

CIVILIANS



PROTECTING CIVILIANS

Acknowledgments

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The mistakes remaining are our own.

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Spontaneous unarmed civilian protection in Nariño, Colombia

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This policy briefing discusses the ways that local actors in Nariño, Colombia, create unarmed civilian protection strategies spontaneously in response to conflict dynamics. It proposes a working definition of Spontaneous Unarmed Civilian Protection (SUCP) and offers a set of policy recommendations to the international community, the Colombian state, and civil society and grassroots organisations, to strengthen these processes.

INTRODUCTION

More than half of the world's population lives within violent contexts, such as civil war, armed conflict, communal violence, cities besieged by gangs, and entire zones controlled by organised crime¹. This constant danger pushes civilians to react quickly, instinctively and spontaneously, and to develop nonviolent strategies to protect other civilians.

Nariño, a department in Southwestern Colombia, has been a battlefield of the country's ongoing armed conflict; a conflict which has intensified during

implementation of the 2016 peace agreement between President Juan Manuel Santos (2010-2018) and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia-People's Army (FARC-EP). Today, there are various illegal armed groups, including the National Liberation Army (ELN, a leftist insurgency created in the 1960s), the Central Command (EMC, a splinter group of the FARC-EP), the Second Marquetalia (an insurgency created by former FARC-EP combatants after signing the 2016 peace agreement), as well as paramilitary groups and criminal gangs. These groups fight for territorial control, drug trafficking routes, and a share in illegal mining and smuggling. They engage in violent clashes and establish de-facto para-state regimes. Illegal economies contribute to the protracted armed conflict, perpetuating violence and instability.

This policy brief introduces a working definition of "Spontaneous Unarmed Civilian Protection" (SUCP), exploring three SUCP processes in Nariño, outlining the strengths and challenges they face. It concludes by offering recommendations to the international community, the Colombian state, civil society organisations and actors involved in similar strategies, to strengthen these intuitive, but fundamental, responses to violence.

¹ During 2022 there were 33 armed conflicts in the world, a higher number than in 2021. Most conflicts were recorded in Africa (16) and Asia (9), followed by the Middle East (5), Europe (2) and America (1). High intensity armed conflicts were more than half (52%) of the total number of conflicts in the world. See: Escola de Cultura de Pau. (2023) Alerta 2023! Informe sobre conflictos, derechos humanos y construcción de paz. Barcelona: Icaria.

I. A Working definition of unarmed civilian protection

Traditionally, Unarmed Civilian Protection (UCP) has been understood as a set of strategies that unarmed civilians - often foreigners deployed by International Non-Governmental Organisations (INGOs) - carry out to protect the lives of other civilians before, during or after an armed conflict, to prevent or reduce violence, and to strengthen or build local peace infrastructures. The aim of this work is to create safer spaces for civilians to satisfy their needs, to transform their conflicts, and to protect people and populations at risk of being harmed or being killed. This “safer space” is built through a strategic combination of methods (e.g. monitoring, advocacy, relationship-building), principles (e.g. non-partisanship, independence), values (e.g. adherence to Human Rights Law and International Humanitarian Law), and skills of non-violent engagement (e.g. active listening, facilitation, negotiation).²

However, there are also other forms of unarmed civilian protection that are carried out spontaneously by local actors. This “Spontaneous Unarmed Civilian Protection” (SUCP) is illustrated by three cases in Nariño, Colombia.

In these cases, the initiatives are not the product of external UCP-trained actors or INGOs who arrive to protect vulnerable communities, but rather a

...a spontaneous, intuitive and adaptable response from local actors...

spontaneous response - intuitive and adaptive - by local actors, who engage in a process of trial and error to develop and refine protection mechanisms specific to their communities and contexts.

These strategies emerge from local knowledge and embedded cultural practices, and are specific to the contexts in which the communities exist. If peacebuilding is understood as a continuum between the end of an armed conflict and the peaceful transformation of conflicts, SUCP could be seen as part of a process of spontaneous actions that provide the space necessary for peacebuilding and social change. Such a process is not defined by fixed timetables with goal-oriented indicators, but rather by community adaptation to the changing world.³

II. Football, spirituality and protective dialogue:

² See: Olenhuis, H., Furnari, E., Carriere, R, Wagstrom, T., Frisch A., and M. Duncan. (2021) Unarmed Civilian Protection: strengthening civilian capacities to protect civilians against violence. An Introductory Course in 5 Modules. 2nd Edition. NonViolent Peaceforce, p. 146.

³ See: Gomez-Suarez, A. (2022) 'Colombia, diez años de construcción de paz con las FARC (2012-2022): retos para la reconciliación y avances desde la no violencia', Revista d'Humanitats 6: 80-93.

three cases of spontaneous unarmed civilian protection

Playing for our future protecting life

In the Telembí region of Nariño, which is inhabited mostly by Afro-Colombian communities, the organisation **¡Pazame el Balón!** (in English, literally, Pass me the Ball or Peace me the Ball, playing on the word “Paz” meaning “Peace”) has managed to create protective environments through promoting football and education. This region is characterised by geographical isolation and lack of road infrastructure. The lack of public services such as education, water and health, and limited state presence, has contributed to the consolidation of illegal territorial control by the FARC-EP’s dissident group, the Second Marquetalia.

¡Pazame el Balón! emerged in 2018 after a conversation between an Afro-Colombian leader of the “Voz de los Negros” Community Council and a Colombian humanitarian actor from Bogotá. Their initial idea was to bring balls and cones to the football pitch for the children to play. The next action was to request the commander of the illegal armed group to stop entering the pitch; a request he accepted. Thus, the pitch started to be transformed into a protective environment.

The enthusiasm of the children was the catalyser to give life to a football school and a football team. To participate in the training sessions and join the team, the children had to commit to attending the local school. Thus, a new phase of the process started: the promotion

of formal education through the re-dignification of the school, which had been affected by the armed conflict, with the aim of offering a safe space for learning. **“Whoever is not enrolled in school and hasn’t got good grades cannot be part of the football school!”** says the coach of the village team during the training sessions.

After some time, **¡Pazame el Balón!** reached an agreement with the illegal armed group for it to stop using the football pitch and the village school completely. This was a significant step forward; previously, the pitch and the school were used for military drills or as a defensive position during armed clashes. The respect for these spaces and the learning and well-being activities for the children and youth opened a minimal humanitarian space.

In the middle of this process **¡Pazame el Balón!** started a process of relationship-building with local, national, and international actors. The aim was to prevent or stop the violence, to win community support, communicate needs, deter possible perpetrators, connect the communities with civil servants and civil society organisations and to lobby policymakers. The multi-stakeholder dialogue, including the illegal armed group, has been carried out following values of non-violence, autonomy, independence, and neutrality.

To offer protection **¡Pazame el Balón!** has produced equipment and kits that distinguish those who participate in its activities, such as T-shirts, caps, flags, and ID cards,

with a logo. The accompaniment provided to the communities is not limited to direct physical protection, but also encompasses support to social leaders and football coaches, the connection with government programmes according to the needs of the communities (health, employment, early warning, psychology), legal advice, and the implementation of peacebuilding mechanisms.

There is evidence that the initiative has strengthened the skills of leaders and communities. For example, it has carried out education workshops on the risk of minefields for teachers, football coaches and players. Moreover, it has promoted knowledge exchange between leaders of different regions. This has allowed the community to develop skills for protection and to defend their interest when interacting with the illegal armed group, as well as to repair the social fabric torn apart by the armed conflict.

Around *¡Pazame el Balón!* An imaginary of the future has emerged: ***“the next football star might be among us”***; an idea even the illegal armed group believes in. This sentence has cultivated the hope that the children who live in this region can have a future other than joining the illegal armed group and participating in illegal economies. *¡Pazame el Balón!* has revealed a process of SUCP which has allowed children to use their free time practicing sports, to return to school to study, to dream of a better future in their region, and the community to start rebuilding the social fabric.

PLAYING FOR OUR FUTURE



PROTECTING LIFE

Spiritual protection harmonising our environment

The Awá and Pasto indigenous communities have inhabited the Pacual and Telembí river basins for centuries and have nurtured a deep cultural connection with the land and nature that is passed from generation to generation. These communities using their ancestral knowledge, have worked together with the Alexander von Humboldt ISAIS Institute for over 20 years, to create a network of spiritual places with the aim of protecting the territory (which includes people, animals, flora and soil). Thus, **a network of spiritual protection** is emerging.

The Awá and Pasto communities have fought nonviolently to protect their land, culture, and traditions. They have faced challenges such as the exploitation of natural resources, indigenous rights violations, and nowadays the armed conflict between the ELN and the EMC and the Second Marquetalia for establishing illegal territorial control.

The strength of the **network of spiritual protection** comes from the communities' past. The network seeks to shield the land and people inhabiting the territory through the indigenous law, ancestral knowledge, and peace infrastructures that have been built since at least 2004, with the Local Peace Pact, a multi-party agreement to reduce violence. These are the ingredients of a local protection ecosystem which has prevailed over time.

The network of spiritual protection includes the construction of spiritual buildings and energies to protect the territory. The network includes not only buildings such as the ISAIS Institute, the Superior House of El Sandé, and three Malokas (sacred buildings), but also the development of three strategies to confront violence against the communities.

Three spontaneous civil protection strategies.

The first strategy is the protective presence of unarmed Indigenous Guards, which can be easily recognised by their waistcoat, caps, flags, ID cards, and their command stick, wooden batons that are considered to give them their traditional authority. The Indigenous Guards position themselves between the legal and illegal armed groups and the civilians, following the principle of nonviolence. Their role is underpinned by the spirituality and the symbolic power that is represented by the command stick.

The relationship of the network members with international cooperation, civil society organisations and local governments has allowed them to equip the buildings with communication technologies fundamental for the Indigenous Guards, such as satellite phones and radios, which are key for the efficacy of the protection mechanism. International cooperation agencies have offered financial support to consolidate their work as part of the network.

The second strategy is relationship building, civil diplomacy and multi-stakeholder dialogue. The Awá and Pasto communities have adapted throughout time the strategy of interlocution under the principles of nonviolence, autonomy, independence, and neutrality. Sometimes there is

direct dialogue with the armed groups and on other occasions public speeches promoting peace and coexistence. In addition to this, the advocacy and articulation of the ISAIS Institute with international, national, and local actors has been fundamental in strengthening the legitimacy and recognition of this strategy. In emergency situations, such as combats or forced displacement, this network of contacts has played a crucial role to provide humanitarian assistance.

The third strategy is built on internal structures and processes that strengthen the work of the Awá and Pasto communities, such as the Special Indigenous Justice or the Women's Council, which contribute to a "process of epistemic resistance". This resistance materialises in the questioning of hegemonic knowledge, the promotion of alternative perspectives, the reappropriation of their history and culture, and the encouragement of the production of new forms of knowledge and wisdom.

Education and organising of the Awá and Pasto communities is fundamental for the protection strategy. Multiple programmes of leadership have been carried out, as well as meetings for exchanging experiences between Indigenous Guards of different regions of the country, environmental protection workshops, agricultural projects, and ecotourism. This SUCP mechanism is centred on the design, approval, and implementation of the ***spiritual protection pathway***. The achievements so far have contributed to the collaboration of more international actors who provide human and economic resources for this initiative.

SPIRITUAL PROTECTION



HARMONISING OUR ENVIRONMENT

Protective dialogue for living in coexistence

In the Cordillera region of Nariño, peasant (*campesino*) groups organised in various community action boards (in Spanish, *Juntas de Acción Comunal* - JAC). These peasant groups, motivated by the urgency to survive and to live in dignity, have opted for *multi-stakeholder dialogue* and what is known as “shuttle diplomacy” as tools to create a *Coexistence Manual*. The Manual aims to establish ground rules for coexistence to protect communities who are trapped in an armed conflict in which the EMC fights to maintain illegal hegemonic control of territory.

Two factors make the Cordillera region a strategic corridor for illegal armed groups. First, the mountainous terrain and lack of road infrastructure allow the groups to operate freely. Second, there are drug trafficking routes for international markets, making the region an essential location for the illegal economy which offers immense revenues to multiple actors present in the region.

The *Coexistence Manual* has been taking shape over the last three years. It emerged from a first agreement between *the campesino* communities to fix the roads connecting different villages, which had been damaged by heavy rain, blocking the communication between them. As a self-governing mechanism, they decided to collect a fee per village and to set a road toll. With the money collected they bought a backhoe to pave the roads between villages.

The meeting was an opportunity to discuss other needs requiring a rapid response. Hence, multiple parallel dialogues were held not only between the campesino leaders but also with the illegal armed group. These dialogues gave form to the *Coexistence Manual* with the aim of promoting coexistence and guarantee minimum security by following strict rules in an environment deeply affected by armed violence.

The *Coexistence Manual* has become a social contract of coexistence which ensures the presence and activities of social leaders in the region. However, there are also non-written norms, known only by the communities and which they apply in this holistic *strategy of protective dialogue for coexistence*, which cannot be written explicitly in the Manual because they need to be secret. The dialogue with multiple stakeholders has provided space to erect buildings, such as libraries, community centres where dance and music happens, and a *Campesino* Youth Home (*Hogar Juvenil Campesino*).

The *Coexistence Manual* is an efficient mechanism for “interpositioning”, rumour control and early warning. When an armed group enters the region, an alert system is activated, involving community leaders who gather the community to discuss what to do, with the aim of positioning themselves between the armed groups and the civilian community. This interpositioning keeps armed clashes away from the community, which could result in harmful collateral damage. Moreover, the community action board exercises a strict control over rumours, accusations or bad-mouthing with the aim of preventing the killing of community members due to fake news or false accusations.

Finally, local protection infrastructure is strengthened through various external programmes which engage social leaders and reach their communities. These programmes involve activities such as dance, music, and football, focusing specially on young people, but also workshops about sexual violence targeted to women in the region. In parallel, money has been collected to respond to the priorities of the communities. This has allowed the creation of food cooperatives which create financial alternatives to avoid dependence on illicit economies. Thus, dialogue for coexistence has consolidated an ecosystem of unarmed civilian protection spontaneously.

PROTECTIVE DIALOGUE



FOR LIVING IN COEXISTENCE

III. Strengths and challenges

These three cases show the importance of spontaneity during the emergence and the development of civilian actions which seek to protect other civilians in conflict-torn regions. SUCP is based on strategies that unfold intuitively, in which civilians act, try out and consolidate flexible action plans which adapt to emerging threats. Moreover, civilians act autonomously, without relying exclusively on external actors, consolidating networks of local actors as key pillars in defending lives and drawing on existing local knowledges and traditions.

Although SUCP does not seek structural solutions to the drivers of the conflict, it is an initial essential step to protect civilians in conflict-torn regions and to provide space for peacebuilding processes. The fact that SUCP continues to work amid adversity and in changing conflict contexts is a demonstration of its relevance and testament to the resilience of the communities that use SUCP.

However, these three cases face two challenges. First, the stigmatisation of social leaders who participate in SUCP strategies is a serious problem that both puts at risk their lives and endangers the legitimacy of the strategy. Second, the risk of new armed groups entering these regions is a constant concern that creates uncertainty about the possibility of the strategies to continue operating under the control of new armed actors.

IV. Recommendations

A systemic approach involving the international community, the Colombian

Thirteen policy recommendations

state, civil society, and actors participating in unarmed civilian protection strategies could strengthen SUCP practices around the country.

To the International Community:

1. To establish a **rapid response fund** to support SUCPs. This fund could offer financial support for short and middle-term challenges by adopting flexible guidelines to respond to the changing needs and spontaneous strategies. Thus, the fund could help consolidate the initial steps of SUCP.
2. To promote the creation of a **horizontal and flexible network of collaboration** between actors involved in SUCP and international organisations working on unarmed civilian protection. This network could contribute to knowledge exchange between SUCP actors, strengthening their strategies in the long-term. Strengthening the work of Creating Safer Spaces

would be an important step in this direction.

3. To create an **international prize** for innovative and resilient SUCP strategies. The prize could showcase nationally and internationally the actors involved in these initiatives and help to fight stigmatisation against them.

4. To **localise humanitarian action** to foster alliances between international actors and SUCP initiatives so as to guarantee the protection of civilians in conflict-torn regions.

To the Colombian state:

5. To implement a SUCP **national awareness programme**. This programme could include: media and social media campaigns, community workshops, education materials to showcase the outcomes and positive impact of SUCP strategies, public events to acknowledge and celebrate SUCP leaders.

6. To include SUCP leaders in the **National Commission of Security Guarantees, the National Council of Peace, Reconciliation and Coexistence, and the Territorial Roundtables of Human Rights Guarantees**.

7. To ensure the participation of SUCP leaders in peace negotiations with **illegal armed groups**. They should be included in the National

Committee for Participation created as part of the peace process with the ELN and invited to the local consultation processes in the peace process with the EMC.

To civil society organisations:

8. To promote the creation and strengthening of SUCP strategies, by establishing flexible relationships of collaboration with different civil society organisations, **including SUCP leaders in local and national civil society networks** that are already sharing resources and knowledge.

9. To acknowledge and support SUCP leaders by running **capacity-building workshops** to strengthen their leadership skills, networking capacities, and intuitive intelligence.

10. To do SUCP **capacity-building with local** populations by carrying out dialogues for knowledge exchange to recognise the capacities that already exist and to transform them into sustainable protection strategies.

To actors involved in SUCP:

11. To establish a **horizontal and flexible collaboration mechanism** between the initiatives that carry out unarmed civilian protection and those leading SUCP. Such a mechanism could

facilitate the synergy of efforts and the efficient distribution of resources, and strengthen protection strategies in conflict-torn regions.

12.

To create a ***lasting and adaptable capacity-building programme*** for people involved in unarmed civilian protection and SUCP. This programme could include a review of knowledge and skills and a cartography of effective protection strategies.

13.

To diversify fundraising, developing self-sustaining projects and accessing government and international funding. This could contribute to consolidate these initiatives and broaden their scope.

RECOGNITION AND SUPPORT



FOR CIVILIANS PROTECTING CIVILIANS