HPG report

Reducing violence and strengthening the protection of civilians through community dialogue with armed actors

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HPG Humanitarian Policy Group

ODI

About this report

HPG's work is directed by our Integrated Programme, a multi-year body of research spanning a range of issues, countries and emergencies, allowing us to examine critical issues facing humanitarian policy and practice and influence key debates in the sector. This paper is part of HPG's IP, 'People, power and agency', as part of the 'Community engagement, protection and peace' project. The authors would like to thank HPG's Integrated Programme donors whose funding enables us to pursue the research agenda.

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Executive summary

Civilians are not passive actors in conflict. They can and do seek to protect themselves, including through seeking to influence the behaviour of armed actors through direct and indirect dialogue. Communities are highly strategic and pragmatic in how they approach dialogue, choosing different strategies depending on the threat, type of armed actor and the issue to resolve. Representatives are selected based on specific qualities: the ability to remain calm, persuasive and non-partisan. They are often drawn from positions of moral respect such as faith, spiritual and maternal authority. Close ties – including through familial, kinship, social and trade links – can provide critical entry points to initiate dialogue.

Too often, current protection approaches are not adequately geared towards supporting communities in ensuring their own safety and security. First, they often focus on responding to the consequences of violence, as opposed to approaches with explicit objectives to reduce violence and mitigate its worst consequences as a core part of protection action. Second, protection approaches have been criticised for being top-down, technical, and primarily based on international norms. Too often they fail to resonate with realities on the ground and overlook the importance of local culture, values, social and customary norms, tradition and religion in mitigating threats of violence and strengthening safety. Where practices exist, they are largely under-documented and under-researched, with a lack of pooled learning.

Other actors, such as peacebuilding actors, can more proactively engage with threats of violence – including through supporting dialogue, negotiation and mediation – though not necessarily through the lens of protection. But too often, such action is carried out in parallel with different terminology, culture and modes of actions to humanitarian actors, leading to missed opportunities for collaboration to achieve greater outcomes.

This report brings together over two years of research. The research sought to understand how communities directly and indirectly engage with armed actors; what factors, actions and actors affect the terms of engagement; and what the opportunities, challenges and risks are for greater complementarity between humanitarian, protection and peacebuilding actors. It draws on consultations with a broad spectrum of over 750 people.

Key findings

Actions and considerations to effectively support community-led efforts

There are a range of actions that can be taken to facilitate dialogue, as well as to provide or support access to the resources to do so. External interventions can support, complement and reinforce community capacities. The presence of a respected external actor can open up the space for dialogue, acting as a neutral third party when communities are not ready to lead their own dialogue. External actors can connect communities to wider networks and stakeholders, and support communities to cut through power dynamics and to reach outside power structures. This can include power structures

that are outside their influence, as well as other communities. They can help support the calculations that armed actors and those that support the use of violence make, including by leveraging livelihood interventions and other assistance as a tool to promote restraint.

Limited understanding of community customs, contexts and power dynamics, and how they interrelate, including at the micro-local level, can lead to humanitarian actors imposing new structures and interventions. This can lead to mistrust and insensitive approaches and can cause harm, including by undermining and frustrating existing mechanisms, authority and/or influence.

Successful dialogue and support must be owned and led by communities. Communities decide when and whether a dialogue takes place, what the dialogue should aim at and how to go about it. External actors should seek to multiply community efforts, but be cautious not to take an overly paternalistic approach. Importantly, they must be careful not to co-opt groups beyond their willingness or purpose.

To effectively support and complement community efforts requires international organisations to be humble, not to assume there is a lead role for them, and to give up space. It requires a willingness to listen and adapt according to communities' and armed actors' suggestions. Effectively supporting violence reduction and facilitating dialogue entails sustained presence and proximity. It requires trust, formed by building relationships and demonstrating credibility and a non-partisan position.

Inclusivity is crucial, but this cannot be tokenistic. For example, humanitarian actors might require a specific number of women, youths and older people to participate in community forums. While this may be representative, it is not necessarily inclusive.

Supporting communities in what they are already doing comes with challenges, risks and dilemmas. It involves considerations of how to bring power-holders and those with an influence over the use of violence into dialogue without perpetuating harmful practices or power dynamics. It requires getting around humanitarian actors' longstanding perceptions that engaging with armed actors and those that instigate violence, particularly when not parties to conflict, somehow compromises neutrality or may legitimise armed groups.

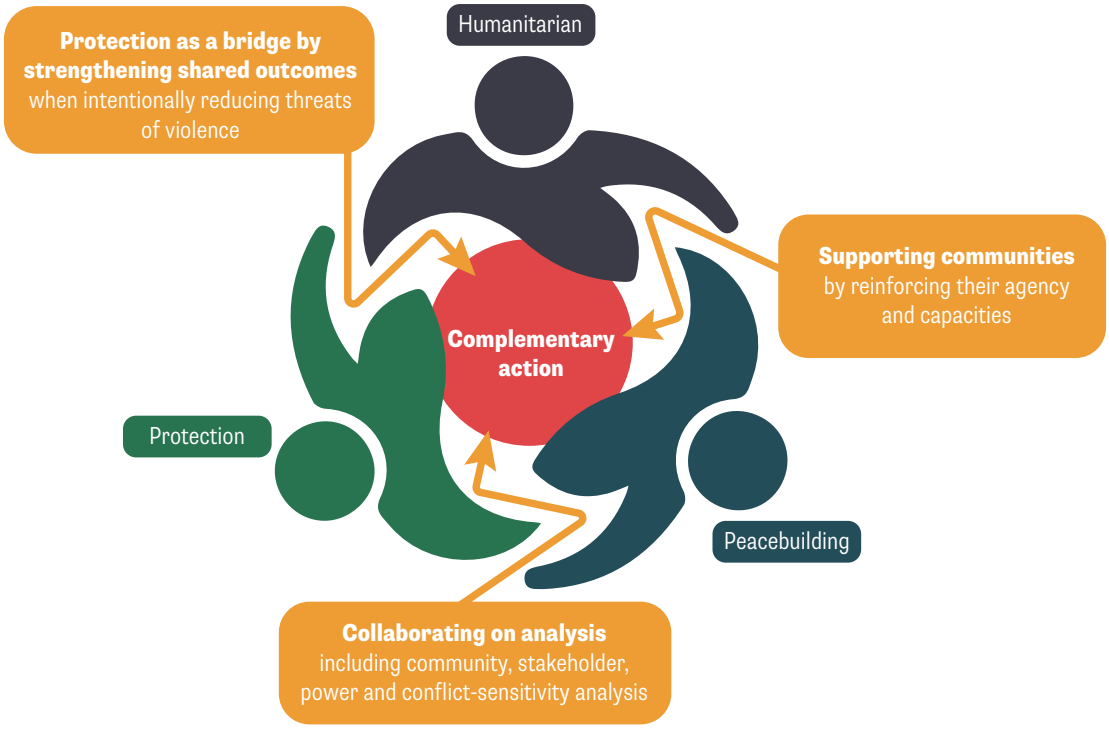
There should be recognition that: reducing levels of violence can only happen when engaging with the sources of threats; transforming perpetrators into champions of non-violence is a powerful strategy to promote restraint; and not engaging armed actors who are significant perpetrators of civilian harm could undermine the principle of impartiality when violence is one of the most acute risks civilians face.

Greater complementarity between humanitarian, peace and protection actors is critical but faces barriers

This research found both a strong interest in and opportunities for greater complementarity between humanitarian, peacebuilding and protection actors. It identified three clear entry points to working in complementarity (see Figure 1). The first is communities: by supporting the agency and capacities of communities, including through their approaches to dialogue, mediation, negotiation and

advocacy, humanitarian and peacebuilding actors can seek to reinforce one another's interventions to strengthen shared outcomes. The second is analysis – community, stakeholder, power and conflict-sensitivity analysis, all of which are essential to supporting community's protection goals and to inform interventions to reduce violence. Finally, protection action itself which, when it is intentionally designed to reduce threats of violence, at the core of interventions, can arguably be the bridge that connects humanitarian and peacebuilding action.

Figure 1 Three entry points to working in complementarity



There are tensions and trade-offs to working in greater complementarity which need to be addressed. These include balancing short-term objectives (safety and security, immediate protection of civilians) with long-term objectives (peace, social cohesion, justice); balancing protection and peacebuilding objectives; and managing longstanding concerns of compromises to humanitarian principles.

There are also challenges related to modes of action:

- **Mandate:** humanitarian actors traditionally focus on needs and vulnerabilities while peacebuilding actors address conflict drivers.
- **Skill sets:** humanitarian actors have traditionally prioritised technical skill sets to deliver at scale, while peacebuilding actors often prioritise social skill sets.
- **Relational:** some humanitarian actors can be more transactional in their relationship with communities in order to emphasise their neutrality, facilitate access, and maintain what they consider a more 'efficient' response. This can contrast with the more exploratory and iterative relationships that protection-of-civilian and peacebuilding organisations predominantly have with communities.

There are opportunities to learn from one another and internalise intersecting modes of action. Humanitarian actors can learn from peacebuilding approaches to conflict and conflict-sensitivity analysis; relational and context-specific approaches to working with, engaging and supporting communities; and iterative approaches to designing interventions. For their part, peacebuilding actors should seek to more systematically reduce and respond to immediate risks to the safety of civilians.

To effectively reduce and interrupt violence requires pragmatic, mutually reinforcing approaches between peacebuilding and humanitarian modes of action. There is a need to recognise that conflict is not linear and neither are effective actions for prevention or response. Importantly, it should be recognised that peacebuilding actors have a role in situations of high-intensity violence, while humanitarian actors should intentionally consider their contribution towards pathways to peace.

Implications for policy and practice

There are a range of considerations and investments to consider to effectively reduce threats of violence, support community capacities and strengthen the safety of communities.

First, there is a critical need for quality conflict and conflict-sensitivity analysis for such interventions. Low-quality analysis can cause harm, or even, in the worst cases, cost lives. One challenge is that the humanitarian sector often carries out analysis at a macro level. Organisations can be reticent to incorporate the wider political landscape into their conflict analysis in the name of objectivity and due to misguided interpretations of humanitarian principles, which results in depoliticised understandings of conflict and violence. Such approaches lead to analysis delinked from context.

Even where such analysis takes place, it insufficiently informs decision-making and adaptations. Humanitarian programmes are not designed to flexibly respond to real-time analysis and adapt accordingly. As a result, organisations too often resort to pausing rather than adapting programmes. There is a need to put the mechanisms in place to allow for analysis to inform decision-making. Humanitarian organisations could learn from peacebuilding organisations, which often undertake more multi-level and participatory approaches to analysis and learning.

Second, the low risk appetite among donors and humanitarian actors and the perceptions of risks related to facilitating dialogue are significant barriers to more systematically carrying out such approaches, especially when engaging armed actors. This results in a continued focus on responding to the consequences of violence, at the expense of seeking ways to reduce it. Potential risks should not be used as a reason to discount support. Indeed, consideration should be given to the consequences of not supporting dialogue, mediation or negotiation, or of not engaging all armed actors that are sources of threats. When risks are effectively managed, the outcomes of dialogue can be profound. Lessons can be drawn from communities' own assessment of risk, and communities can be engaged with to jointly agree the focus and parameters of support. Humanitarian and protection actors can learn from peacebuilding organisations, which often take a more relational approach to risk management in partnership with communities.

Third, in order to support community dialogue effectively, there needs to be recognition that dialogue is iterative and any approach to support it should reflect that. This requires, among other things, flexibility, adaptability, patience, a risk appetite, and an acceptance of failure/setbacks. Systemic change can only take place if the significant structural and systemic barriers within the aid system are addressed. This includes moving away from rigid, pre-designed, output-focused and project-based approaches to programming, unrealistic expectations and short timeframes. By design, quantifying results can enable programmes that achieve limited or no impact, which can undermine flexible, adaptive management approaches.

The aid sector is a competitive marketplace, particularly in the context of progressively constrained funding. Competition for funding and territorial approaches linked to organisational and sectoral mandates can undermine collaboration and lead to duplication of efforts and a lack of coordinated, phased activities. Political will is required from donors, policymakers and operational organisations to address longstanding systemic, structural and cultural barriers, and the political economy of the aid sector. Donors have significant power to either enable or constrain how aid actors work with civilians and with one another. Donors have a key role to play in incentivising the change needed. This means disincentivising approaches driven by a single organisation's mandate towards enabling collaborative approaches based on shared outcomes. Significant power dynamics related to footprint, funding and coordination need to be collectively addressed.

Specifically within the humanitarian sector, to more effectively support the safety of communities requires a shift away from the focus on scale and reach, towards approaches which demonstrate how programming contributes to reducing the threats which communities face and is equipped with the tools to measure this impact. Nonviolent Peaceforce's approach to 'scaling out' could be considered, which focuses on deepening rather than widening impact, through strengthening networks and partnerships.

Finally, there needs to be a mindset shift in what is considered impact and evidence of impact, and ultimately what is considered success. The international humanitarian sector is hardwired to privilege quantitative over qualitative evidence. This, too, is often in the name of objectivity, and due to the sector's focus on demonstrating results. However, quantitative measures are often decontextualised and do not provide enough information to understand the pathway to impact. There must be consideration to more systematically use qualitative evidence which, when well designed, can be as rigorous as quantitative evidence.

There needs to be reconsideration of what constitutes success. Building relationships, facilitating dialogue and undertaking negotiations and mediation take time. Dialogue can be considered successful when violence is delayed, interrupted or when it occurs less intensely. The process is as important as the outcome.

What and whose evidence is privileged needs to be considered, along with the power dynamics involved in evidence, which often lead to locally generated knowledge being ignored. Defining and measuring success should start from community perceptions of safety, and how communities perceive

success. There has been demonstrated success in focusing on lived experiences and diverse voices to develop and measure community-defined experiences using rigorous participatory approaches. Such approaches – increasingly used in the peacebuilding sector – should be learnt from and integrated.

Alternative approaches to understanding and monitoring success will also require operational actors bringing what they have learned to donors, talking them through what alternatives are possible, with the aim of building a wider consensus around the range of accepted methodologies to measure the success of violence-reduction interventions.

Key recommendations

These recommendations call for community-based actors, civil society, local and national governments, national and international humanitarian, protection and peacebuilding actors, as well as donors and diplomatic actors to take the actions required to reduce violence and strengthen the safety of civilians. They does not suggest that all actors should seek to incorporate all actions, in all contexts, at all times, but asks relevant actors to carefully consider their role and added value in any given context, and to critically assess what needs to change in order to effectively implement them.

Recommended actions are premised on the willingness of relevant actors and institutions to do things differently. Actors need to honestly assess what they are and are not willing to do, and take responsibility for their actions and the impact they have. Importantly, actors should consider the serious risks of not seeking to integrate such actions on the lives of those individuals and communities affected by violence and conflict. The following is an overview of recommended actions and considerations. For the full sub-recommendations, and questions to consider, see Recommendations in the final report.

Actions and considerations

- **Respect and support community ownership and solutions.** Base your interventions on the assumption that communities are already taking actions to reduce violence. Consider the extent to which violence-reduction interventions are based on community-devised solutions. Consider how your interventions can be better based on micro-level community stakeholder analysis, including formal and informal power dynamics.
- **Strengthen networks, linkages and communication channels within and between communities to support dialogue.** Consider carefully who to involve, including both those with an interest in reducing violence and those with an interest in perpetuating violence.
- **Make violence reduction a core action of protection.** Consider how far the contributions of your organisation are specifically designed to reduce violence. Consider how to balance your interventions to reduce threats, those to increase community capacities, and those to reduce vulnerabilities.

- **Create space for platforms to promote complementarity.** Consider opportunities to create platforms that go beyond coordination and instead are focused on strategic approaches to reaching common objectives. Ensure that shared learning and joint action is promoted in realising those objectives.
- **Proactively consider ways to complement modes of action between humanitarian, protection and peacebuilding actors.** Carefully consider your role and the role of others, including whether your organisation is best placed to do this, at this time and how your organisation complements the actions of others.
- **Prioritise and resource systematic, high-quality conflict-sensitivity analysis.** Assume that your institution is part of the political economy of conflict and violence and critically assess your institution's role. Ensure you identify the barriers to using analysis to inform programming adaptations and decision-making and seek to address them.
- **Reconsider what constitutes success, according to whom, and how to measure it.** Understand community perspectives on what success looks like and use that as your starting point.

1 Introduction

1.1 Background and rationale

Civilians are not passive actors in conflict. They are can and do exercise agency in protecting themselves, including through efforts to directly and indirectly influence the behaviour of armed actors (Baines and Paddon, 2013; Kaplan, 2013; Arjona, 2015; Hapeslagh and Yousuf, 2015; ICRC, 2018). Within the humanitarian sector, current approaches to strengthening protection are criticised for being overly top-down, technical and primarily based on international norms at the expense of recognising and supporting communities' own action and agency. Too often, communities are excluded from decision-making, planning and coordination (South et al., 2012; Carstensen, 2016; Corbett et al., 2021). Current approaches fail to resonate with realities on the ground and the importance of local culture, values, social and customary norms, tradition and religion in mitigating threats of violence and strengthening safety (Carstensen, 2016; ICRC, 2018; Davies and O'Callaghan, 2022).

There is growing momentum towards the need to shift protection approaches to consider how civilian engagement strategies can be supported, or at the very least not undermined. The recognition that civilians take action to strengthen their own protection is not new (see for instance Bonwick, 2006). Community-based protection has long been adopted as a systematic practice by some humanitarian organisations.

However, practices with explicit objectives to intentionally reduce threats of violence and mitigate its worst consequences remain limited (Gorur, 2013; Carstensen, 2016; Metcalfe-Hough, 2019). These have not been a systematic focus of international humanitarian protection interventions – whether through supporting communities in their dialogues with armed actors or in directly engaging armed actors to strengthen protection (South et al., 2012; Mahony, 2013; InterAction, 2020). The Independent Review of the Implementation of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Protection Policy found that, in general, international humanitarian understandings and practices of protection have focused more on responding to the consequences of violence or on strengthening the protective environment, rather than seeking to prevent, reduce or interrupt threats of violence and mitigate their worst consequences (Slim and Bonwick, 2005: 43; Cocking et al., 2022). For instance, the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) carried out a rapid review of Humanitarian Response Plans in 2023 and found that a third of them do not mention prevention and only a few refer to civilian self-protection and humanitarian mediation (NRC, 2023).[1] Peacebuilding and specialised protection of civilians actors more proactively engage with threats – including through supporting dialogue, negotiation and mediation with armed actors – though

1 While the NRC review is reflective only of activities that fall within the formal humanitarian system and its Humanitarian Response Plans, and therefore don't include activities of the many actors that fall outside of that – including national actors and specialised protection of civilians actors – this is indicative of a trend in the sector.

in the case of peacebuilding actors, not necessarily through the lens of protection. The IASC Protection Policy review called for a greater focus on reducing risks and interrupting threats of violence that civilians face within the humanitarian sector (Cocking et al., 2022).

The humanitarian protection sector is beginning to recognise these shortcomings, with a renewed focus on reducing risks of violence, coercion and deliberate deprivation. There are examples of humanitarian, protection and peacebuilding actors supporting community dialogue with armed actors to reduce violence and strengthen community safety. However, such practices are largely under-documented, under-researched, and show a lack of pooled learning. While humanitarian, protection and peacebuilding actors may work towards shared objectives of reducing violence and strengthening safety, this is often viewed from different perspectives, with different terminology, working cultures and modes of action. As a result, there are often missed opportunities for collaboration.

As such, there was a clear and critical evidence gap. The Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) received strong support to strengthen evidence and learning, resulting in the work in this 'Community engagement, protection and peace' project. The research aimed to understand how to best support communities in their dialogue with armed actors to reduce violence and strengthen their safety, and to explore greater opportunities for complementary approaches between humanitarian, protection and peacebuilding actors.

This report synthesises more than two years of research. The report emphasises opportunities, challenges and risks to support community engagement efforts, as well as opportunities and challenges to strengthen approaches between humanitarian, protection and peacebuilding actors to reduce violence and strengthen civilian safety.

1.2 Methodology and limitations

This final report brings together research carried out between April 2022 and July 2024. The research focused on three key questions:

1. What role do communities play in developing and shaping engagement with armed actors in order to strengthen their protection?
2. What factors, actions and actors affect the terms of engagement between communities and armed actors?
3. What are the opportunities, challenges and risks for national and international humanitarian, protection and peacebuilding actors to adapt their approach based on a strengthened understanding of community engagement with armed actors?

The starting point of this research is how communities directly or indirectly engage in dialogue with armed actors in order to reduce violence and strengthen protection. As such, the focus for external actors centres primarily on dialogue, mediation, negotiations, and a number of actions which can

support such community engagement. This means that a broader range of risks and actions to mitigate them are not discussed – for example the risks of media in inciting or exacerbating violence, as well as the role of protection actors to mitigate such risks.

The research sought the opinions, expertise and experience of over 750 people. Stakeholders were consulted through interviews, focus group discussions and workshops, and included a broad spectrum of communities and community leadership (youth, women, faith, traditional and spiritual leaders); armed actors; government and military representatives; as well as representatives of civil society groups, national and international humanitarian, protection and peacebuilding organisations; United Nations (UN) peacekeeping delegates; donors and diplomatic actors.

Building on an initial scoping exercise including a literature review and expert consultations with global humanitarian, protection and peacebuilding expertise (see Fenton and Davies, 2023), primary research took place in the Central African Republic (CAR) and South Sudan in 2023 in collaboration with national research partners – Peace & Development Watch Centrafrique and The Bridge Network, respectively (Barbelet et al., 2023; Davies and Mayhew, 2024).[2] These country-based case studies were complemented by the collating of innovative practices to strengthen protection.[3] The final phase of research focused on a series of workshops to distil learning from practice at the country, global and thematic levels. These allowed the research team to address the shortcomings of having two case studies based in neighbouring countries through engaging with experience from a broad range of geographical contexts.

The project took an 'action research' approach by feeding findings in real time into relevant practice and policy dialogues and forums to disseminate findings, stimulate two-way learning, and maximise learning opportunities. The ultimate goal was to inform the policy and practice of operational actors, donors and policymakers. Both case studies were carried out in collaboration with/hosted by operational organisations: Nonviolent Peaceforce in South Sudan and the NRC in CAR.

The research took an iterative, snowballing approach. Through initial scoping and consultations, it mapped community-level interventions to reduce violence and strengthen the protection of civilians at global levels and within the two countries, and built evidence and learning from there. It does not represent a full review and analysis of all actors and practices to prevent or reduce violence globally or within the country contexts. Nor does it represent a full review of external actor support to community

2 In South Sudan, community-level data was collected from Greater Pibor Administration Area (GPAA), Jonglei and Western Equatoria. In CAR, community-level data was collected in Bria, Bambari and Mbaïki. Primary research in CAR was supported by historical data collected by the NRC from several neighbourhoods in Bangui between 2014 and 2015.

3 Practices reviewed included: Unarmed Civilian Protection; Everyday Peace Indicators; and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)'s support to community negotiators in Northern Ireland.

and armed actor dialogue in the country case study contexts. Rather, it represents a snapshot of views, experiences, approaches and learning from the communities and the external actors supporting them, with whom we interacted throughout the course of the research.

Definitions and terminology

The research uses a number of definitions that informed the initial research design and which have evolved over time based on developing learning.

Community

The term 'community' is highly complex with multiple definitions. This research acknowledges that communities are not homogeneous or static, they are 'diverse, heterogenous and continuously shifting', influenced by both internal and external factors' (Deng, 2021). Reference to communities in our research relied upon communities' own perceptions of what 'community' means. Such feedback was largely consistent – that communities are built on shared norms, values, customs and traditions, included those linked to religion or spirituality. They are often linked to ethnic and sub-ethnic groups. While many communities are linked to geographic areas, people can move across different areas or international borders and still belong to the same community.

There is not always a clear distinction between civilians and armed actors. Some may 'double hat', taking on roles as both civilian and armed actor. As one interviewee stated, it is often more useful to refer to the extent to which an individual identifies as a civilian or armed actor. Civilians can have existing bonds to armed actors based on family, kinship, identity and ideology, and affiliation to an armed actor can be viewed as a means of protection.

Armed actor

'Armed actor' refers to any individual, group or institution that is armed and is a threat to the safety and security of communities. For the purpose of this research, 'armed actor' is a deliberately broad term that can include state and non-state armed actors who are parties to conflict; community-based armed actors; and politically and/or criminally motivated armed actors (including violent organised criminal groups).

Civilian self-protection

Civilian self-protection is defined as activities undertaken by civilians or communities during armed conflict to avoid, mitigate or respond to threats to physical safety or actual violence (Baines and Paddon, 2012; Betcy and Medie, 2016; Gorur, 2013). Strategies include flight, opposition, accommodation, engagement, collaboration, and support (to armed actors).

This research focuses on non-violent strategies used by civilian communities for self-protection, as well as non-violent approaches to support communities. However, the research found that civilians do use the threat and use of violence as a form of self-protection, for example through community-embedded armed groups, other types of armed actors, or through affiliation with armed actors, which is briefly discussed given the implications for humanitarian, protection and peacebuilding support.

External actor

'External actor' refers to any actor who is not perceived by a community to be part of the community. This can include civil society actors, local and national government, private actors, and national and international humanitarian, protection and peacebuilding actors. While external actors can come from a community or have links to a community (for instance, local government representatives), they are often not seen to act as a member of the community when acting within their official function.

Protection

This research frames protection through the lens of proactive and intentional efforts to prevent, reduce and interrupt threats of violence, mitigate against its worst consequences, and improve the safety of people affected by violence and conflict. While this is often carried out by entities that define themselves as humanitarian, it is not limited to such organisations. For example, the research also examines practices that may not be framed as protection but do contribute to it – for example, through peacebuilding modes of action.

Humanitarian action/actor

For this research, humanitarian actors refer to entities or individuals with an objective to prevent and/or alleviate human suffering in situations of violence or conflict.

Peacebuilding action/actor

Peacebuilding actors and their actions seek to address the underlying causes of conflict, helping people resolve their differences peacefully and lay the foundations to prevent future violence (Conciliation Resources, n.d.).

2 Community dialogue with armed actors

This research found that communities can and do influence the behaviour of armed actors. They engage armed actors strategically, considering carefully who should lead these efforts on behalf of communities and how best to go about it. This chapter focuses on the internal and organised processes communities undertake to increase their own protection. Subsequent parts of the report will discuss the implications for national and international humanitarian, protection and peacebuilding actors.

2.1 Process of dialogue

2.1.1 Who engages?

Communities are strategic and pragmatic about who engages in a dialogue. Community representatives are often drawn from positions of moral respect, such as faith, spiritual and maternal authority. These individuals are selected based on specific qualities and skills, such as the ability to remain calm, persuasive and the perception of being non-partisan with a commitment towards improving safety and a pathway to peace (Davies and Mayhew, 2024). These are seen as critical qualities in carrying out dialogue, as they enable the building of relationships.

Trust and credibility are critical for communities to know that their representatives are acting in their best interests, especially when the community is not directly involved in dialogue. They are also crucial for generating a certain level of respect with armed actors. This means that those chosen to represent their communities are predominantly drawn from existing positions of authority, whether formal or informal. This includes traditional chiefs, elders, religious or spiritual leaders, or other local authority figures within a given community (Haspeslagh and Yousuf, 2015; ICRC, 2018; Jackson, 2021; Shire, 2021; Bleisemann de Guevara et al., 2024a). While the decision of who engages is not necessarily one made by the community as a whole, the position of authority these individuals hold can provide a tacit acceptance to act on the behalf of the community and that they are acting in the best interests of their respective communities (Barbelet et al., 2023; Davies and Mayhew, 2024).

Both CAR and South Sudan are deeply spiritual and religious societies (ibid.). Many armed actors encountered during this research are religious and give some authority to faith leaders. They can cut across political, ethnic and religious lines. Faith leaders from different belief systems also display an ability to work alongside one another through interfaith committees and an acceptance of traditional spiritual and customary beliefs which may not conform with their own (Barbelet et al., 2023; Davies and Mayhew, 2024). However, faith leaders must demonstrate they can hold a non-partisan position and not become embroiled in divisive issues, for example of identity or political affiliation, which can be drivers of conflict. For example, in South Sudan, perceptions of the politicisation of church leaders along ethnic lines in Jonglei mean that the church lost trust as a non-partisan third party to dialogue. As a result, it has lower levels of influence in Jonglei than in other areas of South Sudan such as Western Equatoria (Davies and Mayhew, 2024).

Women can also play a central role during dialogue, as demonstrated in both CAR and South Sudan. In both contexts, women hold, or can build, a social status symbolised by their maternal authority, which they are able to leverage as an entry point for dialogue. In CAR, for example, caring for children orphaned as a result of conflict with Seleka (an alliance of non-state armed actors) enabled women to portray an image of the 'nourishing mother', earning respect among members of anti-Balaka militia forces (Barbelet et al., 2023). In South Sudan, in line with customary tradition, women are viewed as not actively participating in hostilities, meaning they are perceived as less of a threat to engage with than men. Due to this, they face fewer risks and are better able to cross lines of armed actor control and affiliation. This perception of 'neutrality' allows them to act as message carriers during times of heightened insecurity (Davies and Mayhew, 2024). Women also use shared spaces such as market spaces and marital relationships to establish intercommunal dialogue (Barbelet et al., 2023; Davies and Mayhew, 2024). They also directly and actively engaged armed actors to reduce their use of violence against the community (Barbelet et al., 2023).

Youth[4] leaders have also played a key role in initiating dialogue in both South Sudan and CAR. In CAR, members of youth civil society groups have been able to initiate dialogue between communities and different non-state armed actors. The familiarity with young members of these groups meant that they already held a level of respect as role models which they could leverage to facilitate dialogue with other youth that were taking part in violence (Barbelet et al., 2023). The example of youth involvement shows that who is chosen to engage can also be determined by the armed actor that the community seeks to engage with. In South Sudan, community leaders spoke of excluding youth from engaging with government forces, as this required conveying a level of respect and experience. However, when engaging armed actors with a larger youth contingent, involving youth was seen as advantageous (Davies and Mayhew, 2024).

The make-up of those leading the process of dialogue with armed actors for their respective communities can raise questions over how representative these structures are (see section 3.1). Given that those engaging are often drawn from positions of authority, these groups are often dominated by certain individuals, particularly men, which can entrench negative power dynamics. Evidence documenting civilian dialogue has found that the dominant figures leading dialogue may determine which issues are prioritised. Evidence from Iraq revealed that during dialogue, women had knowledge on issues relevant to their communities such as employment, welfare and social stigma around displacement, which their male counterparts did not (Kaldor et al., 2022).

Our own evidence suggests a mixed picture when it comes to engaging the wider community. In certain contexts in CAR, those leading dialogue would be a small group of elders, religious leaders and young men, without consultation with the wider community (Barbelet et al., 2023). However, both

4 What is considered youth is culturally specific and may differ from western definitions. In some cultures, those referred to as 'youth' can refer to a certain stage in an individual's life (e.g. those who have not yet reached the status of 'elder') rather than age. This means that those interviewed as part of research could fall into age categories above the age of 18.

case studies showed that whilst communities will look to the influence of individuals, dialogues adopt a whole-of-community approach to set out the priorities and position of each community. Wider community meetings are held to draw on the collective views of faith leaders, women, youth and other demographic groups (ibid.; Davies and Mayhew, 2024). In some areas, these meetings are public and open to all community members. For example, the church in South Sudan can use sermons as a place to gain the views of the community on its openness to engage with armed actors and its position during ongoing dialogue (Davies and Mayhew, 2024). Similarly, in CAR, women leading engagement might use savings groups to garner the opinion of women in the wider community and feedback on a dialogue's progress (Barbelet et al., 2023).

2.1.2 When do communities engage?

Communities will look for signs and develop early-warning systems to identify when the risk of violence is high and when the time is right to initiate dialogue with armed actors. Communities will often rely on daily observations and subtle changes in the behaviour of armed actors or those linked to them.

For example, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), communities will monitor the increase in the numbers of armed actors and their movements to detect anything out of the ordinary, including observing the actions of neighbours who have relatives or friends connected to armed actors (Suarez, 2017). This form of early warning is supported by our findings from South Sudan. The community marked armed actors' behavioural changes, including changes in routines (such as no longer visiting local markets), or more subtle indications, such as youth collecting water bottles to store water and buying a high quantity of rehydration salts at local markets, in order to support youth mobilisations (Davies and Mayhew, 2024).

Our research in South Sudan also shows communities will use a number of techniques to gauge how open an armed actor is to engaging in dialogue. In Western Equatoria, the Azande community would use family connections with the South Sudan National Liberation Army (SSNLM) to gauge how open the group was to entering dialogue. Symbols can also be used to issue a message that a community is willing to engage in dialogue. In Greater Pibor Administrative Area (GPAA), the Murle tie white flags to trees in order to express to Nuer communities a desire for a reduction in hostilities and a willingness to engage in dialogue (Davies and Mayhew, 2024).

2.1.3 What are the objectives of dialogue?

Communities seek to engage armed actors and influence their behaviour on a range of issues. Broadly, evidence shows that communities focus on objectives relating to their immediate risks to safety, such as physical and sexual violence, abductions, the destruction and theft of property, and the blocking of humanitarian assistance. Communities will also seek resolutions to issues affecting their ability to move freely, as well as their economic security, including the freedom to practice livelihood activities and

the free movement of goods (Barbelet et al., 2023; Davies and Mayhew, 2024). In CAR, religious leaders secured an agreement that taxes would be collected by them rather than the anti-Balaka, due to the latter's use of violence during tax collection (Barbelet et al., 2023).

Dialogue can also seek to achieve longer-term objectives such as peace and social cohesion between communities, with dialogue on more immediate concerns at times paving the way for discussions around longer-term goals (Barbelet et al., 2023; Davies and Mayhew, 2024).

Communities often adopt a 'success–risk' approach to determine which issues to raise with armed actors. They will evaluate their existing relationship with armed actors and the risks involved to determine the possibility of engaging and to identify those issues which they perceive as negotiable and exclude those which they consider no-go areas. For example, in CAR, communities determined that issues that affected their daily lives, such as arbitrary arrests or abusive taxation, were issues where they could have some level of success. However, issues that related directly to armed actors, such as internal dynamics within an armed actor or between two separate groups, were seen as non-negotiable (Barbelet et al., 2023: 34).

2.1.4 How do communities engage in dialogue?

The forms of engagement communities use are largely dependent on the context and the armed actor involved. Communities adapt, choosing different strategies, depending on the threat, actor or issue that they are engaging on (Barbelet et al., 2023; Bliesemann de Guevara et al., 2024a: 3; Davies and Mayhew, 2024). Communities will consider who leads on dialogue based on the armed actor they are facing. Dialogue at times will not seek to engage armed actor leadership. Civilians may look to 'nudge' sympathetic lower-ranked members within an armed actor to influence behaviour change among the wider group (Kaplan, 2013). This practice has been highlighted in Colombia and Syria (ibid.) and it is also a tactic employed by women leaders in Western Equatoria. Here women approached rank-and-file members of an armed group who they knew, resulting in a noted change in behaviour towards the community (Davies and Mayhew, 2024).

Communities leverage the links that they have with armed actors as entry points to initiate dialogue and build persuasive arguments with which to influence their behaviour. Close ties significantly increase the capacity to influence dialogue. Evidence from Colombia, the DRC and Syria shows that dialogue relied on pre-existing family and social ties (Haspeslagh and Yousuf, 2015). Our evidence supports this: communities will draw upon close ties with armed actors – including familial, kinship, social and trade links – which can provide critical entry points to initiate dialogue (Barbelet et al., 2023; Davies and Mayhew, 2024).

In CAR, young men have been able to draw upon their generational connection and friendship ties with members of the anti-Balaka, as an entry point to discussions on what role their generation of young men can play in creating a peaceful society (Barbelet et al., 2023: 21–22). These same young men were also able to use these close ties to gather information to help religious leaders in their dialogue with the

anti-Balaka. In South Sudan, in both Western Equatoria and Jonglei, armed actors are often drawn from local communities, providing an entry point to initiate dialogue and offering a channel through which to pass messages between the community and armed actors (Davies and Mayhew, 2024). For example, in Western Equatoria, women from both the Dinka and Azande communities successfully established intercommunal dialogues, using shared spaces such as markets, to channel messages back to their respective communities on the importance of restraint (Davies and Mayhew, 2024: 24).

Communities' use of persuasive arguments often draw upon an armed group's ideology and identity, its responsibility towards communities, and/or how its conduct can be counterproductive to its aims. The desire for legitimacy and reliance on the community for survival, particularly where multiple armed actors are present, all offer opportunities for both communities and external actors looking to influence the behaviour of armed actors (Bamber and Svensson, 2022; Haspeslagh and Yousuf, 2015; Arjona, 2017; Suarez, 2017; Jackson, 2021).

In both CAR and South Sudan, communities would highlight the importance of their role in supporting a particular armed actor and where the latter's actions might prove to be counterproductive to their survival. In CAR, religious leaders were able to negotiate a reduction in the amount of tax demanded by anti-Balaka forces, arguing that it is more than local people can afford and will reduce the amount of local resources which the anti-Balaka can rely upon (Barbelet et al., 2023). In South Sudan, in certain cases communities could leverage the presence of multiple armed groups, either by supplying food or withholding information, in order to weaken one armed actor in relation to other armed actors in the area (Davies and Mayhew, 2024).

Important religious days and shared beliefs are also used as a platform to build trust in order for dialogue to begin. In Western Equatoria, church leaders visited the SSNLM on Sundays and used prayers in order to create a 'friendly environment' within which dialogue could take place (Davies and Mayhew, 2024: 22). In CAR, Imams were able to use religious holidays to negotiate with the Front populaire pour la renaissance de la Centrafrique (FPRC) to secure both pauses in violence and access for the delivery of humanitarian aid. Imams also used this opportunity of celebrations linked to religious holidays to bring the community together with FPRC to build stronger relations (Barbelet et al., 2023: 22).

The lack of clear separation between communities and armed actors can mean that the process of dialogue is less visible. Dialogue may take place simply when a family member associated with an armed actor visits the family home (Davies and Mayhew, 2024). In contexts with the presence of community-embedded armed actors, such as in South Sudan and CAR, this means that there is not always a clear separation between civilians and armed actors (Barbelet et al., 2023; Davies and Mayhew, 2024). These blurred distinctions can offer an opportunity during dialogue, allowing a shift in the conversation away from a military focus to one focused on the concerns of civilians.

Communities will also adopt indirect forms of engagement. In CAR, religious leaders adopted several tactics to influence the behaviour of anti-Balaka forces. In addition to direct engagement, this also

included sensitisation work, and coaching members of the group (Barbelet et al., 2023: 20). Civil society youth groups have also organised peace marches and football matches, working across communities in order to combat disinformation, misinformation and hate speech (ibid.: 23).

While this research focuses on non-violent engagement strategies used by civilian communities for self-protection, in both case studies, communities demonstrated that they were willing to use or threaten violence if needed. In CAR, as a last resort, communities burnt down the homes of anti-Balaka members in response to the raping of a young child and continued violence (ibid., 2023: 24). In Jonglei, the Lou Nuer community would use the threat of the Nuer White Armies to ensure the restraint of violence of other armed actors operating in the area (Davies and Mayhew, 2024). Indeed, communities may not separate protection from violence. Membership or association of an armed group can be seen as a form of protection for the community (South et al., 2012; Carstensen, 2016; Metcalfe-Hough, 2019). Communities will leverage the presence of multiple armed actors to improve their security. The use of deception through writing fake letters to one armed actor from another, warning them to improve their conduct towards civilians or otherwise face attack (Suarez, 2017); obtaining a direct line of communication to an armed group offering protection from other armed actors (Bøås, 2014); and resisting forced displacement by one armed group based on the prospect of protection from another (Hallward et al., 2017), are all examples of this strategy adopted by communities.

2.1.5 Risks and trade-offs associated with dialogue

Actions such as risk–success calculations and the use of leverage highlight that communities identify where they have an 'advantage' that can strengthen their position during dialogue. However, reaching an agreement with an armed actor may mean that in return for their safety and security, communities may have to accept certain trade-offs. These trade-offs may represent the 'best' of a bad set of outcomes for communities, whereby communities have few alternatives but to comply. In many conflicts globally, complete neutrality from all sides is not possible, leaving civilians little option but to accommodate and cooperate with armed actors to maximise their protection (Baines and Paddon, 2012). For example, in Mali, community leaders complied with Jihadists' interpretation of sharia law in exchange for guarantees for the community's wellbeing and security (Kleinfeld and Tapily, 2022).

We found similar examples during our research. In South Sudan, communities spoke of making deals with armed actors, offering food, cattle or grain (Davies and Mayhew, 2024). This may also be offered in order to encourage armed actors to enter into dialogue. In CAR, communities may be expected to offer armed groups financial incentives to resolve cases of kidnap or arbitrary arrest (Barbelet et al., 2023: 23). Communities can take strategic decisions to prioritise the safety and security of the community. However, this can be at the expense of individual rights. In CAR, young women from the community were offered as brides in order to build good relations with armed actors, while male youths were expected to join armed actors in some places. While in some instances these may have been voluntary choices by individuals, community pressure to do so for tactical reasons would have also limited the voluntary nature of these actions. As in many contexts, women who had been raped were also forced to marry armed actors, which in some cases led the women to commit suicide (ibid.: 24). Indeed, in both CAR and South Sudan, the individual rights and protections for young women and girls, in particular,

were forgone in order to prioritise the collective safety of the community. These trade-offs represent harmful practices that challenge international norms and values and present dilemmas for international organisations to navigate (see section 3.1).

Engaging with armed actors carries high levels of risk for civilians. Especially in contexts where there are multiple armed actors present, civilians run the risk of being accused of spying or being associated with an opposing armed actor. However, communities recognise these risks and take measures to mitigate them. For example, in Jonglei, South Sudan, communities spoke of trying to maintain relationships with all sides in order to avoid the appearance of favouring one armed actor over another (Davies and Mayhew, 2024: 20). Internal divisions and disagreements over how to approach a dialogue process are also a risk. This risk is particularly high where influential figures compete to play a dominant role during dialogue. The presence of different belief systems plays into this dynamic. In South Sudan, tensions can arise when it comes to the sacrificing of animals to mark the agreement of a dialogue process, or decisions on which religious practices should open a dialogue. In South Sudan, Christian leaders who took part in dialogue noted that, in such cases, it is important to step back and allow other practices, even if they counter their own beliefs (ibid.: 21).

2.2 Factors that shape engagement

2.2.1 Community dynamics: social cohesion, social capital, bridging capital

Evidence shows that there are several factors – both internal and external – that can impact community dialogue with armed actors. The presence of greater community cohesion and existing trusted customary authorities and institutions will contribute to the increased effectiveness of community self-protection strategies (South et al., 2012; Gorur, 2013; Kaplan, 2013; Jackson, 2021). From both our case studies, those interviewed described how having stronger social cohesion allowed communities to develop a common position and messaging with which to enter dialogue with armed actors (Barbelet et al., 2023; Davies and Mayhew, 2024). It also facilitated the lines of communication that communities can utilise when separated by conflict. For example, in CAR, established networks both internally and across communities, have allowed youth, women's organisations and faith leaders to continue to communicate even when physically separated by conflict. This has included youth groups who use their networks to help combat misinformation (Barbelet et al., 2023: 33).

The level of social cohesion can fragment during conflict, particularly when civilians are displaced or experience multiple displacements. This can reduce the effectiveness of community self-protection strategies. In Maban, South Sudan, the displacement of communities and their leadership structures led to new forms of leadership (Save the Children International, 2023). Community protection groups, where they exist, have shown that they are able to provide support during displacement. However, this should not be assumed: the dynamics specific to each community should be assessed. Organisations that had supported unarmed civilian protection strategies reported that an increasingly militarised

society – where there is a prominent level of state surveillance – leads to an increasing level of mistrust between communities, making it more difficult to support community protection measures (Bliesemann de Guevara et al., 2024b: 2).

2.2.2 Nature of armed actor and relationship with community

The type of armed actor will help determine the opportunities for dialogue and how this dialogue will take shape. As previously mentioned, communities will use close bonds as entry points to initiate dialogue with armed actors. These bonds can also determine the level of empathy an armed actor has for suffering communities. In Western Equatoria, South Sudan, the SSNLM was encouraged by its close links to the local community to engage in peace talks with the government, as it could see the impact ongoing violence was having on members' families and communities (Davies and Mayhew, 2024). In CAR, evidence showed that where armed actors recruited locally, this reduced the level of violence towards communities and resulted in the group being more open to listening to the community's concerns (Barbelet et al., 2023).

The greater a group's concern for legitimacy, the more receptive it may be to entering into dialogue with the community (Reno, 2007; Brenner, 2017; Podder, 2017; Suarez, 2017; Krause and Kamler, 2022). There are two reasons for the desire for legitimacy. Firstly, in pragmatic terms, armed actors see the importance of winning local support in order to sustain the group. This can come in the form of financial support, food supplies or the gathering of information (Barbelet et al., 2023; Davies and Mayhew, 2024). Secondly, ideology and how armed actors perceive themselves will also help determine their conduct towards civilians. If an armed actor perceives itself as protecting its community, it feels a greater moral obligation to reducing the level of harm experienced by the local community (Barbelet et al., 2023). Communities are aware of an armed actor's ideology and identity, and will look for 'rhetorical gaps' between an armed actor's behaviour and stated ideology, for leverage during dialogue (Kaplan, 2013). This strategy has been adopted by community mediators in CAR during dialogue with the anti-Balaka, holding the group to its stated common goal of 'protecting the community' (Barbelet et al., 2023).

Conversely, having limited connection to the local community can significantly reduce the entry points for dialogue. In Jonglei in South Sudan, communities spoke of the difficulty in opening dialogue with government forces, as these were drawn from different communities from outside the local area (Davies and Mayhew, 2024: 27). In CAR, where the Wagner Group was present, communities rarely engaged with the group directly. This was due to the community lacking the connections to the group to open dialogue and holding limited leverage over it. Instead, communities would rely on engaging the group via local government authorities (Barbelet et al., 2023).

It is important to note that the dynamics between communities and armed actors are not static. Whilst no existing close ties may exist between the community and a given armed actor from the beginning, the inter-reliance that can emerge during conflict can result in closer ties being built over time. In South Sudan, armed actors visiting local markets was identified as one such way these ties, and therefore entry points to dialogue, are built (Davies and Mayhew, 2024: 24).

2.2.3 Conflict dynamics

There is, of course, an interplay between conflict dynamics and the space to engage in dialogue. Broadly, the space for engagement is fluid, reflecting changes in conflict dynamics, resulting in both positive and negative effects. High levels of violence and the type of violence can mean that the space for dialogue closes (Mayersen, 2020). Protracted conflict can also result in the emergence of new actors and the decline in influence of traditional forms of authority that were important for restraining the use of violence (Suarez, 2017; Pendle, 2021; see also Barbelet et al., 2023; Davies and Mayhew., 2024). At the same time, changes in conflict dynamics can present opportunities – for example, in the death or change of individual armed actor leadership, which might create space for a more open form of leadership (Shire, 2021).

These findings are also reflected in our own research. In CAR, anti-Balaka attempts to erode the authority of traditional authorities in the PK3 displacement camp resulted in its diminished authority in resolving conflicts within the community (Barbelet et al., 2023). In South Sudan, dialogue between the SSNLM and government was initiated, partly due to what members of the SSNLM described as a war weariness and growing sense of concern for the impact of violence on the community, which included members of their family. Furthermore, the killing of a leader within the SSNLM is said to have removed a potential spoiler from negotiations between the group and the government, opening space for dialogue (Davies and Mayhew, 2024).

3 Approaches to supporting communities in reducing violence and strengthening protection

This research sought to understand the types of actors, capacities and interventions that are best suited to supporting communities in reducing violence and strengthening their safety. External interventions can support, complement and reinforce community capacities, at times strengthening networks and pathways which communities may not be able to achieve alone.

In brief, these can include community-based facilitation of dialogue, mediation and negotiation to strengthen protection, civilian-led early warning and early response, protection dialogue, multi-level protection advocacy and diplomacy, and capacity strengthening to support communities to strengthen these skill sets.

3.1 Starting with what communities are already doing

External interventions to support reducing violence and strengthening protection must start with what communities are already doing and build from there. Successful dialogue and support must be owned and led by communities. Communities are the ones to decide when and whether a dialogue takes place, what the dialogue should aim for and how to go about it (see CSRF, 2023a).

The presence of a respected external actor can open space for dialogue in some cases. Such actors must consider the extent to which community leaders and structures are trusted, have legitimacy and are representative of communities, as well as the level of social cohesion within communities.

3.1.1 Understanding community and power dynamics: where humanitarian actors might cause harm

Understanding community and power dynamics, how they interrelate at the micro level, and how these dynamics then interrelate across all levels, is critical to supporting community efforts to reduce violence and improve safety. This has proven challenging for large-scale humanitarian actors, who can find it difficult to maintain the continuous community consultation required to understand community dynamics and formal and informal power dynamics over time, as well as to ensure inclusive approaches – for example, with marginalised people – within both formal and informal power structures. In areas where local government is not trusted – for example, if it is perceived as having political biases or instrumentalising the use of violence – its inclusion can undermine the communities' trust in dialogue (Davies and Mayhew, 2024). This also means being cognisant of the fact that the trust and legitimacy associated with these community structures is not constant and can shift as a result of conflict (see section 2.1).

As a result, humanitarian interventions can undermine and frustrate community-level efforts. Conflict-sensitivity analysis is often a weakness for humanitarian actors (see section 5.1). Where external solutions or structures are imposed without taking into account the specific dynamics, customs and context it can lead to mistrust, insensitive approaches and can cause harm, by undermining existing mechanisms, authority and/or influence. When supporting dialogue, external intervention can endanger the entire process and put communities and community mediators at risk:

> In most cases some actors, both national and external, would assume western approach is the best. But in my 33 years I have seen many of such ideas worsen the conflict. Don't suggest to the community how they can address the conflict, let them suggest and you add to what they say (Local peacebuilder, in Davies and Mayhew, 2023: 42).

Limited understanding of what is happening organically at the community level means that structures and mechanisms can be put in place that do not support communities' own efforts. For example, in CAR, some communities reported that the arrival of international humanitarian actors resulted in the loss of their status of active agents in their community's protection (Barbelet et al., 2023: 54).

In both South Sudan and CAR, structures introduced by external actors often ignored what communities already had in place to mitigate levels of violence. Multiple, overlapping, externally established committees (protection, peacebuilding, development, youth, women's committees, etc.) were set up. These committees often serve the interests and needs of the international organisations that set them up, rather than the communities they are ostensibly intended to support. They can often be duplicative, undermining each committee's relevance and influence. Where they use divergent approaches – for example, in selection of committee members and decisions on compensation – this can create tensions within the community. Participants can easily be frustrated if their committees are discontinued and new ones set up, which can have harmful impact. While international actors have made efforts to better coordinate their approaches, there are still numerous examples of duplication and inconsistencies.

When community structures are identified and engaged with, external organisations should recognise the roles these community groups can play and be careful not to co-opt groups beyond their initial purpose and/or the willingness of such groups. For example, in South Sudan, international organisations weakened the role of community groups by trying to promote their influence outside of their original means (see Box 1).

Box 1 Kabarze women

The Kabarze women are groups of Murle women, self-established under the direction of a spiritual leader in 2017, to address intracommunal conflict related to Murle age-set groups in South Sudan. In situations of high-intensity violence, women would self-organise and seek to de-escalate tensions. The Kabarze women were often successful where government and chiefs had failed, and spoke of behaviour changes in youths due to the interventions of the Kabarze:

> We have decided to play our role as mothers of these age-set groups. If they are organising themselves for fights, we move in big groups and curse them until they disperse from the assembling area. It works in most cases (Davies and Mayhew, 2024).

The role of the Kabarze women highlights the importance of recognising that the strength of community structures lies in their connection to the local context. However, international organisations sought their intervention in situations of intercommunal violence involving other ethnic groups, which the Kabarze women did not feel they had the mandate to do. As a result, they weakened their role.

Different community structures can address conflict in different ways. It is important to understand the roles different structures play, and are willing to be involved in, as well as the risks associated with co-opting them beyond the valuable roles they play (Lemon, 2024).

Source: Da Costa, 2022 in Davies and Mayhew, 2024

3.1.2 Managing the dilemmas of power dynamics, inclusion and engaging instigators of violence

When external actors create or support community structures such as protection committees, whether to focus on those that hold power or to promote more inclusive structures is a dilemma (Steets, 2023). Some organisations working in proximity to communities prioritise inclusivity even if it means setting up new platforms:

> We try to build on existing structures, though in most cases CIVIC has ended up setting up new dialogue platforms from scratch because there were no other compatible platforms, or because we deemed pre-existing platforms insufficiently open to allow safe and inclusive dialogue [on protection of civilians] (Linning, 2023: 13).

Inclusivity is crucial, but this cannot be tokenistic. For example, humanitarian actors can require a specific number of women, youths or older people to participate in community forums. However, while

this may be representative, it is not necessarily inclusive as power dynamics will continue to play out within the committees. More importantly, not having those with 'real' power around the table may lead to ineffective interventions.

Having power holders at the table and in community structures requires careful consideration to avoid furthering harmful power dynamics within community-supported structures. This is critical in order to support open and safe discussions about the protection of civilians. For example, the inclusion of traditional leaders can be problematic: in addition to often providing value-add for protection (e.g. via their influence towards other decision-makers) they can also be gatekeepers, or may exclude or perpetrate abusive practices towards specific individuals or groups (Linning, 2024; Hastie, 2024). Where the inclusion of traditional leadership is unavoidable because it adds protection outcome value, extra vigilance and concerted effort is required to avoid supporting harmful power dynamics, and to proactively mitigate against potential harms of their involvement (Linning, 2024).

Power holders also often include those who incite violence. Again, for humanitarian actors wanting to engage with community power dynamics, the question of including instigators of violence as part of their support to communities is a challenging dilemma. Excluding these actors from dialogue runs the risk of them acting as spoilers. Similarly, the unchallenged inclusion of actors that are often assumed to be neutral and non-threatening, such as women, risks 'romanticising' their role and ignoring the role they can play in encouraging violence (Davies and Mayhew, 2024).

Ultimately, bringing perpetrators and those with influence over the use of violence into dialogue in some form is critical in promoting restraint (see Box 2). However, many humanitarian actors perceive engaging armed actors – particularly those that are not formally recognised as parties to a conflict – as a high-risk strategy due to concerns such as compromising humanitarian principles and legitimising armed actors. While there may be risks, instantly dismissing engagement with armed actors without assessing and managing potential risks is a significant oversight. As one representative of a protection organisation said, 'Excluding some groups from peace spoils peace. If there are people excluded from protection, the protection is weak' (Davies and Mayhew, 2024: 40).

As Nonviolent Peaceforce states, 'Too often dismissed without being attempted, "transforming enemies into allies" is a powerful strategy of nonviolence' (Nonviolent Peaceforce, 2022). For instance, in Northern Ireland, former members of armed groups are some of the most progressive actors in seeking to reduce levels of violence and support communities to progress towards safer societies. As one interviewee said, humanitarian actors need to go beyond longstanding concerns about legitimising armed actors and compromising principles, recognising that reducing levels of violence can only happen when engaging with the sources of threats. Not engaging armed actors who are significant perpetrators of civilian harm could also undermine the principle of impartiality to prioritise the most significant needs and issues (Linning, 2024) (see Box 10 in Chapter 5).

Box 2 What is unarmed civilian protection?

Nonviolent Peaceforce distinguishes itself in the field of protection through an approach that is markedly different from traditional actors in the humanitarian sector: unarmed civilian protection (UCP). UCP is defined by Nonviolent Peaceforce as:

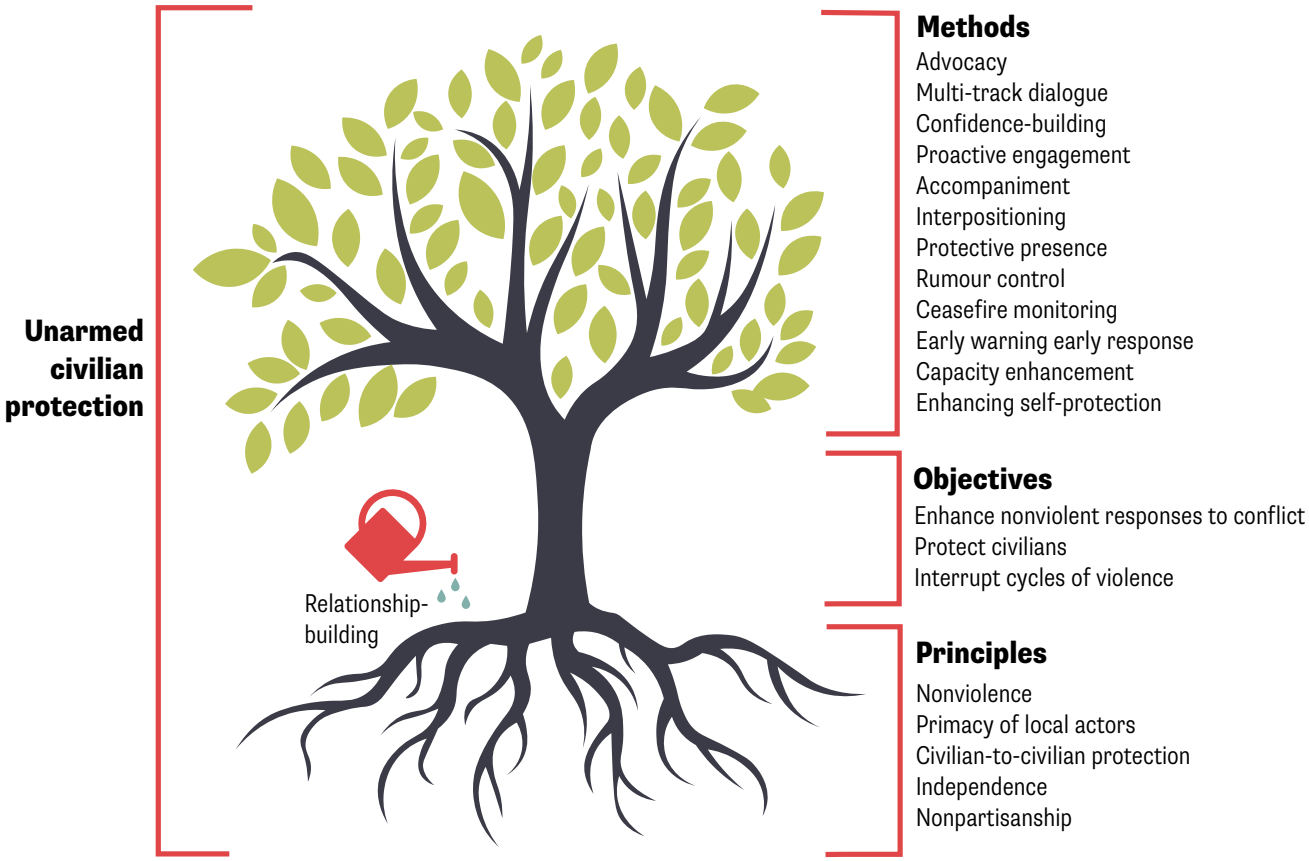
> The practice of civilians protecting other civilians in situations of imminent, ongoing or recent violence conflict. [UCP] involves international civilians protecting local civilians, local civilians protecting each other, and even local civilians protecting international and non-local civilians. The practice of UCP is nonviolent and generally nonpartisan. Protection is provided on invitation from local actors (Bliesemann de Guevara et al., 2021 quoted in Bliesemann de Guevara and Ridden, 2023: 65).

By working alongside community members, interventions are developed based on a nuanced understanding of the drivers of violence and addressing its root causes based on the unique contexts and dynamics of each local area. It dedicates considerable effort to developing the capacities, confidence and legitimacy of local actors, enabling them to actively participate in and lead initiatives to reduce violence and strengthen the safety of communities. This collaborative approach ensures that solutions are not only context-specific but also sustainable, anchored in the community's own strengths and capacities.

Figure 2 provides an overview of the methods, objectives and principles of UCP that some or most UCP organisations and practitioners consider in their practice (Bliesemann de Guevara and Ridden, 2023: 67 in Oldenhuis et al., 2021). As exemplified in the figure, relationship-building is at the centre of the practice of UCP.

One of its core focuses is the bridging role the organisation plays between communities, armed actors and duty bearers. Nonviolent Peaceforce proactively supports communities to directly engage with armed actors and duty bearers and works with stakeholders to influence the behaviour of armed actors towards promoting restraint. It encourages nonviolent approaches to resolving disputes through community-owned solutions, promoting inclusive approaches and building trust.

Figure 2 Unarmed civilian protection tree model



Source: Oldenhuis et al., 2021

3.1.3 External actors' roles, positionality and tensions

To effectively support and complement community efforts requires international organisations to be humble, not to assume there is a role for them, and to take their lead from community-identified solutions and approaches. It involves consideration of the needs, interests and positions of communities, ensuring that they are central to designing the process and content of dialogue, with external actors playing a supporting role. It requires a willingness to listen and to adapt according to community and armed actors' suggestions. Effectively supporting violence reduction and facilitating dialogue entails sustained presence and proximity. It requires trust, formed by building relationships and demonstrating credibility and a non-partisan position.

Locally owned approaches to reduce violence also require recognition and respect of norms, customs and practices, even if they do not conform to external actors' own norms and practice. In South Sudan, Christian leaders who often mediate between communities and armed actors recognise and make provisions for the role of traditional spiritual beliefs, actors and practices, which have a

powerful influence over armed actors (Davies and Mayhew, 2024). This, too, can represent dilemmas for humanitarian actors, who may be reluctant to engage meaningfully with local values and norms, especially if they diverge from international frameworks, or accept strategies and trade-offs adopted by communities to improve their protection (South et al., 2012; Metcalfe-Hough, 2019). But it is increasingly recognised that appealing to local norms, values and ideology can be more effective than solely drawing on international humanitarian and human rights frameworks, which are not generally well known and have varying degrees of acceptance among communities and armed actors alike (South et al., 2012; Haspeslagh and Yousuf, 2015; ICRC, 2018). Importantly, as in the case of early-warning signals, local norms and practices may be critical elements in understanding dynamics of conflict and violence, and when there are opportunities to reduce or interrupt violence (see Box 3).

Early-warning signals from communities may also challenge external actors' perceptions of what is reliable information to act upon. In South Sudan, rituals and symbolism play an important role in indicating risks of violence. Grass cutting, drawing circles using ash and warnings in dreams have all been used by communities as early warning and a form of protection. Whilst such practices may lack a cultural reference for those outside the community, being aware of them can provide information that reduces violence (Davies and Mayhew, 2024: 22).

Box 3 Community-based early-warning systems

A number of humanitarian, protection and peacebuilding organisations now support early-warning systems for risks of violence. In South Sudan, approaches have included working with communities to identify indicators of threats of violence and to prevent attacks; mapping conflict risks and providing rapid, reinforcing local conflict-management mechanisms; and initiating an early-warning system to monitor human rights abuses. One conflict early-warning system, supported by the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) and established by a local civil society organisation, supports communities to more systematically monitor changes in armed actor behaviour. Through a broad network of community reporters across the country, alerts are channelled through a verification centre. Responses can range from alerting customary authorities, or trusted individuals and institutions such as faith actors, to initiate dialogue and prevent attacks from taking place.

While these are positive examples of actions that are being taken to interrupt violence, they are predominantly piecemeal. Where international organisations are involved, they often lack the capacities and networks to effectively respond – for example, due to a lack of personnel with mediation or negotiation skills, or a lack of knowledge of local networks of trusted individuals or institutions who can facilitate dialogue. Managing security, logistical and approvals processes can be a significant barrier, particularly for UN actors. For example, UNMISS personnel and some transport fleets – such as helicopters – require government permission to move. This often means that responses are not acting in an adequate or timely manner to interrupt or de-escalate violence.

There will inevitably be tensions and trade-offs between international norms and frameworks with community-led solutions and priorities. Humanitarian actors should seek to take a pragmatic approach based on any given situation and context, balancing civilian-centred approaches while upholding international frameworks such as international humanitarian law (IHL), where relevant and possible.

3.2 The connecting role of external actors

External actors can be critical for connecting communities to wider networks and stakeholders, especially when the conditions are not conducive to community-led dialogue (see Box 4). This can lay the groundwork for when space reopens for direct dialogue to take place. To do this, organisations must have a long-term vision and approach to ensure the gains are sustainable.

External actors can also support communities to engage in power structures that sit outside their spheres of influence. Respondents recognised that by mapping the conflict system and networks that connect them, external actors can promote inclusive dialogue, connect communities to power structures outside of those with which they are directly engaged, and leverage their influence to promote the participation of relevant stakeholders in local dialogues.

There are risks to connecting local efforts to reduce violence to national-level dynamics. For example, this could enable entry points for national-level powerbrokers to further instrumentalise violence at the local level. However, not doing so can result in national and international spoilers (those who perpetuate or have an interest in perpetuating violence) being overlooked and thus left to undermine local violence-reduction efforts.

By starting from communities, national and international actors can cautiously connect layers, identify and support champions for violence reduction, and mitigate the influence of spoilers. For example, in South Sudan, humanitarian protection and peacebuilding actors have had success connecting local government, state security services and communities in dialogue. This has not only allowed communities to raise the threats they face with state security forces but has had a positive effect in breaking down negative perceptions between actors. Faith actors have played critical roles in this regard, focusing on the grassroots level while seeking to safeguard against harmful influences of the elite, including the diaspora (Davies and Mayhew, 2024).

Box 4 Third-party mediation, negotiations and dialogue to reduce violence

In supporting communities and engaging armed actors, third parties use a range of tools to reduce violence, including humanitarian (or emergency) mediation, negotiations, and facilitating dialogue.

Community-based mediation, negotiation and dialogue are part of the toolkit of peacebuilding actors, often in combination with other peacebuilding modes of action. However, these approaches are increasingly being implemented by humanitarian and protection actors to reduce violence and strengthen the safety of civilians.

Humanitarian mediation – also at times referred to as emergency mediation – is a practice that was used extensively in CAR between 2014 and 2016. It is defined as:

> An inclusive and voluntary process addressing humanitarian concerns in emergency contexts in which a neutral and impartial [...] actor facilitates the communication and the collaboration between stakeholders involved in and/or affected by conflicts, in order to assist them to find, by themselves, a mutually acceptable solution (Humanitarian Mediation Network, 2018: 7 in Grimaud, 2023).

Humanitarian mediation is limited in scope and focuses on preventing and mitigating immediate threats of violence, preventing forced displacement, facilitating voluntary return, improving access to assistance and services, and enhancing respect for basic rights (Grimaud, 2023). It is anchored by the humanitarian principles of neutrality, impartiality and independence (ibid.). In CAR, humanitarian mediation was recognised by evaluations and research as contributing to the protection of civilians by reducing risks of violence (Barbelet, 2015; IAHE, 2016; Jackson and Zyck, 2017). Our research confirmed that humanitarian mediation interventions implemented by the Danish Refugee Council and the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) in 2014 and 2016 contributed to improving the security and protection of civilians, improved freedom of movement and access to basic services, and strengthened the capacity of conflict-affected communities to resolve and manage conflicts peacefully, among other outcomes. More recently, the NRC has been using humanitarian mediation to support the return of displaced people in CAR.

In Northern Ireland, the ICRC supports community-based humanitarian negotiation and mediation and restorative-justice practices (Davies, forthcoming). The ICRC's sole focus on mediation for humanitarian purposes gives a unique lens, seeing traction with both communities and armed groups. Not only have such approaches significantly reduced violence and prevented attacks, they have also strengthened respect for humanitarian principles and the humanitarian impact of violence within communities. Emphasising the humanitarian impact of violence and the necessity of respecting humanitarian values has contributed to communities and armed groups considering alternatives to the use of violence. Reportedly many armed groups in Northern Ireland involved in negotiations have, to certain degrees, taken steps to embed restraint in their use of violence.

Grassroots, protection-specialised and peacebuilding organisations deploy a range of interventions to build familiarity, relationships and trust, including between communities, armed actors and state security forces. For Search for Common Ground, this entails:

> Enabl(ing) security forces, civilian government agencies, civil society and religious leaders to work together to address threats by resolving the root causes of conflict. The issue of trust and accountability is also relevant to foreign forces operating in-country. Our interventions facilitate collaboration between local communities and international military actors to reduce public resentment and build trust (Jobbins et al., 2023: 22).

External actors can also support communities to connect with other communities. By encouraging peer exchange and lesson sharing, communities can not only learn from one another but also leverage their respective networks and connections. There are a number of examples cited where one community and their representatives have felt it is too risky to engage with an armed actor or state security stakeholders themselves, so another community group has stepped in to directly engage the relevant armed actor in order to interrupt violence. Indeed, in Northern Ireland, the most significant successful interventions to threats of violence were enabled through joined-up approaches, leveraging the relationships and trust that individual communities or constituencies have. For example, where one community has the trust of the security services and another does not, information can be passed to the former in order to strengthen the potential for the notification of a threat be acted upon (Davies, forthcoming).

3.3 Providing resources to support dialogue

Facilitating dialogue to reduce violence and strengthen the protection of civilians takes time and resources. Violence- and conflict-affected civilians can often struggle with the resources required. External actors can provide or help source the necessary resources, be they venues, food, transport or accommodation.

Where relevant, supporting customary practices may be required. For example, in South Sudan, some ethnic groups require the sacrifice of livestock and the provision of a meal to mark the culmination of a positive agreement. Not being able to do so can lead to the breakdown of a dialogue and a resumption in violence (Davies and Mayhew, 2024).

The provision of phones or other modes of communication to directly connect communities, armed actors and the external actors seeking to support them can be critical to building relationships and therefore trust. However, this needs to be managed sensitively, given risks that communications equipment could be used for military purposes. While this isn't a reason to automatically discount the provision of communications equipment, it would require cautious handling in order to agree clear principles for use of such support and ways to mitigate any risks.

3.4 Changing calculations, livelihoods and assistance

Protracted situations of violence and conflict, multi-generational trauma and unaddressed grievances can result in the use of violence as an entrenched response to address disputes. National and international actors can seek to influence the calculations made by armed actors and communities by engaging in discussion with them on the risks, gains and losses associated with violence. When violent responses are so entrenched, people need convincing that non-violent means are in their interest, which requires support for alternatives.

The provision of material support, services and livelihoods, for example, can change calculations by providing an alternative to the economic benefits of the use of violence, and ultimately reduce or interrupt violence (Davies and Mayhew 2024: 9). Indeed, violence reduction is intrinsically linked to access to livelihoods (Santschi and Dong, 2023). Recognition of this requires linking protection and peacebuilding to development and livelihood initiatives that provide relevant, appropriate and (where possible) sustained economic alternatives to violence (Comerford, 2022). As such, supporting livelihoods can be a frontline strategy for reduction in violence.

However, there are longstanding perceptions that livelihoods programming is not possible in areas with high levels of violence, and that donors would not risk supporting such initiatives. But this is not necessarily the case. Where organisations can demonstrate that livelihoods support can tangibly reduce violence, donors can and have come on board. In both case studies, cash-for-work programming has been used to reduce the risk of violence. In CAR, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) funded reconstruction of infrastructure, such as markets and schools, bringing together conflicting Christian and Muslim communities in Boda, Boeing and Dékoa following humanitarian mediation interventions. In South Sudan, the World Food Programme (WFP, through ForAfrika and Peace Canal) implemented a three-month intervention targeting youths at risk of carrying out attacks to support the construction of the road network across Jonglei and the GPAA. This weakened incentives to mobilise and led to less violence in border areas than anticipated (Davies and Mayhew, 2024: 45).

Building economic interdependence within and across conflicting communities, too, can help to lay the groundwork for dialogue relating to more sensitive topics. For instance, in the Sahel, Search for Common Ground:

> demonstrates how relationships across dividing lines can lead to livelihood dividends by building economic links between farmers and herders, strengthening local trade and opening the value chain on key market segments [...] over the past decade, building interdependence within communities has played a critical role in setting the stage for formal peace negotiations, mediating conflicts over land and natural resources, building consensus around reforms in the context of political transitions, and facilitating violence-free elections (Jobbins et al., 2023:23).

There are risks to this approach. Where livelihoods and development outcomes benefit one community over another, it can undermine ongoing efforts to reduce and restrain violence. For example,

connecting communities and support for livelihoods and education with a specific focus on youths and women were commitments in the Pieri Peace Process (Pieri Peace Agreement, 2021). Here, the credibility of organisations facilitating dialogue and the trust in the process were at times undermined when commitments were not delivered. This also raises questions of organisational accountability to delivering the commitments they have made (see Davies and Mayhew, 2024). In Jonglei/GPAA, the evaluation of phase one of the Reconciliation, Stabilization, and Resilience Trust Fund (RSRTF) found that although livelihoods interventions played a role in reducing violence, unequal and uncoordinated implementation across the region had left major gaps, as not all communities felt that their material situation had improved (Deng et al., 2022). If conflicting communities perceive there are biases in who received livelihoods support, such interventions risked exacerbating violence. This has led to a strong livelihoods component linked to reducing violence in the second phase.

This reflects the careful requirement for layered, intentionally designed interventions (see Chapter 4). It requires acknowledgement that even if there are changes in behaviour towards restraint in the short term, there are high risks that calculations can again change towards the use of violence if socioeconomic alternatives to the use of violence are not realised and grievances are not addressed. Ultimately, it requires consideration of the long-term implications of transforming conflict and conflicting communities if peace dividends are not delivered. This is where there is strong responsibility – but too often a lack of accountability – on the part of state, development and humanitarian actors. However, there are significant structural and systemic barriers to achieving this in practice (see section 5.3).

4 Complementarity across humanitarian, protection and peacebuilding action

There has long been recognition that effective action to reduce violence and improve the safety of civilians must be a complementary effort between humanitarian, protection and peacebuilding actors – linked to development action in line with humanitarian–development–peacebuilding (HDP) nexus approaches (see Box 5). Each set of actors brings different mandates, principles, funding sources and channels, and operational modes to different but interrelated dimensions of the same complex problem. Importantly, we found that actors trying to reduce violence and improve the safety of civilians at the local level include both those with peacebuilding modes of actions and objectives, and, to a lesser extent, those with protection modes of actions and objectives. This includes actors supporting communities' own efforts and dialogue with armed actors.

Box 5 What is working in complementarity?

Complementarity can be defined as 'an outcome where all capacities at all levels – local, national, regional, international – are harnessed and combined in a way that supports the best humanitarian outcomes for affected populations' (Barbelet, 2018: 17). Complementarity requires the ability to understand, identify and respect the capacities, skills, expertise and contributions of different actors while acknowledging gaps and deficiencies in one's own capacities, skills, expertise and contributions (Barbelet, 2019). Importantly, this recognises that certain interventions and specific outcomes go beyond the capability of a single actor to reach alone, and that strategic collaboration can maximise the potential to reach outcomes. For the purposes of this research, this complementarity could be sectoral – spanning humanitarian, development and peacebuilding action – or local, national and international complementarity.

This chapter considers complementary approaches primarily between humanitarian, protection and peacebuilding actors. There must, of course, be development inputs in order to realise peace dividends. This focus on humanitarian and peacebuilding acknowledges that protection action, when specifically focused on reducing threats of violence, is an entry point to the nexus between humanitarian and peacebuilding action.

While opportunities and challenges for greater collaboration are discussed from the perspective of supporting community-led dialogue, many of the issues discussed are relevant to considerations for more complementary approaches between the sets of actors more broadly (see also Box 6).

4.1 Roles and added value of humanitarian, protection and peacebuilding actors

While there is an increasing interest in framing humanitarian protection interventions using a violence-reduction lens, in practice, this has only been adopted by a small number of non-mandated international humanitarian organisations (e.g. the Danish Refugee Council, the NRC and Oxfam). Too often within humanitarian protection organisations, balanced approaches designed to reduce threats, increase civilian capacities and reduce vulnerabilities are not standard practice, while actions focused on reducing threats of violence are the exception, rather than the norm (Cocking et al., 2022). Where holistic approaches are more standardised practice is mainly in protection-of-civilian international organisations (e.g. CIVIC, Geneva Call, ICRC, Local to Global Protection and Nonviolent Peaceforce). Such humanitarian actors intentionally seek to reduce violence and strengthen the protection of civilians, including by seeking to influence behaviours, policy and practice. In addition, a small number of humanitarian actors are considering their contributions to peace, which is framed as reducing violence and contributing to positive pathways to peace. This is the case of WFP in South Sudan, which uses its full toolbox to interrupt, delay or reduce violence and promote peace.

When violence escalates, there are perceptions that humanitarian actors remain when other capacities withdraw. Some perceive that, as a result, humanitarian actors' added value can be their larger footprint in comparison to peacebuilding actors, and that some humanitarian actors can be better placed to address immediate risks of violence because they assist communities across conflict lines. Humanitarian assistance could incentivise armed actors to change their behaviours.

However, such practice is the exception rather than the rule. In practice, many humanitarian actors leave, scale down or pause operations during situations of escalating violence. Where they do remain, humanitarian actors prioritise 'life-saving' action, usually through delivering goods and services, at the expense of protection actions. Indeed, protection actions are too-often deprioritised as they are not perceived as life-saving. For example, in Jonglei and the GPAA in South Sudan, humanitarian partners routinely withdraw, pause, or prepare to withdraw from areas facing escalating violence before operational, protection-specialised or peacebuilding actors. In reality, a limited subset of humanitarian actors remains present during escalations of violence and with the objective of responding directly to violence. These are usually smaller, more nimble, humanitarian-focused local, national non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and international NGOs (INGOs), which have greater flexibility and less standardised approaches to dealing with security risks than, for example, large INGOs and UN actors.

The subset of peacebuilding actors that remains is also limited. While not all peacebuilding actors involved in this research see a role for themselves in situations of high-intensity violence, the majority did see a role for peacebuilding action to reduce immediate threats of violence. Humanitarian actors highlighted that the capacities and skills prioritised within peacebuilding organisations, such as negotiation, mediation, dialogue and facilitation, are necessary in violence-reduction efforts. This is particularly the case for emergency mediation and, in some instances, protection dialogue, which can be time-bound and focused on interrupting immediate threats of violence. If intentionally approached,

and community expectations can be managed, protection-of-civilian focused dialogue is one factor that can lay the groundwork for longer-term peacebuilding outcomes (Linning, 2024). Importantly, there is recognition that peacebuilding action can and should start early, including in situations of high-intensity conflict, in order to reduce violence and contribute to a pathway towards longer-term peacebuilding when the situation allows.[5]

There are misconceptions and a lack of awareness of the range of practices across and between humanitarian and peacebuilding action and, importantly, where and how they can intersect – particularly at the community level. Drawing sharp distinctions between roles can act as a barrier to fully understanding the added value of the different skill sets and practices, which, if strategically deployed, can mutually reinforce the shared outcome of reducing the level of harm civilians face during violence and conflict.

Unlike their international counterparts, local and national actors can be less siloed across humanitarian, development and peacebuilding action. Often, their added value is their ability to work in a more hybrid way, to adapt to changes in the context, and to solve localised problems and challenges using a range of approaches. This is not to say that the only pathway to nexus interventions is to focus solely on communities working with local and national actors. Rather, it emphasises the need for the strategic design of complementary approaches, considering which sets of actors are best placed to reach the intended outcome, including who is best placed to lead such approaches. Indeed, it exposes the overemphasis on externally imposed distinctions between humanitarian, development and peacebuilding action, at the expense of considering greater complementarity between community, national and international actors.

Box 6 Role of peacekeeping missions

Too often, UN peacekeeping missions struggle to meet their protection-of-civilian objectives, particularly when it comes to engaging with communities.

In South Sudan, UNMISS's mandate includes preventing intercommunal conflict through community-led approaches. The implementation of UNMISS's community-led approach has been mixed. Community-based approaches can be ad hoc and engagement with communities often privilege externally imposed objectives at the expense of the priorities of the community.

5 This is not to say that peacebuilding dialogue can begin in situations of high-intensity violence. However, even if peacebuilding dialogue cannot take place, at a minimum, peacebuilding actors should aim to maintain their lines of communication through whatever means, allowing for the timely resumption of dialogue when communities and conditions allow. This can be an important measure in the longer term.

In CAR, after years of challenges, the peacekeeping mission was perceived as strengthening its support to civilians in local efforts to reduce violence. Indeed, in CAR, communities mentioned the support they received from MINUSCA in their own efforts to reduce violence through dialogue, including through the provision of logistical support to community initiatives. MINUSCA has also supported and protected community mediators and negotiators when their role put them at risk.

Fundamentally, there are structural barriers to achieving a community-led approach due to the design of peacekeeping missions, which, in line with their internationally driven mandate, implements a top-down approach.

Importantly, in both contexts, humanitarian and peacebuilding actors have found it difficult to coordinate and collaborate with the peacekeeping mission to reduce immediate threats of violence, undermining opportunities for complementarity.

4.1.1 Current practices towards complementarity

Complementarity through coordination and funding mechanisms

Where complementarity has been effective, this is often based on individual relationships working around systemic and structural barriers to working in greater complementarity. However, effective examples of good practice are ad hoc, with a lack of a systematic shift in practice.

The current typical model is to establish platforms for more consistent coordination, or funding mechanisms or programmes, with the view to incentivising coherence in approaches. Social cohesion working groups are one example of a coordination platform in both South Sudan and CAR. In CAR, this is a sub-group under the protection cluster. However, as with many humanitarian coordination platforms, the process-driven, bureaucratic approach often prevents participation from peacebuilding actors and is not the solution for more effective collaboration on issues of strategy or substance.

In South Sudan, multiple 'nexus' coordination initiatives have been put in place over the years, which, over time, saw a stronger conceptual focus on peacebuilding, though later became defunct due to a lack of funding or operationalisation. The introduction of the RSRTF has, to an extent, brought about a stronger focus on peacebuilding across nexus programming in South Sudan (see Box 7). The social cohesion working group in Jonglei/GPAA sits under the Area Reference Group set up under the RSRTF. It is more explicitly intended to coordinate across humanitarian–development–peacebuilding action. There is an assumption that there is consistent community engagement, because one of the stated intentions of the Area Reference Group is to engage with communities, but in reality this can be inconsistent. As such, the mechanism has arguably undermined opportunities for humanitarian and peacebuilding organisations to more strategically and consistently work in complementarity when supporting communities.

Box 7 Models to reduce violence and promote peace in South Sudan

The RSRTF was established by UNMISS and the UN Country Team in December 2018. Through its area-based programmes, it seeks to take a comprehensive approach across humanitarian, peacebuilding and development action towards reducing violence, drawing on the expertise and comparative advantages of UNMISS, UN agencies and national and international NGOs.

In the first phase, there were criticisms that the fund lacked sufficient speed, flexibility and adaptability to respond to rapidly changing conflict dynamics. For example, it could be weeks before a decision was made in its rapid-response mechanisms or for requests to adapt planned activities, which could make the difference between attacks taking place and being able to prevent them. This issue was addressed in the second phase with the introduction of crisis-modifier budget lines which, in Jonglei and GPAA, was accompanied by a process for urgent decision-making, and importantly, a simplified bureaucratic process for quick disbursal of funding (Lancaster, 2023).

While non-UN peacebuilding actors have been brought into the RSRTF in Jonglei/ GPAA, the absence of specialist peacebuilding actors within it in other areas of South Sudan was a significant weakness (UN, 2021; 2023). During the design phase of the RSRTF, perceived tensions with humanitarian principles undermined opportunities for greater complementarity, including tensions among donors who were reticent to contribute humanitarian funding at the outset. However, this demonstrated an apparent lack of understanding that humanitarian and peacebuilding action are often working towards similar objectives, particularly when working with communities on violence reduction.

A contrasting approach is the Peacebuilding Opportunities Fund (POF). Established in 2019, the POF seeks to deliver outcomes that ensure that targeted communities are more harmonious and resilient to conflict, and that political, socioeconomic, and cultural institutions that are key to handling conflict and establishing the conditions for sustained peace are strengthened and more inclusive (Oxford Policy Management, n.d.). The contextually driven mechanism has a strong focus on process and adaptation, based on an iterative approach. One of its key strengths is its rapid decision-making, often in a matter of hours or days. A key element is the importance of community-level focus, often above national politics, to leverage change towards violence reduction (ibid.).

Source: Davies and Mayhew, 2024: 35–36

Working in consortia could be another way to overcome siloed approaches. In theory, consortia can incentivise collaboration and reduce competition. However, to be effective, these approaches must all work towards the same objectives of reducing violence, using mutually reinforcing, layered approaches, built from a shared analysis of the uses and drivers of violence (see section 5.1). Without this, it can

create disincentives to greater complementarity – for example, if consortia and trust funds are used as a mechanism to access funding rather than working towards shared objectives. There is a role for donors to incentivise greater coherence by ensuring that mechanisms share the goal of contributing to a reduction in violence and strengthening protection.

However, in order to do this, donors need to have the technical expertise, monitoring and oversight, and time to incentivise strategic collective action, as well as the appetite to work outside of standardised approaches. Donor focal points can lack the capacity and expertise to effectively appraise whether proposals and programmes can effectively deliver the proposed actions, or assess the capacity of organisations to deliver on violence reduction. In conflict countries, donors are in position for short timeframes. Where they do support such approaches, their efforts can drop off when they move on. In South Sudan, the Conflict Sensitivity Resource Facility (CSRF) has in part helped donors to get around this by providing an impartial review of the strengths and weaknesses of different proposals and providing institutional memory. Such an approach is one that could be built upon where relevant, while ensuring that conflicts of interest can be managed.

Ultimately, there is a need to get around formulaic approaches to working in complementarity. This requires mutually agreed specific outcomes that a diverse set of actors should work towards in any given context, while recognising the diversity of experience, expertise, perspectives and voices required to achieve these. This also requires acknowledging the significant power dynamics between large international organisations and other smaller international, national and local organisations, and devising approaches to mitigate such dynamics (see section 5.3). This could, for example, see decentralised and localised strategic coordination platforms brought closer to the conflict system, which would maximise opportunities for more conflict-specific approaches, allow for greater diversity of inputs and give greater opportunities to get around power dynamics if the will of stakeholders allows (Lancaster, 2024; Lemon, 2024).

Integrated approaches through multi-mandated organisations

Some multi-mandated humanitarian organisations (organisations focusing on humanitarian, peacebuilding and development) are seeking to integrate peacebuilding modes of action within their mandate and operations. In theory, this can allow for more intentional ways to link peacebuilding with humanitarian action using a range of approaches.[6] However, in practice, there remain challenges in designing humanitarian interventions that can effectively also benefit longer-term peacebuilding objectives, particularly in situations of high-intensity violence. International humanitarian personnel from a traditional humanitarian background may find it challenging or even be reluctant to integrate peacebuilding modes of action within their own interventions, to understand what is required to effectively achieve this, or to fully grasp the value of peacebuilding and how it intersects with protection and economic recovery interventions. Similar issues can be found with peacebuilding personnel seeking to understand and effectively integrate humanitarian (and protection) approaches.

6 For example, some approaches can be solely focused on peacebuilding objectives, while at other times peacebuilding skills and expertise can support humanitarian interventions, and vice versa.

Indeed, both peacebuilding and protection-specialised humanitarian actors have expressed strong concerns over integrated approaches within multi-mandated organisations. From their perspective, it is unlikely and potentially not feasible to equally balance the multiple workstreams and objectives within the same organisational set-up, which risks overly focusing on either humanitarian, protection or peacebuilding objectives. This carries risks that within one organisation the quality and therefore the impact of humanitarian, protection and peacebuilding work cannot be sustained. Such risks are particularly high for larger multi-mandate actors delivering a broad range of humanitarian and recovery interventions, in addition to their protection and peacebuilding action. In such organisations, even where there is a will for more substantive integrated approaches at the country level, global bureaucracies can be a significant barrier if such actions fall outside of the core mandate of the organisation (see section 5.3). To maximise successful outcomes, integrating peacebuilding and protection within one organisation could be approached in addition to, rather than at the expense of, working in greater complementarity with broader sets of specialised actors.

Indeed, integrated approaches can prevent more systematic exchanges of expertise between humanitarian and peacebuilding specialised actors. In turn, this can lead to inward-facing approaches to integration that can undermine incentives towards wider, collaborative system-wide approaches to leverage larger sets of resources, capabilities and relationships (Morris, 2024). As such, integrated approaches can therefore miss opportunities for more strategic and mutually reinforcing approaches to maximising impact.

4.1.2 Narratives and prioritisation of humanitarian over peacebuilding action

Donors, as well as operational aid actors, tend to adopt a linear understanding of conflict and violence to inform the design and phasing of interventions. This narrative prioritises humanitarian action as a frontline life-saving intervention, and pushes peacebuilding back to when violence has reduced and a negotiated peace might be feasible. However, this not only overlooks the non-linear reality of violence and conflict dynamics, it also overlooks the fact that reducing violence, strengthening safety and contributing to pathways to peace require iterative approaches. Importantly, it misses opportunities to consider pragmatic, mutually reinforcing approaches between peacebuilding and humanitarian modes of action in situations of high-intensity violence. Indeed, this research convened and facilitated conversations between humanitarian and peacebuilding actors, which were very positively received, with participants noting the absence of spaces for strategic thinking to strengthen collaborative efforts.

As a result, peacebuilding actors can be crowded out in situations of high-intensity violence. The humanitarian sector takes a lot of space, attention and resources, which can overwhelm peacebuilding action, further compounded by the dramatic decreases in available funding for peacebuilding. Indeed, Official Development Assistance (ODA) funding for peacebuilding is at the lowest levels in 15 years, while funding for humanitarian action has increased – despite overall lower levels of available funding (OECD, 2023). This can result in challenges for peacebuilding actors to remain present and active in such situations (UN, n.d.).

More space needs to be made for peacebuilding actors in situations of high-intensity violence. In the absence of peacebuilding presence, there are risks that humanitarian actors co-opt peacebuilding practices in ways that do not replicate quality or lead to impact, as they lack the expertise and capacities. As one peacebuilding actor stated, this can lead to peacebuilding interventions with no peacebuilding content, expertise or outcomes.

4.1.3 Challenges and risks to greater collaboration and complementarity

While opportunities exist for greater complementarity between humanitarian and peacebuilding actors to reduce violence and strengthen the safety of civilians, there are numerous challenges, as well as systemic, structural and cultural barriers, to realising this in practice.

Modes of action

One of the critical barriers is key differences in modes of action between humanitarian and peacebuilding action. This is premised on humanitarian action having prioritised skills and qualities for rapid and timely response, delivered at scale, and on humanitarian principles, which can translate into overlooking questions of power and politics – including within the humanitarian sector itself (see Box 10 in Chapter 5).

Humanitarian actors historically respond to humanitarian needs, while peacebuilding actors seek to address drivers of conflict. Humanitarian actors can be reluctant to address conflict drivers particularly when they are in perceived tension with humanitarian principles. However, this also presents opportunities for greater collaboration: if there are issues that humanitarian actors cannot address – whether due to tensions with principles, normative frameworks such as IHL, or political connotations – peacebuilding actors can complement humanitarian action by working on sensitive issues where they often have fewer restrictions. Effective complementarity requires working towards, and taking continuous care not to undermine, common objectives, such as reducing violence and strengthening safety. As one humanitarian actor stated, while the application of IHL is a black and white issue, peacebuilders have greater flexibility to work in the wide array of grey areas than may be available to humanitarian actors.

Humanitarian actors have traditionally prioritised technical skill sets in line with sectoral priorities, while peacebuilding actors have prioritised 'soft' and social skills. As humanitarian organisations are structured to deliver at scale, interventions tend to be top-down, planned and standardised. This contrasts with the small-scale, flexible approaches prioritised by peacebuilding actors that are necessary to inform adaptive approaches with communities to reduce violence.

The two sets of actors also have different relationships with communities. Some humanitarian actors – for example, large UN agencies and INGOs set up to deliver goods and services at scale – can be more transactional in their relationship with communities, sometimes as a deliberate strategy to emphasise their neutrality, facilitate access, and maintain what they see as a more 'efficient' response. Others can take a somewhat paternalistic stance, when implementing their 'protective' role – treating civilians more

as vulnerable 'beneficiaries' at the expense of recognising and supporting civilians as agents of their own protection. In contrast, protection-focused humanitarian and peacebuilding organisations often have more of an exploratory and iterative relationship with communities (see Morris, 2022; CSRF, 2022).

The differences in these modes of action call for greater complementarity across humanitarian, protection and peacebuilding actors, but also make complementarity more challenging. Recognising these differences and understanding the modes of action required to support violence reduction and the strengthening of protection should inform whether and how an organisation can play a role and who they should collaborate and seek complementarity with. For this to happen, incentives and disincentives for complementarity must be addressed. Donors have a significant role to play in this regard.

Tensions and trade-offs

Inevitably, there are tensions and trade-offs to working in greater complementarity. These include balancing short-term objectives (safety and security, immediate protection of civilians) with long-term objectives (peace, social cohesion, justice); balancing protection and peacebuilding objectives; and longstanding concerns of compromises to humanitarian principles (see Box 10 in Chapter 5). A pragmatic approach is required, focusing on shared objectives, recognising that compromises will be necessary, and with a willingness to address tensions and trade-offs with the view to maximising impact. This also requires transparency both in designing and communicating approaches, including how tensions and trade-offs are managed, particularly when communicating with armed actors or conflicting communities who may be suspicious, and with the funding donors who may be risk-averse.

Thought must be given to who is best placed to assume a lead role, and when. This may see a greater leadership role for local actors, who are often better placed to work flexibly across externally constructed siloes and to embrace hybridity. Humility is required on all sides, recognising the added value and unique contribution different sets of actors bring.

Strengthening complementarity requires incentivising the efficiency gains in taking complementary and reinforcing approaches, rather than unilateral, competitive, non-aligned approaches. However, longstanding systemic issues are a critical barrier to greater complementarity, relating to the business model and political economy of funding of the aid sector (see section 5.3).

Many engaged in this research highlighted the significant risk of nexus approaches becoming donor-driven, with top-down projectised approaches. Such externally driven approaches drive competition, risk duplication, and could lead to 'a cookie-cutter approach to dialogue' (Davies and Mayhew, 2024). As one interviewee stated, ultimately, such competition 'defeats the purpose of complementary approaches' (ibid., 2024: 36). Donors and funding bodies could significantly incentivise more coherence if they require all partners to demonstrate that they are contributing to common objectives (reducing violence) using mutually reinforcing approaches and if they hold partners to account for this.

5 Implications, opportunities, risks and challenges for policy and practice

Effectively supporting communities to reduce violence and strengthen protection involves a range of considerations and investments that humanitarian, protection and peacebuilding actors should consider.

5.1 Conflict analysis and conflict-sensitivity analysis

Conflict analysis and conflict-sensitivity analysis (see Box 8) are critical to informing external actors' interventions, including those aimed at reducing violence. How conflict and violence are understood and framed determines the response. Inaccurate analysis and framing of conflict and violence runs the risk of misinformed interventions, which can cause harm and even cost lives (see Box 9).

Box 8 The difference between conflict analysis and conflict-sensitivity analysis

Conflict analysis is:

> an examination of the various levels and types of conflicts that exist in a given context. It offers an overall picture or 'factual' snapshot of [...]the causes/drivers/triggers of the conflict and the main actors involved, including through a gender lens. It also analyses the drivers of peace and what connects people across divides (WFP, 2021: 4).

Conflict-sensitivity analysis consists of:

> understanding the context in which you are operating, understanding the interaction between your engagement and the context, and taking action to avoid negative impacts and maximize positive impacts (Stabilisation Unit, 2016).

A conflict-sensitivity analysis requires conflict analysis and builds on it to understand the relation between the conflict and an organisation's presence, engagement and intervention.

This research found that within many humanitarian organisations, conflict and conflict-sensitivity analysis were often low-quality and failed to systematically inform programming and decision-making. Importantly, organisations can struggle to understand the complexities and interrelated drivers of violence across multiple levels. As such, conflict and conflict-sensitivity analysis require actors working within a conflict to collaborate. They also require actors working within a conflict to come to a consensus. For example, in South Sudan, very few organisations have a full picture of violence and, as a result, there is a lack of common understanding of how drivers of violence interrelate (Millar, 2022).

One challenge is that such analyses tend to be conducted at different levels. For example, humanitarian actors often analyse conflict at macro (national and subnational) levels at periodic points in time. On the other hand, peacebuilding actors tend to conduct analysis across multiple levels including more micro (local to hyper-local) levels on an ongoing basis. Another challenge is that humanitarian actors following a 'strict' interpretation of humanitarian principles are often more reticent to incorporate the political landscape into their conflict analysis, which can contribute to a technical approach and depoliticised understandings of conflict and violence that can do more harm than good (Morris, 2022; see Box 9).

Box 9 Why conflict analysis matters

In South Sudan, analysis has too often been based on misplaced assumptions and mistaken narratives. Some influential international organisations, for example, historically labelled violence as either related to the non-international armed conflict, or intercommunal violence or 'cattle-raiding' that is not part of the armed conflict (UNSC, 2020a; 2020b). However, this interpretation overlooked the interlinkages between local, subnational and national violence, including the instrumentalisation of violence by political elites and the diaspora. This implied that the violence was small-scale and either random, or 'normal', neither of which are accurate. Had the violence been more accurately analysed as organised criminal violence, as some organisations' analysis later sought to draw attention to, there may have been a different response (WFP and CSRF, 2020).

Incorrect framings of violence can lead to inaccurate protection and risk analysis, such as underestimating the impact of violence on civilians, and its interplay with food systems. This was evident in Jonglei in 2019, where the framing of ongoing violence as localised intercommunal violence meant that indications of the severity of the impact on lives, livelihoods and levels of hunger were missed. As a result, the growing risk of famine was not widely identified, publicly reported or acted upon until 10 months after initial warnings. Ultimately, it cost lives.

Source: Newton, 2021; WFP and CSRF, 2020

Peacebuilding actors tend to undertake more relational forms of analysis. One example is the conflict systems approach:

> [Conflict] systems analysis helps to understand the dynamic relationships and causalities between different conflict factors, and the interconnectedness between conflict factors and stakeholders. It operates based on an understanding of 'feedback' (causal connections) between conflict factors and helps to understand reinforcing and balancing dynamics in conflict systems (CDA, 2016).

Systems approaches includes analysis across macro to micro levels and how they interrelate. However, many peacebuilding organisations acknowledge that macro-level conflict analysis is almost exclusively

produced and privileged at the expense of micro-level analysis. Unfortunately, locally generated data is too often overlooked and underutilised in analysis, including to inform decision-making and to measure the impact of interventions (Lemon, 2023) (see section 5.4). This undermines the ability to have a full picture of the interrelated drivers of violence and conflict, and does not suffice by itself. Search for Common Ground argues that there is:

> a need for a more thorough understanding of local dynamics, specifically the ethnic and inter-community context and the relationship between local authorities and communities. Only by understanding the root causes of these conflicts can organisations effectively craft conflict-sensitive programming, which optimises the quality and responsiveness of community-based interventions (Jobbins et al., 2023: 20).

In South Sudan, this research found that the quality of conflict and conflict-sensitivity analysis varied between organisations, partly as a result of resources and capacity (Davies and Mayhew, 2024). The sharing of analysis could provide one solution to improving the overall quality and ensuring that there is a shared understanding of conflict dynamics. However, shared or joint analysis and collaboration between humanitarian actors and with peacebuilding actors is either absent, or where it exists, is ad hoc and not always effective.

Although some of those interviewed were open to sharing analysis, most humanitarian actors engaged in this research acknowledged that there is a general reluctance to share analysis in South Sudan, reflecting a general reticence to share information in the humanitarian sector. There are numerous reasons for this, including potential sensitivities of the content (InterAction, 2020). However, mistrust within the humanitarian sector must be overcome to strengthen outcomes and impact. Trusted relationships are a critical foundation to collaboration. In the absence of shared analysis, humanitarian organisations can take different, at times contradictory, operational approaches when working towards common objectives of reducing violence, which can undermine the shared objective and/or do harm.

While there are shared platforms for conflict analysis – such as the UN Department of Safety and Security (UNDSS), OCHA and the International NGO Safety Organisation (INSO) – this analysis often faces the previously mentioned challenges within the humanitarian sector. The multi-donor-funded CRSF in South Sudan is recognised as a positive resource to support maximising the impacts of humanitarian and development initiatives for reducing violence, and an entry point to strengthen interactions between peacebuilding and humanitarian actors (CSRF, n.d).[7]

Conflict-sensitivity analysis within the humanitarian sector is undermined in three main ways. First, humanitarian organisations find it challenging to accept the role that their presence and assistance plays in conflict dynamics. Second, the lack of flexible and adaptive programming means that even

7 The CSRF 'seeks to maximise the positive impacts of humanitarian and development initiatives for peace, whilst avoiding harm' by providing independent analysis, training, and supporting conflict-sensitive approaches with donors, policymakers and operational organisations (CSRF, n.d.).

when conflict-sensitivity analysis takes place, it insufficiently informs operational decision-making and programme adaptation. Humanitarian programmes are not designed to flexibly respond to real-time analysis and adapt programmes accordingly, due to rigid ways of designing and monitoring programmes according to time-bound outputs and activities. As a result, organisations too often resort to pausing rather than adapting programmes (see section 5.3). Lastly, analysis and proposed responses need to inform the decisions of managers. This requires trust, access to decision-makers, and, as one respondent said, 'brave spaces' for honest dialogue, including with peacebuilding actors.

There are various methodologies that could be used to inform a more standardised approach to analysis. Participatory methodologies are usually those of higher quality. These can be part of multi-level (local, subnational, national, global, etc.) analysis carried out in conflict-systems analysis. Or, participatory methods could be conducted with communities, as is often carried out in grassroots peacebuilding and protection-of-civilian approaches, as well as in humanitarian mediation methodology (pre-mediation workshops).

5.2 Managing risks and risk appetite

Supporting localised approaches to reduce violence inherently comes with a number of challenges and risks. Communities, mediators and negotiators, and staff working for organisations facilitating dialogue, can be accused of being spies, of passing information to opposing armed actors, communities or government bodies, and can be threatened, experience attacks, or be forced to leave their homes and communities (Haspeslagh and Yousuf, 2015).

When mediators and negotiators engage with proscribed individuals or groups, they can be at risk of being charged under terrorism legislation. Indeed, many states, including donor states, have criminalised interaction with armed groups designated 'terrorist', and such measures can make it difficult for international agencies to support community dialogue with proscribed individuals or groups (ibid.). Even when dialogue itself is not illegal, the lack of clarity in overlapping terrorism legislation can have a chilling effect for national and international actors looking to support communities in their dialogue with proscribed individuals or groups. Communities can also be stigmatised by government and military forces due to their geographic proximity, or familial, social, ethnic or religious ties to armed groups, leaving them vulnerable to backlash. This is a particular risk to supporting community dialogue and community-based protection more broadly (Oxfam, 2023).

Humanitarian actors' and donors' low appetite for risk and their perceptions of risks related to facilitating dialogue are key reasons why some humanitarian organisations do not more systematically support it – particularly when engaging with armed actors. This helps explain why humanitarian actors primarily respond to the consequences of violence, rather than actively seeking to reduce it or mitigating its worst consequences. Indeed, a significant challenge and pushback on humanitarian mediation in CAR came from humanitarian and protection actors due to various perceived potential risks – rather than donors and peacebuilders (Barbelet et al., 2023).

While there are potential risks, they should not be used as a reason to discount supporting dialogue, mediation or negotiation. When risks are effectively managed, the outcomes of dialogue can be profound. Indeed, consideration should be given to the consequences of not engaging armed actors. As with any intervention, by proactively assessing risks, mitigating measures can be put in place, including by building trust, taking a non-partisan stance and ensuring transparent dialogue.

Box 10 Risks and humanitarian principles

As discussed throughout this report, humanitarian actors regularly voice the risk that humanitarian principles can be compromised when supporting community–armed actor dialogue, and is a critical barrier to progress.

Many humanitarian actors are particularly concerned with compromising the principle of neutrality, especially as a consequence of supporting community dialogue with armed actors. Not only is this a fundamental misunderstanding of the principle, but by privileging concerns over breaching neutrality (a tool to deliver humanitarian action), humanitarian actors could in turn compromise impartiality by not prioritising the most significant risks and needs faced by communities. Indeed, this raises fundamental questions as to humanitarian actors' understanding of the interrelationship of humanitarian principles and the implications for their operations – in acknowledging that humanity and impartiality are the objective of humanitarian action, while neutrality and independence tools to achieve impartiality and humanity.

Crucially, organisations need to consider what is in the best interest of the civilians they are there to support, as set out by them. It requires humanitarian organisations to remember the primacy of humanity as the core goal of humanitarian action – to reduce human suffering. This may require the compromise of other humanitarian principles in order to reduce violence in the name of humanity, recognising that principles are 'subject to deliberate compromise – and indeed compromise is the rule' (Dubois, 2020).

Localised protection approaches might also transfer risk to local actors and communities. Indeed, while the humanitarian sector has been more broadly characterised by 'risk transfer' rather than 'risk sharing', there is increased progress on approaches to risk sharing (Metcalfe-Hough et al., 2020 in Barbelet et al, 2021: 86; Schenkenberg van Mierop et al., 2020). While these are valid concerns, risks should be jointly assessed and mitigating measures jointly agreed, as well as adequately resourced. Importantly, communities' own risk appetite and approach to risk must be respected, and support designed within these parameters:

> Communities, just like humanitarian actors, engage in some form of risk analysis prior to deciding whether to engage in negotiation. Civilians make informed assessments, take calculated risks and modify their tactics based on a detailed reading of the situation and their 'lived knowledge'.

> While these continuous risk analyses can contribute to safer programming, communities' informal approaches could be systematised to further draw out the main threats (Kothari and Meredith, 2023).

Humanitarian actors can work with communities to jointly agree the focus and parameters of support. They can also support communities in managing their risks (ibid.). Peacebuilding organisations often take a more relational approach to risk management in partnership with communities, which humanitarian actors could learn from.

5.3 Structural and systemic barriers

There are significant structural and systemic barriers to effectively supporting interventions to reduce violence, including through dialogue. Dialogue is iterative, and interventions to support it should reflect this. This requires flexibility, an ability to adapt, a readiness to accept and deal with setbacks, and an openness to failure. It requires patience, perseverance and a willingness to take risks (Lancaster, 2023). And yet almost all representatives engaged in this research cited the near-complete inability of programmes to adapt and respond to changes across humanitarian, protection and peacebuilding action.

Intra-organisational structural barriers

One barrier is the top-down design and logic of international aid programmes, where programmes are designed and funding received for specific outcomes, be they protection, social cohesion, human security or peace (Steets, 2023). By default, this leads to project-based approaches with rigid, pre-defined, logical-framework, output-focused programme design and monitoring, often with unrealistic expectations and short timeframes. The continued use of traditional logical frameworks, for example, forces a focus on quantitative targets, regardless of whether they remain appropriate for an evolving context. While this may satisfy demands for the quantification of results, it undermines bandwidth for strategic approaches to prevent and respond to threats of violence. As a result, it can enable programmes that achieve limited or no real impact (Lancaster, 2024). By design, these entrenched practices undermine flexible, adaptive management approaches that are focused on process and outcomes, as are required to reduce violence, facilitate dialogue and support genuine community-based approaches (see CSRF, 2023b).

Systemic barriers across the aid sector

The aid sector is a competitive marketplace, particularly in the context of progressively constrained funding. Competition for funding and territorial approaches linked to organisational and sectoral mandates can undermine collaboration, and lead to duplication of efforts and a lack of coordinated, phased activities.

Donors have significant power to either enable or constrain how aid actors work with civilians and with one another. To address such systemic barriers, donors must collectively seek to address the political economy of aid. This means disincentivising approaches driven by a single organisation's mandate towards enabling collaborative approaches based on shared outcomes. Critically, this will require bringing large intermediary UN organisations and large INGOs on board. There must be a collective

effort to address the significant power dynamics across the aid sector related to footprint, funding and coordination. Without addressing this, the humanitarian ecosystem will be impervious to substantive change, while protecting the power and position of such organisations who have few incentives to change. Unfortunately, the reduced management capacity of donor institutions in recent times has resulted in greater funding to larger UN agencies and large INGOs in the name of efficient transactional costs, despite the high bureaucratic and overhead costs of such institutions.

Relatedly, the due diligence requirements to access funding significantly and disproportionately affect local and national actors. Unwieldy bureaucratic compliance requirements lead to the deployment of international institutions and global operating procedures, regardless of whether they are fit for purpose. It allows for the status quo to be maintained, with resources and therefore power controlled by a limited number of larger international actors on the basis that local actors have insufficient capacity. Ultimately, this leads to one of the critical systemic issues in the sector – that operational actors spend disproportionate time and resources servicing the bureaucracy at the expense of ensuring greater quality programmes and impact (Lancaster, 2024).

5.3.1 Barriers specific to humanitarian actors

The traditional focus on scale and reach in the humanitarian sector is a critical obstacle to adopting approaches to more effectively support communities. While the logic behind this, particularly in a global context of ever-increasing numbers of people affected by crises, is somewhat understandable, it continues to significantly undermine grassroots interventions that prioritise outcomes and impact. Indeed, across humanitarian responses globally, humanitarian actors are largely still unable to demonstrate how they contribute towards reducing threats of violence and strengthening the safety of civilians, if indeed this was the purpose of their interventions. In part, this is because programme design and monitoring are not built to monitor such results. However, it is also related to the reticence of donors to fund such activities.

When supporting community-level approaches, delivering at scale cannot be a priority consideration. While there are community-led and social movements that can take place at scale (for example, some of the Arab Spring uprisings), in other situations, scaling up can be harmful as it often requires further top-down, standardised and projectised approaches. These run against the principles and elements required to effectively support communities to reduce violence – whether through dialogue and mediation, unarmed civilian protection or other local and community-based approaches. Current approaches and incentives seem to indicate that large-scale interventions that achieve minimal impact on reducing violence and strengthening protection are preferred over having a higher number of smaller-scale interventions that actually achieve impact. This does not mean that all large-scale interventions necessarily lack impact, but it indicates that scale is too often prioritised over outcomes.

Nonviolent Peaceforce operates under the principle of 'scaling out' when applying approaches to unarmed civilian protection. Scaling out is an approach that is locally led and internationally connected, based on deepening rather than widening impact. It is about civil society organisations and grassroots

initiatives learning from one another and supporting communities that are carrying out similar approaches. As one interviewee reported, scaling out can mean working with multiple affinity groups rather than within one overarching organisation.

5.4 Defining and measuring success

5.4.1 What is impact, according to whom?

This research highlights that a strong mindset shift is required on what is considered impact and evidence of impact. There is a need for operational actors to work closely with communities to redefine what success looks like according to them and consider approaches to measure this effectively (CSRF, 2023a). Operational actors should then bring this learning to donors and work on building buy-in around these measures of success. There is a need to build consensus around the range of accepted methodologies to measure the success of violence-reduction interventions.

Demonstrating impact and measuring outcomes are always a challenge. This is particularly the case in efforts to reduce violence that seek to demonstrate the counterfactual – that violence has not taken place and that threats of violence against civilians have been reduced. When violence has not taken place, it is difficult to attribute the outcome to specific interventions. The international humanitarian sector and the donors that fund it are hard-wired into privileging quantitative monitoring approaches over qualitative evidence. This may be linked to the overarching focus in the humanitarian sector to demonstrate results and implement standardised approaches at scale, which can contrast with the more complex indicators that some peacebuilding actors use.

There is also a tension between grassroots approaches to reducing violence (which take time and are necessarily of limited scale) with the drive of humanitarian actors and donors to achieve quick results with as low an investment as possible. This seems to have created disincentives away from achieving outcomes and impact (that may require longer-term interventions), towards short-term quick fixes.

There seem to be misguided notions that reliable evidence should be primarily based on technocratic approaches in the name of objectivity. While quantitative evidence allows subsets of data to be merged, and allows for a degree of comparability, too often it is decontextualised, and rarely gives enough information to understand the pathway to impact. Qualitative evidence, including evidence based on perceptions, can be of far greater value in understanding outcomes and impact. When it comes to demonstrating that risks of violence have been reduced and the safety of communities has been strengthened, there must be consideration to the more systematic use of qualitative and mixed-methods approaches.

There also needs to be a reconsideration of what constitutes success. Building relationships, facilitating dialogue and undertaking negotiations and mediation take time and cannot be hurried. The aim will often not be a full cessation of violence. A dialogue can be considered successful when violence is delayed, interrupted, or when it occurs with less intensity. The process is as important as the

outcome. It can strengthen the capacity of communities to manage and resolve conflict through non-violent means and support greater community resilience to conflict. In CAR, many participants of the humanitarian mediation process talked about how the intervention increased their ability to manage small, everyday conflicts and therefore avoid a rise in tension between communities (Barbelet et al., 2023). The success of dialogue and mediation cannot be reduced to simply the outcome of the dialogue and the agreements made; success can be seen in the act of reopening space for dialogue and critical reflection. All of these outcomes are hard to measure and are not always accepted as a measure of success. This in turn is a barrier to funding, particularly in the humanitarian sector, given requirements to demonstrate delivery of interventions and results.

Humanitarian and peacebuilding practitioners engaged throughout this research widely agreed that defining and measuring success should start from community perceptions of safety, and how communities perceive success. This may look very different to how some humanitarian actors and donors perceive success, but could be a much more relevant measure to identify outcomes and impact.

5.4.2 Qualitative and combined approaches to monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning

There is currently reflection in the peacebuilding sector and, in a nascent form, within the humanitarian sector, of existing approaches to monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning (MEAL). The emergence of more qualitative and participatory approaches to MEAL within the peacebuilding sector coincided with a wider rethink that prioritises 'equitable structures that allow a more diverse group to drive the strategic direction of interventions' (Lemon, 2023). For example, Search for Common Ground has developed the Peace Impact Framework.[8] This, and similar qualitative approaches, are linked to a broader dissatisfaction with accountability within MEAL approaches favouring donor requirements rather than the locally generated evidence and perceptions of local communities (Urwin et al., 2023). The Peace Impact Framework (ConnexUs, n.d.a.) and other qualitative approaches to MEAL challenge what type of information is privileged – by generating evidence on previously ignored knowledge, as well as approaches to monitoring in order to both challenge and inform what success looks like in policy and practice (Lemon, 2023; Urwin et al., 2023).

Focusing on lived experiences and diverse voices to develop and measure community-defined experiences using rigorous participatory approaches has seen demonstrated success in the Everyday Peace Indicator (EPI) approach (see MacGinty and Firchow, 2014; Everyday Peace Indicators, n.d.). EPI uses focus group discussions across diverse demographic groups to establish indicators that

8 The Peace Impact Framework has three pillars, designed to generate overlapping and complementary information. Pillar one focuses on 'lived experience', with an emphasis on generating knowledge through the lived experience of people in violence and conflict. The second is 'aligned measures for peace', which has drawn on expertise to identify 10 standard indicators to allow practitioners to track peace. The third is 'expert observations', which is an approach to shared reflection and adaptation. It builds on learning from outcome mapping and harvesting, committing to biannual reflections at a minimum. For more information, see Lemon (2023) and https://cnxus.org/peace-impact-framework/.

communities consider to be signs of peace and conflict in their everyday lives (see Dixon and Firchow, 2022). An added value of EPI and similar approaches is the use of community-developed indicators in contrast to more traditional 'top-down' approaches to measuring peace, recognising that 'top-down' externally designed approaches introduce external framings, which can 'reproduce or break power dynamics that define priorities and what constitutes success' (Lemon, 2023).

There are a number of variations to EPI that operational partners have developed and adapted according to the requirements of the context and interventions. These include the Measuring Safety and Security (MSS) methodology, employed by the RSRTF in South Sudan (see WFP, 2022). The MSS is complemented by monthly ethnographic diaries using observation as a tool to understand how indicators relate to people's interactions and perceptions (see Davies and Mayhew, 2024: 30). However, this too comes with challenges; for example, how to efficiently generate evidence or, importantly, how the evidence generated can inform adaptations to programming, which at times it has failed to achieve.

What communities define as success can also challenge large-scale humanitarian actors and donors in terms of analysing locally grounded indicators in relation to policy and practice. Local perceptions of safety and security can be culturally specific, which at times may be beyond the understanding or working practices of external actors. Interviews with those linked to EPI highlighted that one challenge has been pushing back on requests from donors for broader conclusions from locally generated indicators. Whilst EPI has shown attempts to generate lessons at a broader regional level, the more a macro perspective is applied, the more there is a risk of omitting context-specific details which undermines the added value of methodologies like EPI (Levy and Firchow, 2021).

While such approaches can offer a step forward, there are challenges to achieving a locally led and representative model that reflects community perceptions of success. Methodologies such as EPI and MSS can be costly, take time and require significant resources. It can mean that using such approaches is beyond the means of smaller organisations such as local peacebuilders.

The Grounded Accountability Model (GAM), developed out of the same tradition as EPI and other participatory approaches led by local actors, was developed to make adaptations in response to such shortcomings.[9] Differences include a more streamlined approach to levels of data, which is often smaller in sample and/or scope and therefore reduces the demand on time and resources , allowing data to inform faster 'real-time' decision making,[10] as well as greater flexibility to look at patterns across

9 The GAM was developed by Search for Common Ground, Humanity and Inclusion, and EPI, as well as local partners COSURCA and Asociación Minga. It was developed to make adaptations in response to such shortcomings according to core principles (ConnexUs, n.d.b.) adhered to by the GAM community of practice (ConnexUs, n.d.c.).

10 Data requirements are designed in line with the needs and requirements of those collecting and using the data. Smaller samples can, for example, indicate top community choices of indicators rather than the larger breadth of choices found in EPI.

groups and communities, or identify trends.[11] These are a few of a number of models that have sought to balance community perceptions of safety and success with the provision of tangible indicators that speak 'to donors in a language they can understand and manage' (Urwin et al., 2023).

Overall, while some donors have shown a willingness to incorporate qualitative and mixed-methods approaches as a way to measure progress, this is very much the exception. There remains strong pushback in the sector writ large, while efforts continue to be undermined by longstanding systemic issues within the aid sector.

11 This contrasts to EPI, which avoids looking at trends across data to retain the specificity of the indicators and keep a level of rigour. For GAM, in order to retain rigour in analysis, there is full transparency about how processes are established and decisions made.

6 Conclusion

There is momentum within the humanitarian protection community to strengthen approaches to proactively reduce threats of violence. This includes supporting communities more systematically in their own efforts, and redressing the humanitarian sector's imbalanced focus on vulnerabilities. A number of donors, too, have been mobilising efforts to strengthen protection as central to humanitarian action, for example, through the Protection Donor Group under the leadership of its co-chairs Switzerland and Sweden, or by considering greater complementarity between humanitarian and peacebuilding action.

However, there are also risks that these opportunities are not acted upon or supported, and that progress is stymied by lack of commitment, ambition, collaboration and funding within and across institutions. There are also risks that current approaches are repackaged to 'retrofit' standard practices into this momentum and that the status quo is maintained. Organisations need to honestly consider what it would take to systematically seek to reduce threats of violence and strengthen the safety of affected civilians, what strategic and substantive changes are required to do so, and what appetite they have to make these changes.

Three clear entry points for complementarity between humanitarian and peacebuilding actors emerged during the research. The first is communities. Engaging communities and supporting dialogue can have profound outcomes to reduce or interrupt escalations of violence. Understanding and safeguarding the ownership of communities' own efforts is crucial. Indeed, there needs to be recognition that communities are undertaking their own efforts to reduce violence and that their practices in many ways mirror those of external actors: they use mediation, negotiation and advocacy, as well as skill sets such as persuasion, and the ability to remain calm and non-partisan. By leveraging the agency and capacities of communities and supporting them when and where it adds value, humanitarian and peacebuilding actors can identify opportunities to work in complementarity and reinforce one another's interventions to strengthen shared outcomes.

The second entry point is in the form of analysis – community, stakeholder, power, and conflict-sensitivity analysis, all of which are essential to supporting community's protection goals and are crucial for informing interventions to reduce violence.

Finally, there is protection action. When intentionally designed to reduce violence and strengthen the safety of communities, it can arguably be the bridge that connects humanitarian and peacebuilding action.

A mindset shift is required for humanitarian and peacebuilding actors to work in more complementarity to support communities in reducing violence. First, donors and external actors must accept that violence and conflict are not linear, and neither are effective actions to prevent or respond to violence and conflict. Situations of violence and conflict are highly complex. Importantly, it should be recognised that peacebuilding actors have a role in situations of high-intensity violence, while humanitarian actors

should intentionally consider their contribution towards pathways to peace. Donors should support such approaches, while humanitarian actors must be incentivised to adopt more iterative, flexible and adaptable ways of working.

Secondly, artificially constructed siloes need to be addressed. While working in complementarity should not lead to humanitarian actors seeking to replace the role of peacebuilding actors or vice versa, there are opportunities to learn from one another and internalise intersecting modes of action. Humanitarian actors can learn from peacebuilding approaches to conflict and conflict-sensitivity analysis; relational and context-specific approaches to working with, engaging and supporting communities; and iterative approaches to designing interventions. For their part, peacebuilding actors should seek to more systematically reduce and respond to immediate risks to the safety of civilians.

Discussions with a range of actors as part of this project demonstrated the strong interest and appetite in assessing opportunities for collaboration and complementary efforts across humanitarian, protection and peacebuilding actors. This represents an opportunity in and of itself, especially as there are limited platforms for strategic dialogue. What complementarity looks like in practice and the platforms or structures needed require a pragmatic approach that considers the specificity of the context and which organisations are present with the relevant capacities, skills and expertise.

Complementarity is not hard in principle but requires the willingness of different sets of actors to challenge misconceptions and recognise and understand the added value of one another's contribution to shared objectives. It requires commitments to overcome any structural and systemic barriers. As a result, it is often largely dependent on individuals who are willing and able to overcome deep-set barriers, cultures and disincentives to more collaborative approaches. If this change is to be more systematic, there needs to be both individual and organisational leadership commitment to change. However, collaboration has a cost. It is time-consuming, and requires compromises and commitment to overcome disincentives.

It is only by acknowledging that complementary approaches will lead to better outcomes and stronger impact that its value can be recognised. Critically, it requires humility from all sets of actors. This requires organisations to step back and give up space, recognising that protection and peacebuilding expertise does not only sit with national and international organisations, but with religious institutions, women, youth groups, and wider civil society. But humility is not easily incentivised or operationalised.

Political will is required from donors, policymakers and operational organisations to address longstanding systemic, structural and cultural barriers, and the political economy of the aid sector. They must address competitive, project-based approaches, and redesign rigid, predefined logical-framework programmes towards more adaptive-management approaches, with a focus on process and outcomes rather than results and outputs (see CSRF, 2023b). Effective approaches to reducing violence require flexibility, adaptability, a readiness to accept and deal with setbacks, and even to fail. It requires patience, perseverance and a willingness to take risks.

This also means addressing the disincentives to collaboration driven by competition, mandate and resources. There are tensions between strengthening localised, contextually driven approaches to reducing violence, and pressures within the humanitarian sector to prioritise delivery of assistance in a context of dwindling international resources for humanitarian action. The current funding context may also present an opportunity. The expensive, bureaucratic architecture in place to coordinate and deliver humanitarian interventions is not sustainable, nor is it fit for purpose to deliver approaches to support communities. Instead, area-based approaches, as close to the conflict system as is feasible, should be prioritised.

There needs to be reconsideration of what constitutes success, as well as what (and whose) evidence is privileged. A fixation on abstract, quantitative data will continue to privilege activities and outputs over outcomes and impact. Standardising the use of qualitative data and building on community perspectives of success would offer opportunities to strengthen analysis and shape context-specific interventions. But it is ultimately up to the international aid sector and those that fund it to demonstrate whether it has the appetite to shift its modus operandi.

In a global context of more and more fragmented situations of violence and conflict, egregious abuses against civilians, increasing levels of humanitarian need, and decreasing resources, creative approaches are required. This, too, is an opportunity for more complementarity. Arguably, seeking to reduce violence, mitigate its worst consequences, and promote pathways to peace will reduce humanitarian needs in the longer term. As one interviewee said, while humanitarian organisations do not need to shape the political landscape, they do have a responsibility to promote peace (or reduce violence) (Davies and Mayhew, 2024: 35).

Recommendations

These recommendations call for community-based actors, civil society, local and national governments, national and international humanitarian, protection and peacebuilding actors, as well as donors and diplomatic actors, to take the actions required to reduce violence and strengthen the safety of civilians.

These recommendations do not suggest that all actors should seek to incorporate all actions, in all contexts, at all times. Rather, they ask actors to carefully consider their role and added value, and to critically assess how their current practice needs to change.

All actions are premised on the willingness of relevant actors and institutions to do things differently. Actors need to honestly assess what they are and are not willing to do, and take responsibility for their actions and the impact they have. Importantly, actors should consider the serious risks of *not* seeking to integrate such actions on the lives of those individuals and communities affected by violence and conflict.

Actions and considerations

- **Respect and support community ownership and solutions.** Base your interventions on the assumption that communities are already taking actions to reduce violence. Consider the extent to which violence reduction interventions are based on community-devised solutions. Consider how your interventions can be better based on micro-level community stakeholder analysis, including formal and informal power dynamics.
  - Are solutions owned by communities? Are your interventions starting with what communities are already doing?
  - How are you mitigating against the marginalisation of certain individuals? How are you mitigating potentially harmful community practices while still supporting community identified solutions?
  - What would it take to better leverage the norms, customs and values of respective communities to promote restraint?

- **Strengthen networks, linkages and communication channels within and between communities to support dialogue.** Consider carefully who to involve, including both those with an interest in reducing violence and those with an interest in perpetuating violence.
  - How do your set of interventions intentionally build and help strengthen networks, linkages and communication channels within and between communities to support dialogue?
  - Does your institution have the necessary risk tolerance to support unpredictable action and actors? What would it take to develop the necessary risk appetite within your own institution, and what can be done to increase this, if necessary?

- **Make violence reduction a core action of protection.** Consider how far the contributions of your organisation are specifically designed to reduce violence. Consider how to balance your interventions to reduce threats, those to increase community capacities as well as those to reduce vulnerabilities.
  - Is there more you can do to take a holistic, balanced approach to reduce risks? What would it take to do so, and do you have the structures, systems and processes in place to support it?
  - Have you considered supporting or deploying dialogue, mediation and negotiation as frontline capacities to reduce violence in the short term? How is this coordinated with (and supportive of) community, local and national actors who are already doing this? Have you thought about opportunities for such actions to contribute to longer-term, peacebuilding outcomes?
  - Have you thought through pragmatic approaches and solutions for the context(s) you're operating in? Can you put aside your individual and institutional interests to honestly consider who is best placed to carry out which role, at which times, to achieve the stated goals? Are you willing to show humility, and accept that this may require giving up space, potentially assuming a support role to local and national actors where relevant?

- **Create space for platforms to promote complementarity.** Consider opportunities to create platforms that go beyond coordination and instead are focused on strategic approaches to reaching common objectives. Ensure that shared learning and joint action is promoted in realising those objectives.
  - What role can you and your institution play to encourage equal partnerships based on trust? Are there informal ways to develop relationships and trust outside of formal coordination platforms? What can you do to contribute to creating safe spaces for honest conversations?
  - How can you better incentivise true partnership approaches focused on common outcomes, allowing for the necessary diversity of actors to achieve those outcomes in any given situation? Are you willing to honestly reflect on power dynamics and make space to address these? What are you willing to give up to achieve this, and what will you not give up?

- **Proactively consider ways to complement modes of action between humanitarian, protection and peacebuilding actors.** Carefully consider your role and the role of others, including whether your organisation is best placed to do this, at this time and how your organisation complements the actions of others.
  - As a humanitarian actor, can you intentionally use your full toolbox to reduce violence and promote peace? As a peacebuilding actor, can you strengthen approaches to interrupt immediate threats of violence and strengthen the safety of civilians? What would it take to do so, and what are you willing to compromise to achieve this? As a donor, how are you incentivising and supporting more complementary approaches across modes of actions between humanitarian, protection and peacebuilding actors? Be clear about what you do and don't have the will to change.
  - Are there things your institution could do to contribute to incentivising restraint? Are there actions that you or other institutions could do to support dividends to reduce violence and promote peace?

- **Prioritise and resource systematic, high-quality conflict-sensitivity analysis.** Assume that your institution is part of the political economy of conflict and violence and critically assess your institution's role. Ensure you identify the barriers to using analysis to inform programming adaptations and decision-making and seek to address them.
  - Are there actions you can take that go beyond mitigating measures towards 'do no harm' and instead proactively contribute to reducing violence?
  - What personnel are required to support such analysis? How can analysis routinely inform programming adaptations and decision-making? Are the necessary structures in place?
  - Are there opportunities to promote or engage in shared and joint analysis, including between humanitarian, protection and peacebuilding actors? What are the barriers to achieving this? How can you enable the trust and willingness required to support shared and joint analysis platforms?

4. **Reconsider what constitutes success, according to whom, and how to measure it.** Understand community perspectives on what success looks like and use that as your starting point.
   - Whose voice counts when measuring success?
   - Can you better integrate qualitative and mixed-methods data and measure process and outcomes rather than results and outputs? Are there opportunities to consider more diverse approaches between operational partners and the donors that fund them?
   - Are you willing to accept and support actions that may fall short of, or fail to achieve, intended results in the short term, but can strengthen effective solutions (and outcomes) in the long term? Are there alternative ways to monitor these successes?
   - Are there ways you can use evidence and learning to influence the systemic use of such practices and interventions as core actions to reduce violence and strengthen the safety of civilians?

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