

Community Unarmed Civilian Protection in South Sudan

South Sudan is a good practice example of multiple protection efforts that include the community.



Dinka chiefs explaining vernacular protection signs and rituals, Malakal, Upper Nile State, South Sudan.
Photo by Haji Elias Hillary, [project link](#).

Key messages

- In South Sudan, the international protection of civilians (PoC) response is centred on the [UNMISS](#) mandate and approach, but multiple community-led protection mechanisms are also contributing to making people safer and reducing violence in the same space.
- Creating Safer Space research found that community-led unarmed civilian protection (UCP) mechanisms include the full range from early warning–early response systems, to proactive engagement and monitoring, and to negotiations and dialogue.
- These local UCP initiatives are effective at addressing multiple forms of violence, are trusted by communities, and create safer space for civilians, meaning that their contribution should be recognized and celebrated.
- 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 more fully into international policy processes and the wider national/international PoC effort, without undermining local protection approaches and infrastructures that are working.

“ I have never encountered a conflict-affected community that does not have protection strategies, although they may differ in form.

(Rosemary Kabaki, Head of Mission, NP South Sudan.
Creating Safer Space Conference for Africa and the Middle East, Nairobi, January 2024)

What we know

South Sudan is the only country, where a UN peacekeeping mission, UNMISS, works alongside a major international UCP mission (Nonviolent Peaceforce South Sudan—NPSS) and a range of locally-led UCP initiatives and community UCP activities to protect civilians from violence and displacement in the same space.

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

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

- In Juba, the research found three main types of UCP actors: 1) community action groups using some UCP mechanisms; 2) faith-based actors who play major roles in the de-escalation of conflicts; and 3) peace committees who, [supported by NPSS](#), engage in early warning–early response (EWER).
- In Rumbek, the research found four UCP mechanisms: 1) customary and traditional protection practices (see below); 2) protection teams formed by women, youth, and traditional and religious leaders, some

supported by NPSS, who use community security meetings and early warning systems to gather and share information to warn people, and have built relationships with a range of actors to develop escape routes and provide accompaniment to people vulnerable to attack; 3) youth groups such as the Rumbek Youth Union using some forms of UCP; and 4) women leaders, especially elder women, who intervene in micro-level conflicts within and between families to prevent violence from escalating.

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

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

A third project, '[Art Allies](#)', explored the role of art and art activism in keeping both artists, who often face particular threats for their politically and socially engaged work, and the communities in which they work safe.

For further information:

- Please visit the Creating Safer Space website: <https://creating-safer-space.com>
- Or contact us at: creating-safer-space@aber.ac.uk

Policy Recommendations

The UN and its Member States should:

- **Acknowledge and include** in future descriptions and analyses of protection activities in South Sudan **the wealth of community UCP in South Sudan**, which is based on local cultures and mechanisms of self-protection embedded in people's social and cultural identity.
- Devise **new pathways and opportunities for local community participation in the design of civilian protection**, which recognize the valuable knowledge and skills of community leaders and protection teams.
- In the framework of the South Sudan Protection Cluster and decision-making bodies on making communities safer, **design a specific mechanism that includes and grows existing local capacity and mechanisms** by providing support, training, and flexible funding, rather than rely predominantly on top-down outsider-led missions.
- **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.

Looming threats and the role for UCP

At the *Creating Safer Space* Regional Conference for Africa and the Middle East in Nairobi in January 2024, delegates from South Sudan as well as Head of NPSS, Rosemary Kabaki, shared concerns about imminent threats and discussed the role for UCP:

- **Election-related violence:** They shared deep worries about possible election-related violence and mass displacement, if the planned elections go ahead in 2024. Kabaki reported on the work of Nonviolent Peaceforce and how they are preparing for this possible violent escalation—learning also from the experience of community-led initiatives in Kenya—and simultaneously advocating neighbouring states to take action in assisting South Sudan to organize violence-free elections.
- **Climate conflict:** Climate change was the biggest concern shared widely among participants in the region, not just for South Sudan. Many countries in Africa are already seeing the devastating effects of floods and droughts. UCP was seen as a conflict-prevention mechanism that should be built into all community-level climate-related action.
- **UCP's way ahead:** Conference delegates recommended that the way ahead should be to connect community protection groups and mechanisms into a wider structure. This would create safer space for discussions on conflict transformation and should, in a second step, be linked to bigger institutions and structures. The result would be a bottom-up scaling out of local, context-sensitive UCP, as opposed to a top-down imposition of one-size-fits-all models.

Cited projects:

- Project '[Understanding Community-level Spontaneous Unarmed Civilian Protection \(UCP\): A Comparative Study of Initiatives in South Sudan, Myanmar and Colombia](#)', led by Winchester University, UK, in collaboration with researchers at the Organisation for Nonviolence and Development (ONAD), South Sudan.
- Project '[Visualising early warning and preparedness in civilian protection: Investigating local vernaculars of community adaptations to insecurity](#)', led by Coventry University, UK, in collaboration with researchers of Community Aid for Relief and Development, and at Lomore Development Organization, South Sudan.
- Project '[Strategies for Safety and Solidarity: Understanding protection through creativity in South Sudan and Colombia](#)', led by the London School of Economics, UK, in collaboration with an independent researcher in Juba. Project brochure '[Art Allies / Alianzarte / Hulafaa Alfun](#)'.
- To get in touch with the project leads, please contact creating-safer-space@aber.ac.uk.

Other resources:

- 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.
- Davies, G., and L. Mayhew with The Bridge Network, '[Community Engagement with Armed Actors in South Sudan: Reducing Violence and Protection Risks](#)', HPG Working Paper, 2024.
- John, Moses Monday, 'Unarmed Civilian Protection and Nonviolence With Attention to Sub-Saharan Africa', in: Furnari, Ellen, Randy Janzen, and Rosemary Kabaki, eds., *Unarmed Civilian Protection: A New Paradigm for Protection and Human Security* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2023).
- Nonviolent Peaceforce, '[A Pathway to Peaceful Coexistence: Joint Efforts of the Inter-Community Peace Committee Initiative in Juba, South Sudan](#)', no date.
- '[The Power of Women's Peace Teams](#)', in: E. Furnari and C. Schweitzer with M. Duncan: *Report of the International Gathering on Unarmed Civilian Protection and Accompaniment 2023*, pp. 30-31.
- UCP Research Database: <https://creating-safer-space.com/ucp-research-database/>

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