term ('second generation') rights, including access to equitable economies and livelihoods and local development, including mother tongue-based, multilingual education.

Karen Education and Culture Department (KECD) school in Taw Oo District. Photo: Ashley South

These frameworks are significant achievements, especially because most activities are carried out in zones of recent or ongoing armed conflict and violence against communities. In this context, community leaders, civil society actors and EAOs play important protective and mobilisation roles. They need better political, technical and financial support.

International support to local agencies in Myanmar should be a matter of urgency, given the significant needs and proven capacities of CSOs and EAO line departments. This is also an act of solidarity, supporting suppressed people in their struggle for a better life, against one of the most vicious regimes in the world – what Hugo Slim has called 'humanitarian resistance'.

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The Protracted Displacement Economies (PDE) research project is funded by UK Research and Innovation through the Global Challenges Research Fund. The PDE investigates economic activity among those affected by long-term displacement, to promote and support inclusive and sustainable livelihoods. Led by the University of Sussex, teams in five countries (the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Lebanon, Myanmar and Pakistan) undertake research in a variety of settings. For more information see www.displacementeconomies.org/.

Three key lessons from efforts to strengthen community protection in Iraq

Julia Steets

Whenever there is armed conflict, civilians are harmed. Protecting civilians is therefore a core task for humanitarian organisations. One of the most promising approaches is to strengthen communities in their ability to protect themselves.[42] This article builds on a two-year research project on protection in Iraq.[43] It explains the benefits of strengthening community capacities. It then reflects on experience with this approach in Iraq, which has been problematic in many respects. To better address these issues, practitioners need to understand local political dynamics, do everything they can to break the top-down logic of international aid programmes, and find a good way to balance power and diversity in community structures.

There are good reasons for focusing on community capacities when trying to protect civilians from harm

We often think and talk about civilians as *victims* when we consider what happens to them when they get caught up in armed conflict. Yet individuals and communities rarely remain passive when armed actors are out to harm them. They may, for example, hide or seek safety in another location, plead with fighters or their leaders, turn to powerful figures to intervene with the armed actor on their behalf and either offer or deny the armed actor their support. A first advantage of protection actors that try to strengthen community capacities is that they don't just see civilians and communities as passive victims of attacks. Rather, they recognise the agency communities have in protecting themselves and in negotiating with armed actors, and seek to build on it.

Power structures in communities can be patriarchal or exclusionary. When it comes to protection, the perspectives, needs and priorities of women and girls often do not get enough attention. Similarly, the interests of less powerful or marginalised groups – people with disabilities, displaced people or migrants, young people, members of a specific clan, ethnic, religious or political group or the lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer (LGBTQ) community – may not be respected when negotiations with armed actors happen. A second advantage of protection actors who try to strengthen community capacities is that they can try to design processes in a more inclusive way. They can, for example, design community committees in which women and minority groups are well represented or organise separate groups where sensitive issues for women or members of the LGBTQ community can be discussed more openly.

42 Other approaches include 'naming and shaming' armed actors, mobilising influencers and training armed actors. See Westphal, F., Stoffel, S. and Steets, J. (2022) *The logic of protection approaches: four models to safeguard civilians from harm* (https://gppi.net/2022/06/08/the-logic-of-protection-approaches).

43 See gppi.net/project/protecting-civilians-from-harm. The Global Public Policy Institute (GPPi), the Institute for Regional and International Studies (IRIS) at the American University of Iraq Sulaimani, the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) and Geneva Call jointly implemented this research project, which was funded by UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) on behalf of UK Aid.

Educating community leaders on the importance of voting in Iraq. Credit: Ibtisam Rahmatallah, IRI

Finally, effective engagement with armed actors requires long-term investment in building relationships. Humanitarian organisations are mandated to focus first on the immediate and short-term needs of crisis-affected people. Planning horizons are therefore usually short and staff are frequently reassigned elsewhere. Building the capacity of communities to self-protect and to engage with armed actors promises to be more sustainable than other protection approaches as it helps build the skills and relationships of community members, rather than of staff members of humanitarian organisations who will likely redeploy.

Protection actors have implemented a variety of activities in Iraq – and some have led to results

So far, so good. What, though, does it mean in practice to 'strengthen community capacities for protecting themselves'? Iraq has been a rich testing ground. Many international actors have been engaged and a lot of money has been invested, especially in multi-ethnic areas like the Nineveh Plains that were once controlled by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). International protection efforts there have involved one or more of the following:

- **Setting up representative structures**. Some international actors or their local partners help to set up community committees that discuss protection priorities, participate in training and, where possible and feasible, engage with armed actors. As part of this, protection actors map the community's composition and power structures and select committee members on that basis. Some develop inclusive approaches to ensure that different ethnic, religious or tribal groups as well as women and young people are well represented.

- **Training**. Protection actors involved in this kind of activity typically offer some form of training or capacity-building to committee members. This can range from awareness-raising sessions on the rights of civilians in armed conflict to training programmes on negotiation skills.
- **Direct or indirect contacts with armed actors**. While this doesn't happen often, some organisations have contacts with relevant armed actors. Where they do, they sometimes support communities either by acting as a go-between or by facilitating direct contacts between community representatives and representatives of the armed actor.
- **Financial resources**. Some organisations consciously steer clear of offering financial resources or material support to communities because they fear this would raise expectations and distort why community members get engaged. Other organisations make such resources available to build trust and to enable communities to implement projects they deem relevant to protection.
- **Protection by presence**. Finally, organisations often assume that the presence of their staff can help prevent attacks on civilians. Some, like the non-governmental organisation Nonviolent Peaceforce, specialise in this, deploying unarmed international civilians to areas, communities or individuals at high risk of attack.

Our research in Iraq shows that these efforts can bear fruit. In one example, a protection organisation helped liaise between the community, an armed group and the authorities. This revealed that the armed group had not been blocking the return of internally displaced people for political reasons (as displaced people assumed), but because the area was mined. This helped all sides build trust and jointly search for constructive solutions. In another example, a community committee asked the protection organisation to discuss with the security actor in the area whether they could deploy more educated and experienced people to operate checkpoints. According to the community, this helped reduce harassment and the risk of violence at the checkpoints. In a third example, a community protection group, established and supported by a protection organisation, persuaded an armed actor to vacate civilian buildings.

Community-based protection in Iraq faces critical problems and pitfalls

Despite these encouraging examples, by and large efforts to strengthen community capacities for protection have been far from successful. Several observers we spoke to went as far as saying that the problems with implementing this approach in practice are so pervasive as to discredit it. Experiences in Iraq highlight the following problems.

First, the local political context matters a lot. In some areas, political constellations and power relationships are such that communities and their representatives can influence armed actors, at least to a certain extent. In other areas, however, there is no such political space. As one protection actor we interviewed put it:

> What can the community do? They don't really have a way to communicate with the army. A village may have a *sheikh* or a *mukhtar*. They will communicate with the army, but they don't have any power.

Protection actors should therefore focus their efforts on areas where there is at least some space for communities to influence armed actors.

A second set of problems relates to the role and identity of 'the community'. Protection organisations often assume that 'the community' is a positive force. However, communities (or specific groups or individuals within communities) may also support or participate in rights violations against other communities or groups. In Iraq, for example, community members who stayed in their villages often strongly object to the return of internally displaced people, especially if they have family members who are suspected of being affiliated with ISIS. These communities use their relationships with armed actors to block the return of internally displaced people, rather than to strengthen the protection of civilians.

Second, communities are made up of different identity and interest groups that are often in conflict with one another. Protection actors influence local power dynamics when they create or support representative structures like community committees. In doing so, they face a common dilemma: should they focus on those who already hold power, those who are most likely to have some leverage in political processes and in negotiations with armed actors? Or should they use the process to promote more inclusive forms of governance, strengthening the roles of women, young people and minorities, for example? Protection actors operating in Iraq have approached this question in different ways – although many actively promote the participation of women.

Third, we found that international initiatives support a dazzling variety of community structures, created by humanitarian, development and peace actors. We came across local peace committees, community dialogue committees, community protection groups, community security forums, community committees for social cohesion and peacebuilding, youth committees, community policing forums, leadership committees and committees of wise men. In some villages or small cities, several exist at the same time. In many, community structures and their membership changed repeatedly over time, depending on which actor convenes the committee and decides who participates. This fragmentation of community capacity-building efforts creates obvious practical problems: where structures and training duplicate each other, they waste resources and undermine each individual committee's relevance and influence. Where they use different approaches, for example to select and compensate committee members, this can create tensions within the community. Participants can easily be frustrated if their committees are discontinued and new ones set up. While international actors have made efforts to coordinate their approaches better, our research identified numerous examples of duplications and inconsistencies.

The fragmentation and discontinuity of community capacity-building efforts are symptoms of a larger, underlying issue: although interventions aim to be community-based, they are driven by the top-down logic of international aid programmes. Aid organisations apply for and receive funding to pursue particular objectives and outcomes, such as protection, security, social cohesion or peace. The community structures they create must support these purposes, and this in turn is reflected in the name, terms of reference and membership of these committees. Therefore there is an inherent tension between the structure of the aid system and genuine community-based approaches in which communities designate their own representative structures, identify priorities and allocate resources.

Three key lessons

What does this mean for organisations that want to strengthen the capacities of communities to protect themselves and engage with armed actors? We believe that experience in Iraq holds three key lessons for protection actors:

1. Understand the local political context well before deciding whether and how to engage. Is there space for communities and their representatives to negotiate with armed actors in a way that makes engagement worthwhile? Which individuals and groups in the community hold power and who is marginalised? What community structures exist and what other initiatives are there to strengthen them?
2. For a genuine community-based approach, community members should be in the lead and determine which challenges should be addressed. This has implications: protection organisations should not set up a committee that is specifically designated to fulfil their or their project's purpose. Instead, they should join with other organisations that want to strengthen community capacities, ideally supporting an existing representative body pursuing a broad set of objectives, and explain to their donors why this is necessary. Protection organisations should only engage if they can commit to doing so for the longer term, and reflect from the beginning on what will happen after their intervention ends.
3. Balance power and diversity. To what extent does the committee you support need to reflect existing power structures to ensure that it is has leverage, for example when negotiating with armed actors? To what extent should it include representatives of less powerful or marginalised groups to make it more diverse and inclusive? What differences matter most in the given context – gender, age, ethnic or tribal background, sexual orientation?

Experiences in Iraq show that the current structure of the international aid system makes it hard to find good ways to strengthen community capacities. Protection organisations, however, are not only takers, but can also be shapers of the international aid system. They may have more space than they think to adapt their interventions to the local context. In our research, we did not come across any instances where a donor explicitly forbade such adaptation. Using this space more proactively would also help inform and educate donors about local conditions, preparing the ground for more adaptability in the long run.

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Everyday negotiations with the Taliban insurgency: perspectives on civilian agency in Afghanistan

Ashley Jackson

In the years leading up to their capture of power in 2021, the Taliban employed a strategy of creeping coercion. By relying on both violence and the provision of some services (particularly justice, through their shariah courts), they gained influence in village after village. They then began imposing more and more rules on the civilian population, and sought to co-opt existing government services and aid projects. Communities responded in different ways, but many sought to subtly push back and renegotiate the terms of Taliban control.

In exploring how Afghans navigated life under the insurgency, this article draws on interviews with Afghans and members of the Taliban carried out by the author in various capacities since 2017. Focused on the pre-August 2021 period, when the Taliban was still an insurgency, the article begins by exploring the dilemmas faced by civilians living in areas under Taliban influence. It then looks at some of their tactics and strategies, highlighting how people sought to maximise their agency. The article concludes by briefly looking at the implications for civilians now under the de facto Taliban government. It attempts to reflect the wide range of circumstances and dynamics at play, but one important caveat is that, in a country as diverse as Afghanistan, some nuance will undoubtedly be sacrificed to the need for concision.

Afghan elders hold Shura in Marjah. Credit: Lance Cpl. Tommy Bellegarde

No good choices: options for civilians living in areas under insurgent influence

By 2017, the Taliban controlled large swathes of Afghanistan. They had built a parallel bureaucracy with governors, courts, tax collectors and even school monitors.[44] Official narratives of the conflict, and maps of government and Taliban control, painted a misleading picture. In May 2017, the US government estimated that the government controlled or influenced 59.7% of Afghan districts, while a further 29.2% were classified as contested.[45] Only 11.1% were said to be influenced or controlled by the Taliban.

In reality, the dividing lines were rarely so black and white. Control was fluid and overlapping, even in major cities. Moreover, this method of accounting tended to badly underestimate the Taliban's power and capacity.[46] A district centre might be 'controlled' by the government, even if much of the district was in Taliban hands and government district officials resided elsewhere for security reasons.

Further, the Taliban sought to control people more than territory. They needed to ensure Afghans would not inform on them or stand in their way. As the insurgency evolved, they increasingly sought to control more aspects of people's lives – how many times a day they attended mosques, what they wore, who they paid their taxes to, what was taught in schools.[47] To be clear, it wasn't that most Afghans wanted to engage with the Taliban; indeed, many fled to government-controlled areas. But those who stayed behind could rarely avoid dealing with the Taliban directly or indirectly.

Survival between a rock and a hard place

Ordinary Afghans living in areas under Taliban influence might try to negotiate with the insurgency on any number of issues. This included things like the payment of taxes, on reopening schools or even getting family members released from Taliban custody. But they had to do so while avoiding the appearance of 'supporting the Taliban', lest they invite suspicion or retaliation from the government or international forces. This was an exceedingly difficult tightrope to walk.

While few openly spoke of doing so, aid agencies, telecommunications companies, trucking firms and anyone else who wanted to do business in, or transit through, vast swathes of the country all engaged with the Taliban. Elders or other customary authorities would often act as go-betweens for aid agencies, negotiating their access with the Taliban. Often referred to as 'community acceptance', these arrangements became the backbone of humanitarian and development efforts.[48]

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44 https://gppi.net/project/protecting-civilians-from-harm

45 Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (2017) *Quarterly report to the United States Congress*. SIGAR, 30 April (www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2017-04-30qr.pdf).

46 Jackson, A., Weigand, F., Mayhew, L. and Bahiss, I. (2022) *Rethinking armed group control*. Working paper. London: ODI (https://odi.org/en/publications/rethinking-armed-group-control/).

47 Jackson, A. (2021) *Negotiating survival: civilian–insurgent relations in Afghanistan*. Hurst (www.hurstpublishers.com/book/negotiating-survival/).

48 Pont, N. (2011) 'Southern Afghanistan: acceptance still works' *Humanitarian Exchange* 49: 3. London: Humanitarian Practice Network, ODI (odihpn.org/publication/southern-afghanistan-acceptance-still-works/).

In engaging with the Taliban, civilians were quite literally outgunned. The Taliban relied heavily on violence to get people to go along with their demands. Even so, as the insurgency evolved they became more amenable to meeting (or at least listening to) civilian demands. Afghans in turn sought to find or build whatever leverage they could. The most significant incentive that civilians could provide was compliance, a powerful bargaining chip that they leveraged in different ways:

- **Collectively engaging with the insurgency.** Many communities backed, and even pushed, their elders to negotiate with the Taliban on their behalf. These elders were then able to leverage the collective compliance of the community in their requests to the Taliban. These might include protecting civilians from violence, reopening schools or clinics or reducing the taxes levied on farmers.
- **Cultivating bilateral relationships.** Many civilians and Taliban were enmeshed in the same social fabric. Some might be related to Taliban fighters while others came from the same village, went to school together or attended the same mosques. Civilians used these connections and tried to cultivate new ones (such as 'giving' a son to fight with the Taliban), to protect themselves.
- **Doing 'favours' for the Taliban.** Some people might provide intelligence or agree to help the Taliban in certain ways, and try to use these favours as leverage. For example, some people used quid pro quos to ask for Taliban help obtaining a job or to advocate for a relative in Taliban custody.

As these examples suggest, social capital – defined as the opportunities created by relationships, shared norms and cultural reference points – was incredibly important.[49] For example, when civilians were dealing with Taliban fighters and commanders from outside their communities, they often had a much harder time than when they were engaging with local Taliban. Connections also kept civilians safe in other respects. For example, divided communities were often much weaker vis-à-vis the Taliban – who used divide and rule tactics – than more coherent, cohesive ones.

It was not only the civilians who relied on a diverse array of connections to survive. As one Taliban commander said, 'everyone needs two phone numbers, one for the government and one for the Taliban. Even me, I have many friends on the government side, and this is how we manage our lives.'[50] These kinds of relationships were an essential part of their strategy to win control of the country. In the months leading up to the fall of the Islamic Republic government in August 2021, hundreds of Afghan districts fell to the Taliban in quick succession, like dominos. The vast majority of these changed hands through

49 This is certainly not limited to dealings with the Taliban. For examples from other contexts, see Baines, E. and Paddon, E. (2012) '"This is how we survived": civilian agency and humanitarian protection' *Security Dialogue* 43(3): 231–47; Suarez, C. (2017) '"Living between two lions": civilian protection strategies during armed violence in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo' *Journal of Peacebuilding and Development* 12(3): 54–67; Sanaullah (2020) 'Effectiveness of civilians' survival strategies: insights from the Taliban's insurgency (2007–09) in Swat Valley, Pakistan' *Global Change, Peace & Security* 32(3): 275–96; Kaplan, O. (2017) *Resisting war: how communities protect themselves*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

50 Jackson (2021).

tacit deals rather than pitched battles.[51] The Taliban's takeover of Nimruz – the first province to fall – was partly mediated by local powerholders and businessmen who had long been negotiating with the Taliban.[52]

Life under the Islamic Emirate 2.0: implications for understanding civilian survival strategies

Since the Taliban takeover, Afghans have sought to navigate a dramatic shift in circumstances. The economic collapse and ensuing humanitarian crisis have created excruciating levels of hardship, compounded by the uncertainty of dealing with a fragmented and unpredictable government. The conditions aid workers, and Afghans, encounter vary from one province to the next.[53] Women are particularly affected by both the harsher restrictions and the 'whims of individuals'.[54]

Many civilians, aid workers and others have fallen back on the same tactics they used throughout the war. Social capital is more important than ever, as is consideration of the local dynamics. A recent evaluation of community development projects highlighted the different dynamics non-governmental organisations (NGOs) encountered in trying to deliver aid under the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA) across the country, particularly regarding women's participation.[55] One clear finding was that NGOs with longer-term presence and a consistent approach were more likely to be able to stick to their principles and continue to involve women in their work.

Even though the Taliban is now the de facto government, the diversity of local deals, norms and rules remains. For example, as a recent report illustrated, what taxes you are forced to pay, and the degree to which the rates are negotiable, often depend on the individual you're dealing with.56 The best chances for survival seem to lie in who one knows and whatever leverage one can muster. Yet with the country showing 'strong signs of descending into authoritarianism', according to the United Nations,[57] this seems to be an

51 Zucchino, D. (2021) 'How the Taliban conquered Afghanistan'. New York Times, 8 August (www.nytimes.com/2021/08/18/world/asia/taliban-victory-strategy-afghanistan.html).

52 New York Times (2021) 'Taliban capture Zaranj, an Afghanistan provincial capital, in a symbolic victory'. New York Times, 6 August (www.nytimes.com/2021/08/06/world/asia/taliban-afghanistan-capital-zaranj.html).

53 Gall, F. and Khuram, D. (2022) *Between a rock and a hard place – multifaceted challenges of responders dealing with afghanistan's humanitarian crisis: a report on the perspectives of national NGOs*. Geneva: International Council of Voluntary Agencies (www.icvanetwork.org/uploads/2022/03/Final-ICVA-Report-AFG-v2.pdf).

54 UNOCHA (2022) *Female participation in the humanitarian action in Afghanistan*. New York: OCHA (https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/female-participation-humanitarian-action-afghanistan-september-2022-endarips).

55 Strand, A., Hatlebakk, M., Wimpelmann, T. and Wardak, M. (2022) *Community-driven development or community-based development?* CMI report (www.cmi.no/publications/8331-community-driven-development-or-community-based-development).

56 Clark, K. (2022a) *Taxing the Afghan nation: what the Taleban's pursuit of domestic revenues means for citizens, the economy and the state*. Special report, Afghanistan Analysts Network (www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2022/09/Taleban-Taxation-Final-1.pdf).

57 Clark, K. (2022b) *UN Human Rights Rapporteur warns of Afghanistan's descent into authoritarianism*. Afghanistan Analysts Network (www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/rights-freedom/un-human-rights-warns-of-afghanistans-descent-into-authoritarianism).

increasingly precarious survival strategy. The IEA is increasingly cracking down on any perceived dissent, and taking a harder line with aid agencies, detaining and abusing those it suspects of 'spying', as well as seeking greater control over programming and budgets. The room for manoeuvre is rapidly shrinking.

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Unarmed civilian protection

Louise Ridden and Berit Bliesemann de Guevara

While the physical safety of civilians amidst violence is often seen as a task of armed security actors (peacekeepers, police, etc.), a growing number of unarmed civilian protection (UCP) organisations have demonstrated that protection can be effectively provided by civilians for civilians without the use or threat of force.58 In a process organised by the international UCP organisation Nonviolent Peaceforce (NP) between 2017 and 2021, representatives of 160 international, national and local organisations from 45 countries came together to discuss principles, good practice and challenges in nonviolent civilian protection work.[59] Beyond UCP organisations' evaluations and reports, however, there is still little publicly known about nonviolent protection provided by organisations specialising in UCP, and this work's links with community self-protection practices.[60]

A major international research collaboration, the Network Plus 'Creating Safer Space', has been set up to contribute to deeper understanding of, and to support, unarmed civilian protection and self-protection amidst violent conflict.[61] The network currently funds 21 research projects in 10 countries exploring how violence against civilians can be deterred or prevented by civilians without the use or threat of force, how civilian capacities for protection can be strengthened, and how local efforts can be supported to transform conflict nonviolently as a basis for lasting, sustainable peace with social justice.[62]

Drawing on the work of this network, this article introduces the main practices and mechanisms of UCP, gives examples of how it works in different contexts and discusses some of the central challenges of

58 Julian, R. and Gasser, R. (2019) 'Soldiers, civilians and peacekeeping – evidence and false assumptions' *International Peacekeeping* 26(1): 22–54 (https://doi.org/10.1080/13533312.2018.1503933).
59 https://nonviolentpeaceforce.org/good-practices
60 www.usip.org/events/resisting-war-how-communities-protect-themselves
61 https://creating-safer-space.com
62 See https://creating-safer-space.com/projects-2. Findings of one of these projects, a study of cultural-artistic organisations' work of creating safer space for communities amidst urban violence in Medellín, Colombia, is discussed in the article 'Art that protects' on page 76 of this issue.

UCP work. We begin by outlining UCP, its principles, methods and activities. We then explore monitoring as one practice of civilian protection, focusing specifically on the cases of Mindanao in the Philippines and Kachin state in Myanmar. These two cases demonstrate two very different settings for this practice, and as such they exemplify the versatility of the UCP approach. We end with a brief discussion of the possibilities and limits of UCP, which humanitarian organisations thinking of adopting a UCP approach may want to consider.

Unarmed civilian protection

Unarmed civilian protection, sometimes also termed unarmed civilian peacekeeping[63] or (protective) accompaniment, is a method of civilian-to-civilian protection and civilian self-protection that seeks to reduce physical violence in areas of armed conflict by creating space(s) for peace. Nonviolent Peaceforce,[64] the largest international UCP organisation, defines UCP as:

> The practice of civilians protecting other civilians in situations of imminent, ongoing, or recent violent conflict. [UCP] involves international civilians protecting local civilians, local civilians protecting each other, and even local civilians protecting international or non-local civilians. The practice of UCP is nonviolent and generally nonpartisan. Protection is provided on invitation from local actors.[65]

While many communities self-protect without any outside support, in this article we focus on UCP practitioners who are 'external' to the conflict, whether working in their home countries or internationals, and who either support existing local protection initiatives or build protection mechanisms for civilians who had not previously received support. Although the practice varies depending on context, these civilians usually live and work within the communities affected by conflict. The practice works by building effective relationships between UCP practitioners and all parties to a conflict, including both armed and unarmed actors, where possible. Different UCP organisations carry out the practice slightly differently,[66] but most are generally led by the same, or similar, key principles.

Many international UCP organisations trace their history back to pacifist thought and embrace the ideals of Mahatma Gandhi's Shanti Sena, a peace army of nonviolent civilians who worked at the grassroots level to reduce violence and bring peace to communities in India.[67] This principle of working alongside

63 Bliesemann de Guevara, B., Furnari, E. and Julian, R. (2021) 'Unarmed civilian protection/peacekeeping' in *The Palgrave Encyclopedia of Peace and Conflict Studies*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan (https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-11795-5_178-1).

64 Furnari, E., Bliesemann de Guevara, B. and Julian, R. (2021) 'Unarmed civilian peacekeeping' in K. Standish, H. Devere, A. Suazo and R. Rafferty (eds) *The Palgrave Handbook of Positive Peace*. Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan (https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-3877-3_15-1).

65 Oldenhuis, H., Furnari, E., Carriere, R. et al. (2021) *Unarmed civilian protection: strengthening civilian capacities to protect civilians against violence.* Geneva: Nonviolent Peaceforce (https://nonviolentpeaceforce.org/wp-content/uploads/archive/UCPManual/2021_Course_Manual___Full_Text.pdf).

66 https://nonviolentpeaceforce.org/good-practices

67 Weber, T. (1996) *Gandhi's peace army: the Shanti Sena and unarmed peacekeeping.* Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Publishing.

communities is shared by all UCP organisations, some of whom employ national staff or volunteers, some international staff or volunteers, and some a combination. Whatever the specific UCP model, the vision of reducing violence in communities without the use of further violence remains.

Principles

While the principles of UCP vary from organisation to organisation, there are several key principles, some or most of which UCP organisations and practitioners identify with: nonviolence, non-partisanship, independence, primacy of local actors, relationship-building and civilian immunity in violent conflict.[68] Independence and non-partisanship are not principles for all UCP organisations, some of which prioritise solidarity with oppressed peoples instead. Nonviolence, the centrality of civilians and civilian relationships, which in practice means that UCP organisations accompany individuals or communities upon their invitation and decide on strategies in collaboration with local partners and those protected, and a commitment to the immunity and protection of civilians, however, are important for all UCP practice.

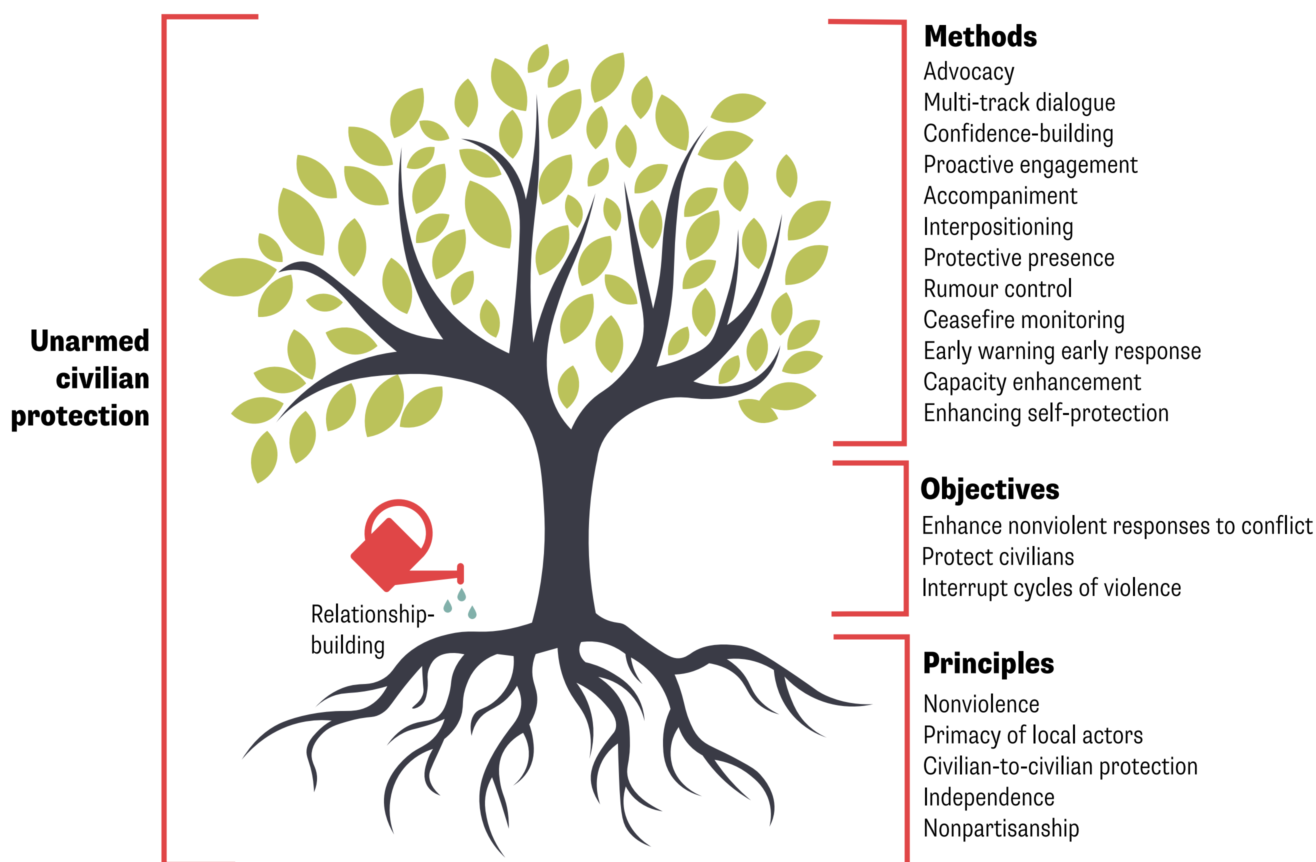
Methods

Relationship-building is at the heart of UCP. It is central to all other UCP methods, as it is through strong relationships with communities affected by armed conflict, armed actors involved in conflict and relevant local and national authorities that UCP practitioners can make their presence known, keep abreast of rapidly changing conflict dynamics, understand the protection needs of communities affected by conflict and take informed action. Facilitated by these strong relationships, UCP methods include advocacy, multi-track dialogue, confidence-building, proactive engagement, (protective) accompaniment, interpositioning, protective presence, rumour control, ceasefire monitoring, early warning early response, capacity enhancement and enhancing self-protection (see Figure 1).

Training is a second important aspect of the work of many UCP organisations. Commonly referred to as 'capacity enhancement', training conflict-affected communities in self-protection methods, as well as confidence-building in these methods, is a nonviolent way to support communities in self-protection. Armed actors, too, can receive training and capacity enhancement through UCP practitioners.
In both the Philippines and Myanmar, for example, UCP teams have trained military personnel in international human rights law and conflict-relevant international or national agreements signed by their governments. This has helped both to widen the legal knowledge base among armed actors and to educate them about the legal basis upon which UCP teams carry out their work.

68 Oldenhuis et al. (2021).

Figure 1 UCP tree model



Source: Oldenhuis et al., 2021

Civilian conflict monitoring: between institutionalisation and improvisation

The final group of UCP methods is monitoring. The term monitoring can refer to several things, including conflict monitoring, rumour monitoring and control and ceasefire monitoring. Conflict monitoring is central to UCP work, as practitioners rely on their knowledge of and information about changes in an armed conflict and ensuing civilian protection needs to be able to carry out their work. Conflict monitors build an understanding of developments through their relationships with local communities and armed actors, as well as by monitoring news sources and reports from other organisations. Monitoring and controlling the spread of rumours is another key aspect in conflict de-escalation, as rumours of imminent threats can quickly spread and mobilise armed opposition. Where such rumours are true, UCP practitioners aim to support civilians in their protection or even flight, while ensuring that information being circulated is accurate and will not result in further escalation of tensions. Ceasefire monitoring by UCP practitioners happens only in some contexts but can be effective. UCP practitioners can be well placed to practice monitoring as they are not party to conflict and are usually embedded in local communities and able to pick up on early signs of rising tensions.

Mindanao, Philippines

In Mindanao in the Philippines, where a peace agreement was negotiated between the government and the insurgent Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) in 2014, Nonviolent Peaceforce Philippines (NPP)[69] and three local non-governmental organisations (NGO) have been official members of the International Monitoring Team (IMT) under its Civilian Protection Component (CPC),[70] meaning that civilian protection practitioners have been actively involved in a ceasefire monitoring process.[71] This process wrote UCP explicitly into an international peace agreement for the first time. The CPC organisations monitored and investigated breaches of the agreement and de-escalated violence on the ground. They also trained thousands of people in human rights, violence reduction and relationship-building, who in turn built new mechanisms to make their communities safer. NPP is now also officially recognised by the Joint Normalization Committee (JNC)[72] to support the Bangsamoro Normalization process, the mechanism which implements the new Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM).[73]

Beyond ceasefire monitoring, UCP tasks and strategies in Mindanao have included rumour control to de-escalate community violence, preventing displacement, helping with the safe return of internally displaced persons (IDPs), monitoring and investigation of violent incidents, and training local people in UCP.[74] Through community early warning and early response, local communities are taking preventive action (e.g. reporting violence, using a protection activity such as fleeing, negotiating, confronting or calling someone for help). Indigenous community-led peace zones in different parts of the Philippines provide examples of how communities have organised to protect themselves from armed violence.[75]

UCP has adapted throughout the peace process and continues to do so. While the conflict with the MILF ended with the peace agreement and the creation of the BARMM, other forms of violence continue, ranging from the activities of several smaller armed groups to *rido*, a form of community violence. Mindanao has seen a resurgence of violent conflict within the BARMM, specifically in areas referred to by the military as the 'SPMS Box', which are alleged strongholds of the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters, a MILF splinter group that rejected the peace agreement. All this has led to a continuation of UCP work by international and local organisations and takes place in close collaboration between international NGOs such as NP and local organisations such as Bantay Ceasefire and the Consortium of Bangsamoro Civil Society – some of which will be studied in a forthcoming 'Creating Safer Space'

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69 https://nonviolentpeaceforce.org/where-we-work/philippines

70 www.peaceagreements.org/view/738/Terms%20of%20Reference%20of%20the%20Civilian%20Protection%20Component%20%28CPC%29%20of%20the%20International%20Monitoring%20Team%20%28IMT%29

71 Gündüz, C. and Torralba, R. (2014) *Evaluation of the nonviolent peaceforce project with the civilian protection component of the international monitoring team in Mindanao, Philippines.* Final report. Geneva: Nonviolent Peaceforce (www.c-r.org/learning-hub/evaluation-nonviolent-peaceforce-project-civilian-protection-component-international).

72 www.peaceagreements.org/view/1345

73 https://bangsamoro.gov.ph

74 Furnari, E. (2017) *Wielding nonviolence in the midst of violence: case studies of good practices in unarmed civilian protection* (www.soziale-verteidigung.de/system/files/documents/summary_wielding_nonviolence.pdf).

75 Macaspac, N.V. (2019) 'Insurgent peace: community-led peacebuilding of indigenous peoples in Sagada, Philippines' *Geopolitics* 24(4): 839–877 (https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2018.1521803).

project. Indeed, when asked about good practices of international UCP organisations working with local partners at a UCP workshop in Manila, representatives of such local UCP organisations were clear that they see the work of international and local organisations as complementary, that 'local and international actors can play crucial roles depending on the specific context, and that they should engage in a process of "co-production" of protection'.[76]

Nonviolent Peaceforce protection officer conducts community orientation on UCP in one of the conflict-affected communities in Sulu, one of the islands of the Philippines. Credit: Nonviolent Peaceforce

Kachin state, Myanmar

The close community work carried out on the ground by NPP in Mindanao, on the invitation of and in collaboration with its local partners, has been largely impossible for its sister mission, Nonviolent Peaceforce Myanmar (NPM). Even during Myanmar's period of democratic opening between 2011 and 2021, NPM staff (including national staff) themselves were not directly involved in community protection on the ground, due to official access restrictions for foreign organisations. Between 2014 and 2021, NPM was therefore mainly involved in training local volunteer Civilian Conflict Monitors (CCMs), later renamed Community Peace Observers in the context of emerging national ceasefire and peace negotiations. This training was initiated on invitation by and in collaboration with Burmese civil society organisations, who took the lead in implementing UCP strategies in eight conflict-affected states of Myanmar. Conflict monitoring thus took on a very different character from the institutionalised process in Mindanao.

In Kachin state in northeast Myanmar, for instance, there has been a long-standing violent conflict between Myanmar's military (Tatmadaw) and the Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO) with its armed wing, the Kachin Independence Army. After a 17-year ceasefire from 1994 – which many Kachin people experienced

76 Schweitzer, C. (2017) *Good practices in nonviolent, unarmed, civilian-to-civilian protection.* Geneva: Nonviolent Peaceforce (https://nonviolentpeaceforce.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Documentation_Manila_20170220-final.pdf).

as a phase of exploitation by Myanmar's ethnic Bamar majority and foreign companies and extractive industries – violence resumed in 2011 and has continued since. Given the absence of a ceasefire agreement, conflict monitoring in Kachin was based on a bilateral agreement between the government and the KIO to respect the human and humanitarian rights of civilians. NPM's training for Kachin CCM volunteers consequently focused on the monitoring of rights violations by armed actors.

A recent study into these civilian monitoring networks concluded that:

> despite failed ceasefires in Myanmar, the nurturing of civilian monitoring networks, that is, supporting civilian capacity, had a positive – albeit limited – impact on civilian protection. Monitors adapted knowledge from international ceasefire monitoring training to their reality on the ground and implemented civilian protection monitoring.[77]

The authors also observed, however, that 'conflict conditions seriously limited protection monitoring and posed grave security challenges to monitors and communities'. They concluded that

> in conflict situations where armed actors show little sensitivity to civilian preferences and commitment to respecting human rights, the need for civilian protection is high while the protective potential of civilian monitoring is limited as long as armed actors' incentives to better protect civilians remain weak.

At first sight, the 2021 military coup in Myanmar seems to support this conclusion. Ethnic armed conflicts around Myanmar's borders have flared up again, and thousands of people – now including members of the Bamar ethnic majority, especially youth – have joined the armed struggle, in an uncanny resemblance to the 1988 uprising of students and Buddhist monks and its bloody aftermath, captured so grippingly in Pascal Khoo Thwe's memoir, *From the land of green ghosts*.[78] Yet, Myanmar has also seen large nonviolent resistance movements and actions, and there is evidence that civil society organisations and communities in several states have continued practising and adapting UCP under the new dictatorship, as another forthcoming 'Creating Safer Space' project will explore.

Possibilities and limits of UCP

An international intervention in Myanmar to protect civilians is politically unviable, even though nonviolent protesters have called on the international community to exercise its 'Responsibility to

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77 Krause, J. and Kamler, E. (2022) 'Ceasefires and civilian protection monitoring in Myanmar' *Global Studies Quarterly* 2(1) (ksac005, https://doi.org/10.1093/isagsq/ksac005).

78 www.hrw.org/news/2005/03/24/book-review-land-green-ghosts

Protect'.[79] There has also been a further shrinking of the space for international organisations, including UCP work, to assist Myanmar's citizens. In a situation like this, UCP knowledge, skills and strategies gained in more peaceful times enable civilians' agency to self-protect.

In a group conversation held by one of the authors with volunteer CCMs in Kachin state in 2018, all CCMs claimed they had become monitors due to their experiences with violence, and because they wanted to do something. As one monitor noted, 'I have seen the injustice, rape, killing and violence of the armed groups. I hope to reduce these problems by becoming a member of the CCMs.' While CCMs knew that their involvement might put them at greater risk of being targeted, they accepted this risk in order to be able to act in the face of violence, rather than remain passive. This choice is not least based on the understanding that UCP strategies such as relationship-building, capacity enhancement and advocacy also work to protect the protectors. In a context where most international partners have had to withdraw or are greatly hampered in carrying out their work, community self-protection – however imperfect – may be one of the few possibilities for political action short of participating in conflict.

As in many other forms of intervention in armed conflict,[80] UCP relies in part on the willingness of armed actors to consent to it. Without this minimum consent and the basic cooperation of armed actors, UCP practices are severely restricted. There have been cases, including in Mindanao, where international UCP practitioners had to withdraw because they were deliberately targeted, although this remains an exception (the fatality rate among armed peacekeepers is estimated to be 12 times higher than among UCP practitioners)[81]. It is for this reason that UCP practices centre around local actors and civil society organisations within conflict-affected communities, who are well placed to build understanding with armed actors about the role of UCP and its practitioners, making dialogue possible, and who can continue UCP work when outside actors cannot.

A related challenge is limited access to some conflict-affected areas, for example due to official access restrictions such as in Myanmar or Ethiopia, or high levels of violence, as in Syria at the height of the war. Even where UCP organisations have access, the state may revoke the visas of international practitioners at any time with little warning, as has been the case for some organisations working in Colombia. The primacy of local actors in UCP, however, means that civilian protection can be supported remotely through online training and advice, and the exit of international practitioners does not need to mean the end of UCP. While the international community of states has shown little appetite to intervene in Myanmar, either in the 2017 Rohingya crisis or the 2021 military coup, organisations such as Nonviolent Peaceforce Myanmar have continued to support civilians in self- and community protection.

79 Global Justice Center (2021) 'Protesters in Myanmar call on international community to uphold "responsibility to protect"'. Blog, 20 May (https://globaljusticecenter.net/blog/28-publications/videos/1475-protesters-in-myanmar-call-on-international-community-to-uphold-responsibility-to-protect).

80 Julian and Gasser (2019).

81 Janzen, R. (2014) 'Shifting practices of peace: what is the current state of unarmed civilian peacekeeping?' *Peace Studies Journal* 7(3) (https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/248285946.pdf).

Like any method of civilian protection, UCP faces challenges and obstacles – not least a lack of funding relative to other forms of externally supported peace interventions. But it also presents enormous possibilities and potential for supporting civilian protection efforts in contexts where, without it, they might not exist at all.

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Unarmed civilian protection through collective impact: the Jos Stakeholders Centre for Peace (JSCP), Plateau State, Nigeria

Sukanya Podder

The vast majority of casualties in armed conflict are civilians. This continues to raise significant challenges in international and national approaches to the Protection of Civilians (PoC). Protection, however, is not only about external approaches, but also civilian approaches to their own self-protection. Civilians have adopted diverse survival strategies towards armed actors, including non-engagement (flight, silence), non-violent engagement (negotiation, paying taxes and tolls) and more violent forms of engagement (forming civil defence militias and armed vigilante groups). Civilians have also promoted protection against abuse and violence through collective protest and direct communication with armed groups.

Community self-protection initiatives can include a range of activities to counter, mitigate, deter or avoid threats to their lives and safety. In Colombia, the Association of Peasant Workers of the Carare (ATCC) was formed to prevent armed militias and military forces from carrying out extra-judicial killings. Community-based militias among Nuer groups in South Sudan have demonstrated adherence to ethical restraints and socially defined moral codes in their interactions with civilians due to strong social control mechanisms around violence. In northern Uganda civilians adopted neutrality towards and avoidance and accommodation of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) when it was an active belligerent.

Agricultural training college in the Democratic Republic of Congo, empty since it was attacked by the Lord's Resistance Army in 2008. Credit: Caroline Gluck/Oxfam

In particular, unarmed civilian protection (UCP) approaches have gained traction in restraining civilian targeting by armed actors. UCP is an umbrella term to describe the practice of civilians protecting other civilians in situations of imminent, ongoing or recent violent conflict. It involves both formally trained international and national civilians protecting local civilians, as well as local civilians informally protecting each other and extending protection to internationals, as well as non-local civilians. As a practice, UCP has roots in Mahatma Gandhi's *Shanti Sena* or peace army, which engaged in non-violent civil resistance to end British colonialism in the Indian sub-continent.[82] The key principles of UCP involve non-violence, the primacy of local actors, impartiality and neutrality. UCP builds on key methodologies around relationship-building, proactive engagement through protective accompaniment, inter-positioning between warring parties and protective presence. It offers a model based on non-violent engagement through monitoring ceasefires, rumour control and early warning and early response (EWER).

There is a growing body of evidence that non-violent, unarmed strategies can be more effective in protecting civilians than armed or militarised strategies.[83] A number of NGOs, including Peace Brigades International (PBI), Nonviolent Peace Force (NP), Christian Peacemaker Teams, Meta Peace Team and Peace Watch Switzerland, have fielded unarmed civilian peacekeepers in conflict zones in the Philippines, Colombia, Palestine and South Sudan. NP in particular has been driving UCP mainstreaming through the design and delivery of bespoke training courses such as 'Strengthening Civilian Capacities to Protect

82 Julian, R. and Schweitzer, C. (2015) 'The origins and development of unarmed civilian peacekeeping' *Peace Review: a journal of social justice* 27(1): 1 – 8 (https://doi.org/10.1080/10402659.2015.1000181).

83 ibid; Wallace, *Security without weapons*; Julian and Gasser (2019); Schweitzer, C. (2021) *Unarmed civilian protection: protecting people in crisis and war zones without violence*. 29 March (accessed 12 July 2022) (https://doi.org/10.1080/10402659.2015.1000181).

Civilians', run by the United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR).[84] These efforts have seen the UCP community of practice expand from seven organisations working in five countries and regions in 1990 to 42 in 42 conflicts around the world.[85] Recognition of the importance of unarmed strategies is reflected in the Report of the Independent High-level Panel on United Nations Peace Operations (2015).[86] The United Nations (UN) has in response adopted some UCP activities by deploying observers and unarmed military officers in the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA).[87]

Local adaptations of UCP include community watch teams composed of unarmed volunteers or community guards and declaring specific villages or areas as zones of peace, peace communities or weapons-free zones. While several examples exist, here I draw on the case of the Jos Stakeholders Centre for Peace (JSCP) in Plateau State in Nigeria. JSCP is a multistakeholder network comprising 39 representatives of communities and organisations in Jos North. It offers a collective impact model that has been used to build the capacity of people at the grassroots, and those in positions of local power and influence, to prevent conflict escalation and violence directed at civilians in the context of an ethnoreligious communal war. The approach draws on an innovative method of peacebuilding developed by CDA Collaborative Learning Projects (CDA), the Framework for Collective Impact in Peacebuilding.[88] The framework, first published in 2017, was field-tested in partnership with Search for Common Ground in Jos. CDA provided technical support for the development of locally driven, multistakeholder collective impact networks targeting local-level conflicts.[89] This approach brings together actors across different societal sectors to establish a locally led and locally owned 'collaborative', which works to develop and implement novel solutions to violence in Jos North.

Communal conflict creates insecure spaces marked by targeted violence and retaliatory attacks, endangering individuals and groups, displacing families and creating added burdens on relatives in safer locations. This in turn transforms neighbourhoods into communal hotspots and 'no-go areas' for minority groups. Traditionally, political mobilisation along ethnic and religious lines has characterised intergroup conflict in Jos. Pre-existing networks of vigilantes, thugs and gangs aligned with specific political actors or ethnic and religious leaders are readily mobilised into communal conflict. However, pockets of non-violence still exist. In Dadin Kowa, retaliatory attacks were stymied in 2010 through social control mechanisms that included the informal monitoring of community activities such as the

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84 Janzen (2014).

85 Oldenhuis et al. (2019), p. 5. For a history of UCP by various CSOs, see Venturi, 'Mainstreaming UCP', pp. 62–63.

86 Julian and Gasser (2019).

87 Julian, R. *The transformative impact*, pp.99–111; Vela, V.G. (2021) 'MINUSMA and the militarization of UN peacekeeping' *International Peacekeeping* 28(5): 838-863 (https://doi.org/10.1080/13533312.2021.1951610).

88 Woodrow, P. (2019) *Framework for collective impact in peacebuilding: revised version.* Cambridge, MA: CDA Collaborative Learning Projects (www.cdacollaborative.org/publication/framework-for-collective-impact-in-peacebuilding-revised-version/).

89 Valpillay, S. (2019) *Hope for building a collective peace movement: lessons learned from developing collective impact networks in Nigeria and Sri Lanka.* Cambridge, MA: CDA Collaborative Learning Projects (www.cdacollaborative.org/publication/hope-for-building-a-collective-peace-movement-lessons-learned-from-developing-collective-impact-networks-in-nigeria-and-sri-lanka-2/).

movements of people during different times of the day. Youth were not permitted to leave their homes and unarmed youth patrol groups were set up to offer protection to communities. Communication networks were also established to control the spread of rumours that could incite communal violence.[90]

Building on this community resilience framework, the JSCP, with funding from Tearfund Nigeria, has trained 30 community leaders and influencers as 'Breaking the Border Ambassadors' to advance community-based early warning and response, youth action and community cohesion initiatives. These ambassadors have engaged in dialogue in Rafin Pa and Bible Faith communities in Laranto in Jos North, to curb conflict escalation in communities affected by ethno-religious violence. Through meetings, dialogue and training in EWER, levels of violence between the Christian Bala Kazai community and the Muslim Angwan Damisa community were reduced. Through joint security patrols, non-violent citizens' arrests and solidarity events such as interfaith meals and pooled community labour for maintaining roads and borders, communities have begun planning and implementing community security initiatives without external support. A recent spate of violence in Jos city in August 2021 did not have any spillover effects due to active information-sharing and patrols by Breaking the Border Ambassadors.[91]

A community security and security agency collaboration working group has used inter-group communication and trust-building between Christians and Muslims to manage conflict over the ancestral ownership of Tudun Wada town. In 2020, a town hall meeting involving security agencies and community stakeholders in Tudun Wada was organised to create collaborative mechanisms for information-sharing, and for reducing incidents of violent community justice in response to criminal acts. By establishing working relationships with formal security agencies – including the police, the National Drug Law Enforcement Agency, the State Security Service and Operation Rainbow (a local security initiative)[92] – the effectiveness of EWER systems in Jos North has improved. The working group has also opened up new channels of communication with the formal security agencies.

Creating safe spaces for interaction has reduced the segregation of communities along religious lines. This allows for more equitable access to resources such as streams, markets and schools by both Christian and Muslims. It has encouraged unarmed citizen arrests and the safe handing over of offenders to the police. These developments represent a marked improvement over incidents of violent community measures against suspected criminals, which in the past triggered communal tensions or further polarisation. In recognition of the unarmed strategies for tackling communal conflicts used by the JSCP, the Nigerian police has formally commended the peacebuilding role of the JSCP network.[93]

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90 Krause, J. (2020) *Resilient communities: non-violence and civilian agency in communal war.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

91 Information collated from internal documents and evaluations shared by Search for Common Ground (SfCG) Nigeria, which launched the JSCP network initiative in 2017. The JSCP transitioned into a local entity from 2019.

92 The Operation Rainbow initiative is a local security collective that provides security intelligence to the Federal Government's military task force, 'Operation Safe Haven' (OPSH), deployed to protect citizens of Plateau State. Operation Rainbow is drawn from residents of various communities in the 17 Local Government Areas of Plateau state and is recognised for having positively contributed to tackling security challenges in the state.

93 Input from former backbone coordinator of JSCP network on behalf of Search for Common Ground based in Jos.

Art that protects

Beatriz Elena Arias López, Laura Jiménez Ospina, Freddy Giovanni Pérez Cárdenas and Berit Bliesemann de Guevara

In Colombia, a country marked by decades of armed conflict, nonviolent self-protection has become a widely used practice in communities' struggle for survival in violent environments. In both rural and urban areas, social organisations have been at the heart of creating and developing a range of self-protection strategies. In cities, violence is an integral part of everyday life, experienced through forms of invisible boundaries between territories controlled by different armed groups, extortion, behavioural norms, selective killings, finger-pointing and intra-urban displacement.[94] Culturally, militarised masculinity and submissive femininity dominate, affecting the socialisation of boys and girls and favouring forms of cultural consumption that reinforce violence.[95]

Research has shown the crucial role of art and performance in the construction of collective memories of violent conflict.[96] They allow multiple narratives to be debated, especially where power asymmetries are deep. Academics have shown that art has a transformative and even therapeutic function. Artistic-cultural collectives and initiatives have also played an active role in the dynamics of urban conflict, resistance and social cohesion.[97] For some, this has been one of their main objectives; for others this role has emerged incidentally, as a positive side-effect of their artistic work. They have helped to foster communities where members understand themselves, not as passive recipients but as active political agents[98] with a critical understanding of their political and socio-economic circumstances, and to empower marginalised groups[99] such as women and ethnic minorities.

94 See www.youtube.com/watch?v=KOintzu73cY and Bedoya González, Y. (2019) HiSTOReLo. *Revista de Historia Regional y Local* 11 (22): 301 (https://doi.org/10.15446/historelo.v11n22.73222).

95 Lederach, A.J. (2020) 'Youth provoking peace: an intersectional approach to territorial peacebuilding in Colombia' *Peacebuilding* 8(2): 198–217 (https://doi.org/10.1080/21647259.2019.1616959).

96 Villa-Gómez, J. D. and Avendaño-Ramírez, M. (2017) 'Arte y memoria: expresiones de resistencia y transformaciones subjetivas frente a la violencia política' *Revista Colombiana De Ciencias Sociales* 8(2), 502–535 (https://doi.org/10.21501/22161201.2207).

97 Carbonell, J. (2017) 'Medellín 3. Agroarte y rap como resistencia y memoria'. El Diario de la Educación blog, 5 April (https://eldiariodelaeducacion.com/pedagogiasxxi/2017/04/05/medellin-3-agroarte-y-rap-como-resistencia-y-memoria/); Chaverra, J.C. (2018) *Trabajo de grado para optar al titulo de Socióloga* (https://bibliotecadigital.udea.edu.co/dspace/bitstream/10495/15088/1/CanoJulieth_2018_IdentificacionAnalisisPropuesta.pdf).

98 Arroyave Barco, K.A. and Valásquez Ramírez, J.A. (2017) *Trabajador y trabajadora social* (bibliotecadigital.udea.edu.co/bitstream/10495/10457/1/ArroyaveKaren_2017_ResistenciaArteConstruccion.pdf).

99 Castro Ospina, V., García Echeverri, K. and Ortiz Roldan, S. (2017) *Línea de profundización en trabajo social e intervención socialcon énfasis en pedagogía social* (https://core.ac.uk/download/304647788.pdf).

Our project Art that Protects explores nonviolent self-protection through artistic and cultural practices developed by community-based organisations in Medellín.[100] Since April 2022, we have engaged with 20 artistic-cultural organisations to identify their initiatives, activities and impact. A central finding regarding their effectiveness in creating safer spaces for civilians has been that artistic and cultural groups generate legitimacy among communities, including local armed actors. This legitimacy allows them to influence and participate in social conflicts over spaces and people. This is particularly important with regard to young people who are at high risk of being recruited into armed groups or drug gangs. It is this question of the legitimacy of artistic and cultural interventions and their potential for self-protection that we focus on in this article.

Urban conflict in Medellín

In the armed political and social conflict in Colombia, the spaces of confrontation are not only concentrated in the countryside; the cities became strategic sites for the armed conflict between different state and non-state armed groups.[101] From the 1980s onwards, urban conflict in Medellín was marked by a sharp increase in violence related to the growing importance of drug-trafficking in everyday life, the emergence of private justice groups who were predecessors of the countries' widespread paramilitarism, and the reorganisation of militiamen.[102] Urban settlements were transformed into spaces of armed dispute.[103]

According to Colombia's National Centre of Historical Memory, between 1995 and 2005 Medellín was transformed into a hotspot of urban conflict.[104] In disputes among paramilitary organisations, criminal gangs, militias, the army and the police, civilians were caught in the crossfire. This period also witnessed operations Mariscal and Orion, carried out as a collaboration between the Colombian armed forces and paramilitary groups. Far from having the welfare and human security of citizens in mind, security policy turned Medellín into a prison for its inhabitants. While the authorities entered into negotiations with the paramilitaries between 2006 and 2014, this did not end the violence but rather transformed it. This period was characterised by armed actors' rearmament and co-option into different criminal groups, the murder of prominent leaders, an increase in gender-based violence, the atomisation of communities, and the exacerbation of invisible boundaries in neighbourhoods demarcating zones of influence and control.

100 Art that Protects is implemented by the Faculty of Nursing, University of Antioquia, and the corporations Arlequín y Los Juglares and Robledo Venga Parchemos. It is supported by the Network Plus 'Creating Safer Space', financed by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) through the Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) [grant number AH/T008024/1].

101 Angarita Cañas, P.E. (2017) *Conflictos, guerra y violencia urbana: interpretaciones problemáticas* (http://nomadas.ucentral.edu.co/index.php/inicio/30-las-guerras-contemporaneoas-nomadas-19/442-conflictos-guerra-y-violencia-urbana-interpretaciones-problematicas).

102 Dávila, L.F. (2016) 'Violencia urbana, conflicto y crimen en Medellín: una revisión de las publicaciones académicas al respecto' *Revista Criminalidad* 58(2): 107–121 (www.scielo.org.co/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S1794-31082016000200003).

103 Franco, V.L. *Violencias, conflictos urbanos y guerracivil: el caso de la ciudad de medellìn en ladècada de los noventa* (http://biblioteca.clacso.edu.ar/gsdl/collect/co/co-029/index/assoc/D8011.dir/violencias.pdf).

104 https://centrodememoriahistorica.gov.co/medellin-memorias-de-una-guerra-urbana/

Yet even when caught in the middle of violence between different groups, the civilian population was never passive. Civilians engaged in manifold everyday practices and processes of resistance aimed at keeping their neighbourhoods or family members out of reach of armed groups or establishing forms of coexistence with them. These processes were supported by cultural, artistic and social collectives and human rights defenders, who sometimes denounced what was happening in the city, but above all helped civilians in their everyday silent resistance, enabling them to remain in their communities. Their activities made it possible to create safer spaces in which, even if only temporarily, the invisible boundaries that divided neighbourhoods were erased.

This active role was acknowledged by the Truth Commission, set up as part of the peace agreement between the Colombian government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) in 2016. In its report published in August 2022, the Commission warned that the conflict had caused severe cultural damage.[105] But it also recognised the existence of 'varied and rich community and social projects that have allowed the transition from armed conflict to coexistence, and from pain to reconciliation' (p. 574). The Commission's report emphasised that art and culture are powerful and useful tools to mend a social fabric broken by violence and conflict, as they 'name the unnamable and make visible the invisible' (p. 575). Perhaps the most well-known examples are the Singers of Pogue in Bojayá, the site of an infamous massacre by FARC guerrillas in 2002 in which over 100 Afro-Colombian civilians were killed, and the Weavers of Mampuján, who have documented paramilitary massacres in textile form, receiving the Colombian National Peace Prize in 2015.[106] In both examples, art helped to make known what had happened during the war. These groups achieved national legitimacy by confronting armed actors with their artistic products in court, and by disseminating what happened to a national and international public – which in turn helped protect these communities from further violence.

In Medellín the impacts of the war were profound, evidenced not only in the numbers of murders and incidents of other violence, but also in its emotional repercussions and effects on social relationships. Fear, sadness, pain, guilt, shame, desire for revenge and rage have been the breeding ground for much of the violence. In addition, the social fabric of communities has been weakened due to distrust between neighbours. Medellín currently has the second-highest rate of victims of armed violence in Colombia's cities, according to the Central Register of Victims.[107]

How art creates safer spaces

The classic approach to legitimacy, following Max Weber's influential definition, has focused on how the state's power over its citizens is recognised as legitimate rule. However, in the Art that Protects project

105 www.comisiondelaverdad.co/hallazgos-y-recomendaciones-1

106 See Peláez, I. (2017) 'Canciones por la resistencia: las cantadoras de Pogue, Bojayá, que le cantan a la paz'. El País, 28 August (www.elpais.com.co/entretenimiento/cultura/canciones-por-la-resistencia-las-cantadoras-de-pogue-bojaya-que-le-cantan-a-la-paz.html); Art & Reconciliation 'The Weavers of Mampuján' (https://artreconciliation.org/arts-and-reconciliation/case-studies/the-weavers-of-mampujan/).

107 www.unidadvictimas.gov.co/es/registro-unico-de-victimas-ruv/37394

we seek to understand legitimacy as a basic process of social organisation that is built collectively.[108] This implies that a community reaches a consensus on the common acceptance of certain beliefs, norms and values around a specific social object. Reaching such common acceptance requires a process of local validation in which the object of legitimisation must be linked to a broader cultural framework and collective interests. Consequently, for an arts organisation to be seen as a legitimate social actor within a community, it needs to have a sustained territorial presence over time.

Street art, Medellín. Credit: Dan, www.layerculture.com

In the case of the artistic and cultural organisations in our study, we found that art functions as if it were a type of passport that allows these organisations to cross certain limits and boundaries established by local armed actors, and to occupy certain territorial spaces off-limits to others. This has been possible thanks to long-term commitment to these areas over time and relationship-building with local communities, which together translate into recognition. It has also been enabled by an identification of armed actors with, or recognition of, the contents and narrative forms of the artistic and cultural projects brought forward by these organisations. Since artistic outputs speak of the context in which people in poor neighbourhoods of Medellín live, and since they are created with the active participation of communities themselves, they also make sense to armed actors from and rooted in these same contexts.

108 Johnson, C., Dowd, T.J and Ridgeway, C.L. (2016) 'Legitimacy as a social process' *Annual Review of Sociology* 32:53–78 (https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.32.061604.123101).

Given such dynamics, the trust and legitimacy gained by these organisations through their initiatives are also shared by members of armed organisations, who recognise the value of artistic practices for their relatives and neighbours. In the following interview excerpt, members of a cultural organisation recall how they were warned by a woman in the community of armed actors' presence, as their *comparsa* – a group who parade and dance in disguise in festivities – set out to pass through a neighbourhood in an artistic parade. The women addressed one of their members:

> 'Sir, don't go that way, they're going to kill you, they're going to shoot you. Look up, look over there. On those rooftops there are some boys watching with rifles, looking with those binoculars, don't go over there.' Then I looked her in the eyes and told her: 'Madam, join hands with the children and with all of us. In this *comparsa* there are sisters, mothers, and uncles of those boys who are up there. I don't think they will shoot at their mother, their girlfriend, or anyone. Come on, let's sing together and don't be afraid [...].' We went through the street. Nobody shot at us. The *comparsa* passed through, nothing happened. (Group interview, Cultural Organisation 2, July 2022)

Observations by members of another cultural organisation echoed this sense that they enjoy a specific legitimacy. As another interviewee told us:

> With our body made up, dressed up, we have been a shield to protect the community [...] Why didn't they shoot at me as they could shoot at someone else? Even when they could be thugs, violent, or whatever they could be, there is an appreciation of what art is. Even when we arrived here, the guys who were watching over here, 'the neighbourhood thugs', came and told us: 'Welcome, don't give money to anyone, we don't ask artists for money here, because we respect artists.' (Group interview, Cultural Organisation 1, July 2022)

In this sense, there is a consensus that recognises in art and artists an apparently inoffensive narrative, which becomes *metaphor* and *metamorphosis*, that is, an innocuous practice that seemingly does not compete with the violent and masculinised narrative of local armed actors, although it clandestinely pierces the cultural and symbolic patterns that produce and sustain violence. With these strategies, artistic collectives are establishing safer spaces, not so much physical but symbolic: sheltered spaces where it is possible to meet, wonder, imagine and create. As one organisation's leader reflected:

> When the cultural expressions of the neighbourhood, in their different manifestations, come together to protect the patrimony of life [...] and this alchemy of solidarity is made and persists over time as a sensitive way to overcome the difficult adverse contexts of the territory, then the culture in its force of creative expression finds a way to contribute to the crises we have in our territories. Through art, songs, hugs and festive creation [a strategy is achieved] to bring together the floating islands of the neighbourhood [...] The *comparsa* brought in the musician, the boy who was on the street, the mothers who sing, who tell stories, and the teachers. Then it generated a living community environment, which

> is strengthened by the participation of all and the contribution they have had to coexistence. So what happens? The space is valued and recreated, and the boys and girls feel more confident to contribute and participate and strengthen it. When this becomes something permanent, it is a manifestation of the community's living culture, an alternative meeting space for the communities to socialize and to recreate forms of joyful life. (Interview with Cultural Organisation Leader 2, July 2022)

These accounts confirm to us the value of art, and more specifically community art, in strengthening social ties and enabling the community to be an active agent in social transformation, which in turn is a central element for recognising its self-protective role.[109] They also allow understanding of what type of art it is that gains legitimacy, not only because of its participatory and relationship-building nature but also because of its critical and situated position in the contexts where it is created and produced. In this sense, it is an art where people are both consumers and co-creators of alternative forms of resistance, awareness and visibility of political and social phenomena in artistic processes in which they partake.[110] This type of participatory art enables people to interact with and understand their conflicts and seek other forms of coexistence – be it through theatre, folk art, artivism (resistance and activist art) or other forms and examples of community art.[111] It also challenges local armed actors, many of whom are close to their neighbourhoods and families:

> The festive act has been legitimised, they [armed actors] are also moved by it, it is what they would have wanted to do, the party is legitimised, and the boundary disappears for a while (Interview with Cultural Organisation Leader 3, October 2022)

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109 Bang, C. (2012) *Creatividad, prácticas comunitarias de arte y transformación social: una articulación posible*. Buenos Aires: Universidad de Buenos Aires (www.aacademica.org/000-072/598).

110 Jiménez Mojica, S. (2013) 'Memory, artistic practices and public space: possibilities regarding the Colombian armed conflict' Campos En Ciencias Sociales, 1(2): 387–413 (https://doi.org/10.15332/s2339-3688.2013.0002.09).

111 Ramírez Orozco, L. (2017) *Arte para la convivencia: una mirada antropológica sobre la escuela popular artística en El Charquito – Soacha* (https://repositorio.unal.edu.co/handle/unal/62339).

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