

## **Civilian-centered approaches to PoC: What works, why and advancing acceptance within the international system**

### **Remarks by the Creating Safer Space Research Network**

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**“Creating Safer Space”** research conducted by 26 project teams in eleven countries across three continents shows that proactive nonviolent strategies used by civilians save lives, create safer spaces for communities, change the behavior of armed actors, reduce violence levels, and interrupt cycles of violence.

While communities and civil society organizations often engage in practices of UCP without calling them such, our research network has uncovered and systematized homegrown capacity and practice, much of which entirely undocumented before. The capacity and creativity of communities to provide protection is evidenced through the wide variety of activities and mechanisms documented by our projects:

**First**, communities develop early warning–early response mechanisms (EWER), e.g. through vernacular signs and signals for warning and communication, by using mobile phones and social messaging apps to share and verify information, and by planning for flight and displacement (e.g., designating safe routes, providing safe houses).

For example, in Cameroon’s Anglophone conflict, communities identified WhatsApp groups as important means of sharing information about armed actors’ activities and avoiding interactions with them. Rural communities in South Sudan often still rely on traditional signs, e.g. reeds positioned in particular ways, to share information and warn others. In both contexts, whistles also play a major role in early warning, e.g. urging people to flee when armed actors enter a village at night

**Second**, civilians cultivate a range of proactive engagement measures. For instance, they provide protective accompaniment to vulnerable/ threatened people or only travel together in groups to keep themselves safer.

In Nigeria and Cameroon, for instance, women accompany each other when traveling to the market or working on their fields. Civilians also protect communities and their living environments through civilian presence and permanence, e.g. regarding disputed land. For Palestinians in the West Bank, for example, living and working on their land is part of their identity; protection therefore revolves around the accompaniment of herders to enable them to safely remain on the land. Proactive engagement often also includes protection of and care for nature, such as rivers and forests. In Colombia, for instance, peasant organizations in the

department of Antioquia have included the protection of local rivers from hydroelectric power plants and privatization into their efforts of protection from forced displacement.

**Third**, civilians negotiate and engage with state officials and state and non-state armed actors, for instance through direct dialogue and by negotiating coexistence with armed actors. In Myanmar after the 2021 military coup, civil society organizations have used established UCP mechanisms to keep civilians safe from heightened levels of state violence and forced recruitment by armed groups. In other contexts, civilians have held a mirror up to the violence through art activism, for example in the case of police brutality against youth in Kenya, or by using cultural activities such as football or theatre to reclaim public space, such as in the case of the many artistic organizations working to create safer space amidst the drug-related violence in the Colombian city of Medellin.

**Fourth**, communities monitor and document violent incidents and abuses, sometimes using legal mechanisms to address the threats and often collaborating with wider national and international advocacy networks to exert pressure on perpetrators. In Colombia, there is a wealth of national and international organizations that support communities in these tasks, for example through strategic litigation of companies using armed backing to displace communities and exploit resources.

**Fifth**, the Creating Safer Space findings add new insights into the motivations of civilians to take nonviolent (self-)protective action. Not only do violence-affected civilians want their families, communities, and places to be safer, but our research findings also suggest that, far from being victims waiting to be saved by strangers or for national authorities to step up to their protection responsibilities, many violence-affected civilians use their collective and individual agency to draw on traditional mechanisms, learn new skills, develop context-appropriate strategies, and take collective action.

**Finally**, there is an increasing need for the protection of civilians (PoC) from violent conflict and displacement, but this need cannot be met by current international approaches. Locally led community protection can bridge the current gap between need and capacity in the protection of civilians (PoC). The findings of “Creating Safer Space” research network demonstrate the importance of including unarmed self-protecting communities as equal partners in the Protection of Civilians (PoC) and creating a contextual design that helps them make their self-protection safer as they react to changes in threats, conflict situations, or safe spaces.

**The UN and its Member States should:**

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

4. Ensure that communities are included as decision-makers regarding how to use funding, who is involved in high-level meetings, and what protection approaches work in any given context.

5. Feed the Creating Safer Space model of giving people equitable voice, respecting their knowledge and capacity, and creating learning opportunities through collaboration, as a way of generating experiential knowledge on community protection from violence, into national, regional, and global debates.

“Creating Safer Space” is an international and inter-university research network that enhances and strengthens civilians’ capacities to protect themselves and others amid violent conflict and displacement and to create safer spaces in which communities can build infrastructures for sustainable peace and development. The research network has developed models of community engagement that uncover and recognize local protection capacity and contribution and enable national and international protection actors to better understand effective local unarmed civilian protection (UCP) and its knowledge base.

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## **SHORTER VERSION:**

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