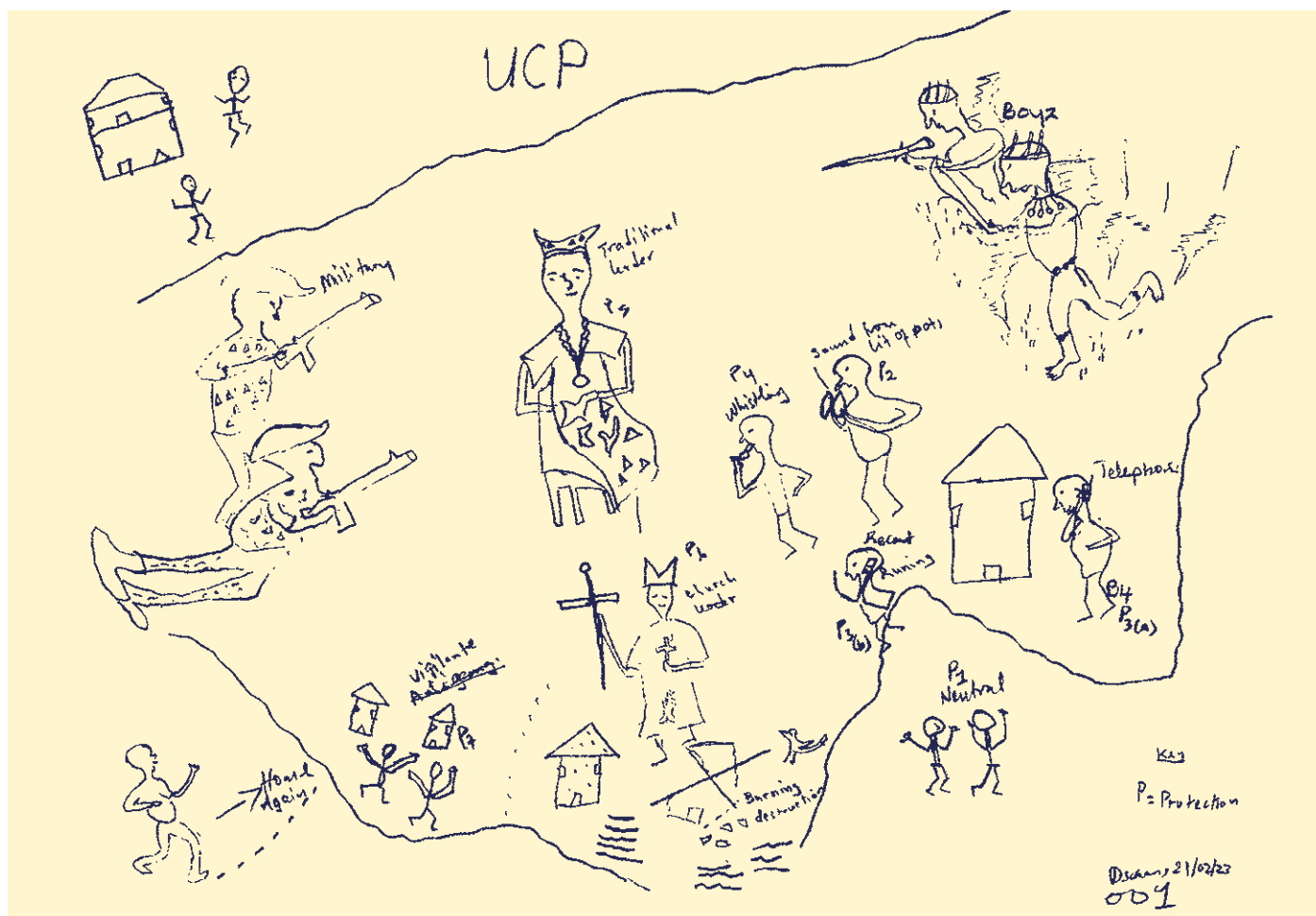# Nonviolent Community Strategies Protect Civilians Across the World

The localization of protection of civilians (PoC) efforts must start with the recognition of existing community protection agency and knowledge

Drawing of local UCP practices by a community member from the North West Region, Cameroon. See project brochure 'Resilient Voices'.

Key messages

- Civilians across the world protect themselves and others from violence using unarmed, community-centred methods that have been developed over generations and are led and carried out by women and men, mostly without having been trained by outside actors.

- In their protection efforts, local communities harness the experiences and knowledge they have by virtue of living amidst violence; they know what works in their context and why.

- Locally-led forms of unarmed civilian protection (UCP) are found in many different violent contexts, where communities develop context-appropriate responses and early warning mechanisms that make people safer.

- PoC localization must start with the recognition of existing community protection mechanisms and knowledge and aim at scaling out locally-led UCP by supporting, funding, and helping to connect these efforts.

> *In the midst of the conflict, we've had to declare our territories as 'Territories of Peace', and to do so we use resistance mechanisms such as social mobilization and setting up humanitarian shelters.*
>
> **Reflection by peasants of the community of Tarazá, Antioquia, Colombia. Project "The Social Process of Guarantees".**

What we know

Protection from many forms of violence

In-depth research by 26 *Creating Safer Space* projects across eleven countries revealed that all communities studied are using some form of nonviolent self-protection and local unarmed civilian protection (UCP) strategies. These strategies protect civilians from many forms of violence:

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

Local protection agency

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

- Communities develop **early warning–early response mechanisms** (EWER), e.g. through vernacular signs and signals for warning and communication, by using mobile phones and social messaging apps to share and verify information, and by planning for flight and displacement (e.g., designating safe routes, providing safe houses). For example, in Cameroon's Anglophone conflict, communities identified WhatsApp groups as important means of sharing information about armed actors' activities and avoiding interactions with them. Rural communities in South Sudan often still rely on traditional signs, e.g. reeds positioned in particular ways, to share information and warn others. In both contexts, whistles also play a major role in early warning, e.g. urging people to flee when armed actors enter a village at night.

- Civilians cultivate a range of **proactive engagement measures**. For instance, they provide protective accompaniment to vulnerable/threatened people or only travel together in groups to keep themselves safer. In Nigeria and Cameroon, for instance, women accompany each other when traveling to the market or working on their fields. Civilians also protect communities and their living environments through civilian presence and permanence, e.g. regarding disputed land. For Palestinians in the West Bank, for example, living and working on their land is part of their identity; protection therefore revolves around the accompaniment of herders to enable them to safely remain on the land. Proactive engagement often also includes protection of and care for nature, such as rivers and forests. In Colombia, for instance, peasant organizations in the department of Antioquia have included the protection of local rivers from hydroelectric power plants and privatization into their efforts of protection from forced displacement.

- **Civilians negotiate and engage** with state officials and state and non-state armed actors, for instance through direct dialogue and by negotiating coexistence with armed actors. In Myanmar after the 2021 military coup, civil society organisations have used established UCP mechanisms to keep civilians safe from heightened levels of state violence and forced recruitment by armed groups. In other contexts, civilians have held a mirror up to the violence through art activism, for example in the case of police brutality against youth in Kenya, or by using cultural activities such as football or theatre to reclaim public space, such as in the case of the many artistic organizations working to create safer space amidst the drug-related violence in the Colombian city of Medellin.

- Communities **monitor and document violent incidents and abuses**, sometimes using legal mechanisms to address the threats and often collaborating with wider national and international advocacy networks to exert pressure on perpetrators. In Colombia, there is a wealth of national and international organizations that support communities in these tasks, for example through strategic litigation of companies using armed backing to displace communities and exploit resources.

Context knowledge and embeddedness

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

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

Challenges

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

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

Further information

- Creating Safer Space website: https://creating-safer-space.com
- Creating Safer Space newsletter: https://creating-safer-space.com/contact/
- UCP Research Database: https://creating-safer-space.com/ucp-research-database/

Policy Recommendations

The UN and its member states should:

1. **Acknowledge in protection policy**, based on evidence from *Creating Safer Space* and others, that communities across the world are using nonviolent strategies to protect themselves.
2. **Create and resource accessible pathways** for communities to communicate their needs and contexts for protection on an equitable basis with national and international protection actors.
3. Recognize local **communities' own protection capacity, agency, and knowledge.**
4. Develop and resource special recognition, platforms, and reporting mechanisms for local UCP actors as **a means of scaling out civilian protection** that contributes to meeting global protection needs.
5. Ensure that **communities are included as decision-makers** regarding how to use funding, who is involved in high-level meetings, and what protection approaches work in any given context.
6. **Feed the *Creating Safer Space* model** of giving people equitable voice, respecting their knowledge and capacity, and creating learning opportunities through collaboration, as a way of generating experiential knowledge on community protection from violence, into national, regional, and global debates.

Our Research Network

United Kingdom

United States

Mexico/ US border

Colombia

Palestine

Cameroon

Myanmar

Thailand

Philippines

South Sudan

Kenya

Nigeria

Indonesia

26 Research Projects

Research in **11** countries

Conducted by **165** researchers

Working with over **2000** research participants directly

Engaging over **8000** people so far through their dissemination activities

Led by organisations around the world

15 projects led by organisations in the Global South

11 projects led by organisations in the Global North

Provided over **£930,000** in grants

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CREATING SAFER SPACE
STRENGTHENING CIVILIAN PROTECTION AMIDST VIOLENT CONFLICT

Creating Safer Space (CSS) is a 5-year, £2.25 million international research network, the biggest of its kind so far. We support research on unarmed civilian protection and self-protection amidst violent conflict and aim to strengthen civilian capacities for nonviolent protection and conflict transformation.

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