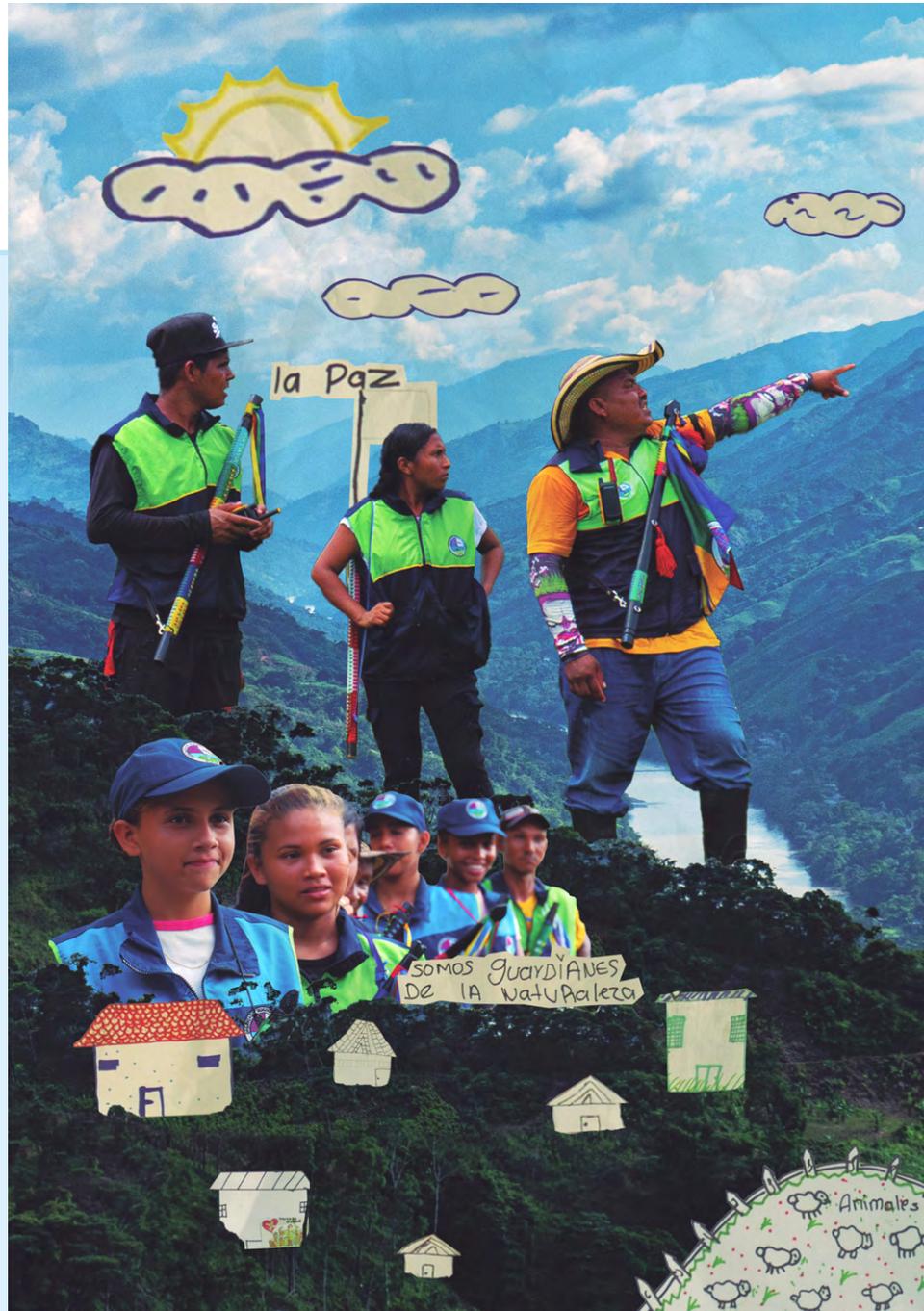# Community Self-Protection Makes Civilians Safer

Evidence shows that unarmed civilian-to-civilian protection works to create safer spaces for civilians across the world

Key messages:

- Although protection policies have developed in recent decades to better include local voices, contexts, and needs, one key group of actors remains largely marginalized in the policymaking process: self-protecting communities.

- Communities affected by violent conflict have been developing their own protection mechanisms based on cultural and traditional practices, but they struggle to be heard in protection coordination efforts.

- *Creating Safer Space* research has demonstrated that community self-protection efforts based on unarmed civilian protection (UCP) strategies and principles work and that people engage in these efforts because of a strong commitment to their family, community, place, and natural environment.

- The *Creating Safer Space* model, based on principles of systematization of existing knowledge and experiences, co-production with communities, and practices of care, offers ways of including community protection into international policy processes.

Detail of a collage by members of the Indigenous Guard Los Almendros II, Antioquia, Colombia. Project '**The Social Process of Guarantees**'.

> *Given the conflict in our ancestral territory... we decided to strengthen the indigenous guard to protect our lives, the territory, nature and survive, including through humanitarian dialogues.*

(Almendros #2 indigenous community, El Bagre, Antioquia, Colombia. Project 'The Social Process of Guarantees**')**

What we know

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

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

- In South Sudan, UCP actors such as [Nonviolent Peaceforce](#), locally-led initiatives, and self-protecting communities have drawn on local relations, practices, and sources of authority to develop [community early warning–early response](#) (CEWER) systems, [build community mechanisms](#) for protection from violence and conflict resolution, break cycles of violence, and create safer space for civilians.

- In [Papua, Indonesia](#), where indigenous Papuans have faced threats from the state military and intense natural resource exploitation, and where there is also inter-communal conflict with migrants from other parts of Indonesia, civilians have built on networks of church and civil society organizations, and on the social capital of prominent leaders, to protect themselves through fleeing, negotiations with the conflicting parties, and advocacy.

- [Colombia](#), which has seen decades of violent political and social conflicts, has particularly rich experiences with different locally-led and [spontaneous](#) as well as [nationally](#) and internationally supported UCP mechanisms, showing the many ways in which safer space for individuals and communities can be achieved amidst different violent contexts, including fighting between state and non-state armed actors, narco-trafficking, natural resource exploitation, and urban violence.

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

Three further findings stand out:

- **The centrality of land and nature:** In many communities across the world, practices of protection and care for people and the community are interwoven with practices of protection and care for the land or ancestral territory and for nature. Strategies include, e.g., remaining on the land and opting out of dominant political and economic logics, e.g. by creating [peace communities](#) or working towards food sovereignty. This finding was particularly highlighted by research in Colombia, Palestine (West Bank), Indonesia (Papua), and the Philippines.

- **The importance of cultural and traditional practices**: Many local unarmed civilian protection practices are embedded in, and emerge from, traditional and/or cultural practices. These include indigenous and religious forms of spirituality; traditional practices of care for community and nature; community arts, art activism, sports, and other cultural activities; and the use of rituals and symbols. Our projects show that such practices are essential to the context-specific forms and effectiveness of community protection, yet they are largely absent from protection policies and programmes designed by international agencies.

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

Policy Recommendations

The UN and its member states should:

1. **Acknowledge the family, the community, and their place or environment** as crucial sites for protection and **part of a globalized protection effort**.

2. **Develop new ways of building policies that begin from and value local experience**, drawing on the evidence from communities using local unarmed civilian protection strategies to build good practice and support communities to speak for themselves.

3. **Develop and resource** recognition, platforms, and reporting mechanisms, which value local communities' experiential knowledge and enhance capacity based on existing evidence.

4. 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.

5. **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.

> *I am the community and the community is me…we resolved to always put Community first…to stay safe.*
>
> **(From the poem 'The Four Commandments of Unarmed Civilian Protection' by a research participant in Cameroon. Project brochure 'Resilient Voices'.)**

Related publications

- Arteaga Garzón, K., and A. Gómez-Suárez, 'Civilians Protecting Civilians', Rodeemos el Diálogo Policy Brief, February 2024.

- Bliesemann de Guevara, B., J. Allouche, and F. Gray, 'Introduction: Enacting Peace Amid Violence: Nonviolent Civilian Agency in Violent Conflict', *Journal of Pacifism and Nonviolence*, 1(2), 2023, pp. 161-180.

- Furnari, E., R. Janzen, and R. Kabaki, eds., *Unarmed Civilian Protection: A New Paradigm for Protection and Human Security* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2023).

- Gray, F., 'Relational R2P? Civilian-Led Prevention and Protection against Atrocity Crimes', *Global Responsibility to Protect*, 14(3), 2022, pp. 313-338.

- Krause, J., and E. Kamler, 'Ceasefires and Civilian Protection Monitoring in Myanmar', *Global Studies Quarterly*, 2(1), 2022, ksac005.

- Macaspac, N. V., 'Indigenous Geopolitics: Creating Indigenous Spaces of Community Self-Protection and Peace Amid Violent Conflict', *Journal of Pacifism and Nonviolence*, 1(2), 2023, pp. 181–207.

- Ridden, L., 'The Temporal and Embodied Construction of Space and UCP', in: Furnari, E., R. Janzen, and R. Kabaki, eds., *Unarmed Civilian Protection: A New Paradigm for Protection and Human Security* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2023).

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/
- UCP/A Community of Practice website: https://www.ucpacommunityofpractice.org

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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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