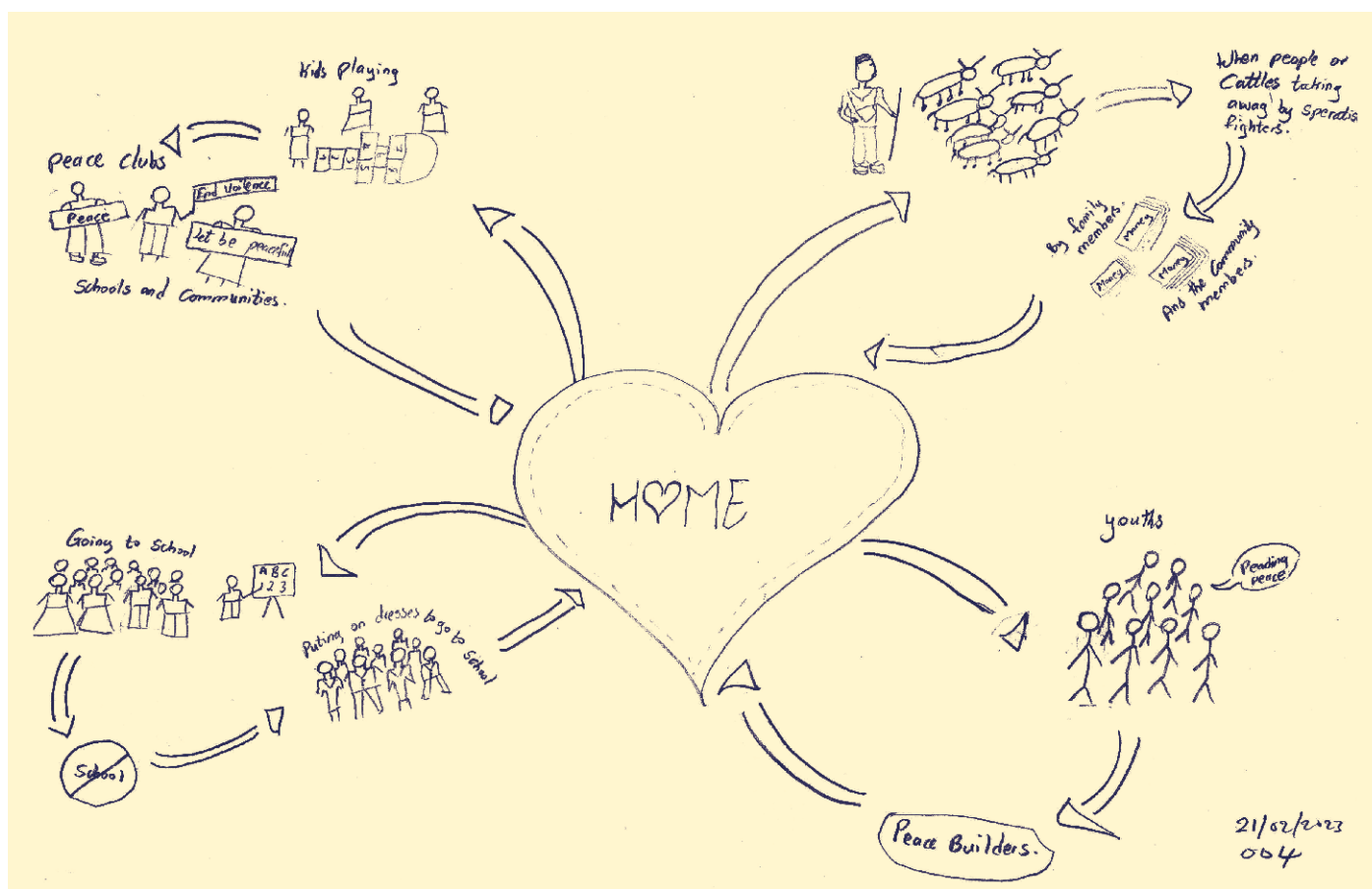


# Nonviolent Community Strategies Protect Civilians Across the World

Recognition and support of existing community protection agency and knowledge offers a cost-effective, localized way to support unarmed violence response and prevention



“Protection cycle”, drawing by a local community member, 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.
- The localization of responses to and prevention of harms from violence must start with the recognition of existing community protection mechanisms and knowledge.
- Helping to scale out locally-led UCP by supporting, funding, and helping to connect these community efforts is a cost-effective way of addressing violent conflict and displacement across the world.

**“ Our research shows that local communities’ agency and creativity, based on local context knowledge and embeddedness, offers protection from many forms of violence across the world. ”**

(Prof Berit Bliesemann de Guevara, principal investigator, Creating Safer Space)

# 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 was previously undocumented. 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.
- While locally effective without outside support, communities sometimes **request some outside support**, e.g. through international advocacy and solidarity, as an additional leverage when engaging with national and international 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

Policymakers should:

1. **Acknowledge UCP as a credible and important practice in protection policy** that is broadly applicable and effective.
2. **Expand understandings of localization** to move beyond community voices being considered in decisions about international operations or national approaches **to include communities' own protection capacity, agency, and knowledge**.
3. **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.
4. **Support community UCP as a cost-effective** and much-needed contribution to meeting global protection needs by developing and resourcing local UCP as well as special platforms and reporting mechanisms for local UCP actors.
5. **Follow the *Creating Safer Space* model** of giving people equitable voice, respecting their knowledge and capacity, and creating learning opportunities through collaboration, to generate experiential knowledge on community protection from violence which can feed into this debate.

# Our Research Network

**26**

Research Projects



Research in **11** countries



Conducted by **202** 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 (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](mailto:creating-safer-space@aber.ac.uk)

Website: [www.creating-safer-space.com](http://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.



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