

The Missing Piece of PoC: Local Unarmed Civilian Protection

Locally led community protection can bridge the current gap between need and capacity in the protection of civilians (PoC)



Detail from visual workshop summary, project 'Introducing UCP to Thai Society'.
Illustration by Wanwisa Intarakanchit.

Key messages:

- There is an increasing need for the protection of civilians (PoC) from violent conflict and displacement, but this need cannot be met by current international approaches.
- Creating Safer Space research has gathered ample evidence which shows that, across the world, communities themselves are engaged in locally-led protection based on proactive nonviolent strategies in places where there are no international PoC missions.
- Local, but largely unacknowledged, unarmed civilian protection (UCP) efforts thereby contribute to meeting the enormous need for the protection of civilians from violence.
- Our findings demonstrate the importance of including unarmed self-protecting communities as equal partners in PoC and creating contextual design that helps them make their self-protection safer as they react to changes in threats, conflict situations, or safe spaces.
- Creating Safer Space has developed models of community engagement that uncover and recognize local protection capacity and contribution and enable national and international protection actors to better understand effective local UCP and its knowledge base.

Let's plant and nurture many more community-led protection trees around the world and connect them into a forest of unarmed civilian protection!

(Participant's call for action at Creating Safer Space final conference for Africa and the Middle East, Nairobi, 2024)

What we know

The gap between need and capacity in PoC is growing, but international capacity is not. Every year, we receive news of new record highs of people forcibly displaced by violent conflict, with current numbers of at least 110 million ([UNHCR 2023](#)) and rising. Moreover, experts consistently report that 90% of war-time casualties are civilians ([UNSC 2022](#)). The UN Security Council has responded by repeatedly adopting the protection of civilians (PoC) in its resolutions, and UN peacekeeping missions now have a PoC mandate ([UN Peacekeeping](#)). Yet, the alarming rise in numbers of civilians affected by violent conflict despite these positive developments suggests that current international approaches are unable to meet the global protection needs. Responsible factors include limited resources, restrictive mandates, hesitancy to engage, and access restrictions to some countries and areas in conflict.

Through 26 research projects in eleven countries, [Creating Safer Space](#) has explored what happens in different contexts, in which communities experience heightened levels of violence and needs for protection but lack outside support. **We found that in all these communities, civilians have devised and are using at least some protection strategies, with some of them relying on sophisticated long-term protection mechanisms.** This finding was valid for 100% of our projects and across a range of different contexts, which include (but are not limited to) the following:

- 1. Armed conflict contexts without international protection presence:** Research into Cameroon's anglophone conflict and into armed conflict in the Indonesian province of [Papua](#), respectively, shows that civilians have developed a wealth of creative, context-specific, nonviolent protection strategies, without international prompting or training. In both Cameroon and Papua, being part of a larger network and exerting collective protection agency was central to protection strategies, whether it be early warning, negotiations with a conflict party, non-engagement strategies such as flight and silence, or advocacy. Churches and civil society organizations, alongside the authority of particular personalities such as indigenous and religious leaders or elderly women, played a pivotal role in proactive protection activities.
- 2. Contexts where the state is a main source of violence against civilians:** In several project countries, the state is one, or sometimes the, main source of violence against civilians. In Kenya, researchers discovered the power of [art activism](#) and [community radio](#) in addressing and preventing elections-related police brutality against youth. In Myanmar after the 2021 military coup, projects evidenced the continued use of UCP strategies, some of which had been adopted through training provided by protection INGOs such as

[Nonviolent Peaceforce](#) since 2012. Due to severe access restrictions for outsiders, UCP is now exclusively locally-led, taking place in a context of widespread violence, socio-economic exploitation, and, paradoxically, a widely shared lack of faith in a nonviolent end to the military rule.

- 3. Peacebuilding contexts with multiple persistent violences affecting marginalized communities:** In Colombia, despite a peace process with the country's largest guerrilla group, FARC, and efforts by the presidency to negotiate a 'total peace' with remaining armed groups, armed violence by guerillas, paramilitaries, drug-trafficking cartels, and gangs is still widespread and affects mainly marginalized communities such as indigenous peoples, Afro-Colombians, peasants, and the urban poor. In response, Colombian civil society has harnessed a [plethora of protection and resilience mechanisms](#), from [community arts](#), to [traditional practices](#) such as the *minga* (a collective community support system), and [spiritual practices](#), and from [advocacy with authorities](#) and [non-state armed actors](#) and legal instruments such as strategic litigation, to [space-based measures](#) such as peace communities and humanitarian zones, to name but a few.

What **all communities** under study have in common is that they have designed protection mechanisms that fit their particular context and [are built on relationships](#) and the use of local capacity. Depending on context, protection agency is located in a range of different actors, including human rights and [environmental defenders](#), community leaders, indigenous authorities, religious or spiritual authorities, [women's groups](#), youth or students associations, journalists, and many more. *Creating Safer Space* regional events suggested a widespread sense among research participants that building networks and opportunities with other self-protecting communities to share their knowledge and build further capacity would be beneficial.

Creating Safer Space research evidences the global nature and breadth of [civilians' agency in conflict](#) and local unarmed protection. **This existing capacity, we argue, is part of the solution to bridge the gap between protection need and capacity.** Communities have designed approaches to early warning–early response and preparedness, negotiation and shuttle diplomacy, communication and information verification, protective accompaniment and presence, and many more. Communities also [hold experiential knowledge](#) about what works or does not work in their contexts and why. The aim for international approaches must be to build on these approaches and support them, rather than to replace or marginalize them, and to use international leverage to address conflict and displacement drivers beyond communities' influence.

Policy Recommendations

The UN and its Member States should:

1. Recognize local and **community protection as an essential component of PoC.**
2. **Include** community protection strategies, capacities, and needs currently in place directly **in the baseline of any assessment and funding decisions** regarding the protection of civilians.
3. **Include and build on existing local capacity and mechanisms** by providing support, training, and flexible funding for displaced people and protection of civilians in violent conflict.
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.



Related publications:

- 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.
- Jiménez Ospina, L., and B. E. Arias López, '[Unarmed Civilian Protection and Community Self-Protection in Colombia: A Literature Review](#)', *Creating Safer Space Working Paper Series*, 1(3), 2023.
- Julian, R., '[Civilians Creating Safe Space: The Role of Unarmed Civilian Peacekeeping in Protection of Civilians](#)', *Civil Wars*, 2023, pp. 1-26.
- Julian, R., Berit Bliesemann de Guevara, and Robin Redhead, '[From expert to experiential knowledge: exploring the inclusion of local experiences in understanding violence in conflict](#)', *Peacebuilding*, 7(2), 2019, pp. 210-225.
- 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.

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.ucpcommunityofpractice.org>

Our Research Network

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



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.

Creating Safer Space, Department of International Politics, Aberystwyth University, Penglais, Aberystwyth, SY23 3HR, Wales, UK

Email: creating-safer-space@aber.ac.uk

Website: www.creating-safer-space.com



Authors

- **Berit Blieseemann de Guevara**, PhD, is Professor of International Politics at Aberystwyth University, UK, and CSS principal investigator. She has accompanied the formation of the UCP Community of Practice since 2017 and is a Steering Committee member.
- **Rachel Julian**, PhD, is Professor of Peace Studies at Leeds Beckett University, UK, and CSS co-investigator, in addition to leading on several related projects in Africa and Asia. She has more than twenty years of experience of researching and practicing UCP in different roles.
- **Nerve V. Macaspac**, PhD, is Assistant Professor of Geography at CUNY, US, and CSS co-investigator. His research specializes in community-led demilitarized 'peace zones' in Southeast Asia. Nerve also supports human rights work in the Philippines.



Arts and
Humanities
Research Council

