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## Civilian-centred approaches to POC: what works, why and advancing acceptance

### within the international system

#### Summary of POC week event

Thursday 23 May 2024

As part of the annual 2024 *United Nations Protection of Civilians week*, which takes place around the annual UN Security Council Open Debate on the Protection of Civilians, a side event on ‘*Civilian-Centred Approaches to POC: what works, why and advancing acceptance within the international system*’ was held at the Mission of the Kingdom of the Netherlands. The event was co-organised by Nonviolent Peaceforce, CIVIC, Creating Safer Space, Global Protection Cluster, HPG/ODI, Oxfam, NORCAP, PAX, the Permanent Observer Mission of the African Union to the UN and the Permanent Missions of El Salvador, the Netherlands, Philippines and South Sudan. The presentations by protection practitioners and researchers highlighted how civilian-centred approaches to protection complement traditional protection methods and improve and expand protection responses and outcomes. The ensuing discussion focused on how humanitarian, peacebuilding, and peacekeeping organizations, as well as donors and regional organizations, can support these civilian-led protection initiatives to reduce, prevent and interrupt violence in the short-term and co-create a conducive environment for sustaining peace in the longer term. The event drew on multiple experiences from research and practice, reflecting what has worked, what can be learned, and what is needed to ensure that civilian-led approaches are systematically adopted and infused into institutional protection efforts.

**HE Ambassador Yoka Brandt, Permanent Representative of the Kingdom of the Netherlands**, opened the discussion by acknowledging that discussions on protection of civilians (POC) often assume that protection responses are civilian centred, but often this is not the case. She underlined why it is important that we look into this phenomenon more closely, as this is critical to ensure that POC can become more effective, sustainable and responsive to the people involved. Ambassador Brandt stressed that the international community is currently facing a critical juncture with new challenges, risks, and threats to protection that require ‘out-of-the-box’ thinking that should involve engaging with local communities to deeply examine how people-centred approaches can be added to the repertoire of approaches to protection and prevention. The Ambassador highlighted the

Netherlands' commitment to adopting people-centred approaches so that protection responses can be more effective and sustainable. She closed with the hope that this event can inspire members of the international community to work better with each other and with local partnerships on protection issues.

**Bruno Lemarquis, Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary General for the UN Stabilisation Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO)**, explained that the mission is drafting the post-MONUSCO protection plan for a gradual, responsible drawdown. The plan includes important aspects of "doing POC without weapons" and cites the most recent mandate renewal, UNSC Resolution 2017, which specifically instructs MONUSCO to strengthen mechanisms for the unarmed protection of civilians. This is particularly crucial in the drawdown, as security conditions are deteriorating and amplifying protection risks. While the DRC Government is preparing to take over security responsibilities, there is significant potential and new opportunities for unarmed civilian approaches to enhance community-based efforts, fill remaining gaps, and capitalize on the gains made by MONUSCO over the past two decades. Recently, MONUSCO has been working in partnership with UNFPA and Nonviolent Peaceforce, supported by the UN Peacebuilding Fund, to enable the implementation of community violence reduction programs in South Kivu. Additionally, the DSRSG asserted that unarmed approaches need to be fully supported and funded in this post-mission context, especially as the UN Country Team will have to rely solely on voluntary funds to address the deep-rooted drivers of conflict and work toward sustainable peace.

**Tiffany Easthom, Executive Director, Nonviolent Peaceforce**, introduced the panel discussion by acknowledging the diversity and complexity of protection risks and responses. She reflected on differing terms for protection of civilians, e.g. civilian-led approaches, unarmed civilian protection, proactive protection, etc. and suggested avoiding debates on terminology and instead focusing on what is most impactful, based on placing those most impacted by violence at the centre of the design and implementation of unarmed POC programming.

**Hanin Ahmed, Sudanese Activist and Founder of Omdurman Emergency Response Room**, shared reflections on how groups of local civilians in Sudan are leading protection efforts and having a significant impact due to their non-partisanship and non-political agenda. Such entities have often been the only groups able to access civilians and provide humanitarian aid. They are agilely fulfilling critical functions by providing food, healthcare and protection from gender-based violence. Ms. Hamed reported that in Khartoum alone the Emergency Response Room has organized 398 soup kitchens, 75 women co-ops, and 40 health clinics. However, members of such groups face security and financial challenges, as they are subjected to raids, rape, and harassment by all parties to the conflict. The civilian volunteers are further constrained by a lack of resources and trust in the community. They continue to do advocacy, both inside and outside the country, to further protect and provide assistance to civilians.

**John Malith Mabor, South Sudanese peacemaker, PAX**, shared his experience as a local peacebuilder in South Sudan, highlighting the importance of trust in building confidence across conflicting communities. Mr. Malith described how the violence in South Sudan had become increasingly identity based, making it difficult for him to operate in areas where residents have a different ethnicity than his own. Seeking to prevent intercommunal violence in Unity and Lake States, he listened to and then relayed the Nuer communities' grievances (i.e. cattle raiding, killing, etc.) to the neighbouring Dinka community, who then asked him to convey theirs in return. This process of dialogue and communication built an unprecedented level of trust between the two communities,

which enabled the two to meet, reconcile, and break the multi-year cycle of violence affecting both communities.

**Gemma Davies, Senior Research Fellow from Humanitarian Policy Group/ODI**, reflected on findings and learning from three years of research into how communities engage with armed actors for self-protection. These results indicated that community-led approaches to protection can have profound outcomes in reducing or interrupting escalations of violence but are rarely enough to sustain communities' safety over the longer term. While the evidence of impact is growing, evidence and learning is yet to inform wider policy and practice. Looking forward, evidence of good practice needs to reflect what communities themselves perceive as success, rather than the perceptions of external actors. More research is needed using qualitative approaches rooted not in activity-based measurements, but in an understanding of what makes civilians feel safe according to their own perspectives. Ms. Davis asserted that there are too few examples of these kinds of approaches, especially by international actors, and suggested that the international community needs to engage in deeper introspection to question its own bias and privileged position. This will require ceding a greater leadership role to local communities and civil society, with international actors supporting from behind.

**Nerve Macaspac, Assistant Professor/CUNY and researcher with the Creating Safer Space (CSS) Network**, reflected on research conducted with 26 project teams in eleven countries. The research findings displayed the capacity and creativity of communities in providing protection through a wide variety of activities and mechanisms, demonstrating that proactive nonviolent strategies used by civilians save lives, create safer spaces for communities, change the behaviour of armed actors, reduce violence levels, and interrupt cycles of violence. Dr. Macaspac described ten years of research in indigenous communities in the northern part of the Philippines that identified community protection measures which successfully prevented conflict-related violence and deaths and played an important role in the peace process. The research found that indigenous protection measures were intimately tied to the communities' historical, cultural, and social relationships to their land. Additionally, their methods of protection are closely linked to daily indigenous practices, norms, and values which international actors often delegitimize and undermine in their exogenous interventions. The work validated the importance of recognising community agency during armed conflict, ensuring that community-centred approaches to protection are respected and legitimised, and insisting that communities are integrally involved in the design and implementation of protection interventions. CSS's research demonstrates that locally-led community protection can make a critical contribution in bridging the current gap between need and capacity in the protection of civilians (POC).

**Ambassador Cecilia Adeng, Permanent Mission of South Sudan**, noted that South Sudan has long needed and has long had mechanisms for the protection of civilians both before and after independence which manifested in different ways. The Ambassador identified local communities as the backbone of protection and violence prevention, as they can best understand the problems, disseminate deconfliction messages, deescalate tensions, shift perceptions and attitudes, educate about coexistence, and find ways to reconcile and move forward. The Ambassador reaffirmed earlier recommendations to: recognise local community involvement in protection as essential; include communities' existing protection strategies, capacities, and needs in baseline assessments and funding decisions; and ensure that communities are included as decision-makers in selecting protection approaches and funding going forward.

In opening the floor to a wider discussion among participants, **Ambassador Egriselda González López, Permanent Mission of El Salvador**, stated that today's discussion had raised unique and

important insights which can often be missed. Ambassador González López noted that at UNHQ, there is a focus on leaders' statements within the United Nations, numbers, and statistics, which can mean losing sight of the fact that the centre of these discussions is about people and their suffering. Solutions to local problems are unlikely to come from Headquarters' meetings. Therefore, it is important that we constantly listen and reflect what others are saying and be aware of the issue of representation, ensuring that all key stakeholders are around the table.

Synthesizing the discussion, **Ambassador Fatima K. Mohammed, African Union**, re-affirmed key learnings centring on the importance of community-led protection measures anchored on the principles of nonviolence and full involvement of local actors. The Ambassador underscored that locally-led unarmed protection can make a difference both in the short and long term in mitigating the different challenges faced by communities at risk. She reiterated the earlier speakers' overarching themes, i.e. to recognise, respect, and legitimise local actors/actions and that civilian-centred approaches to protection need to be based on locally articulated needs and not be externally led. There is continuing need to further document lessons learned and measure success in ways that reflect communities' perceptions and respond to their needs rather than those of external actors. The withdrawal of UN peace support missions highlights not only the responsibility of the state, but also the importance of working together with civilian-based protection systems to fill protection gaps. The ambassador reiterated key points on: the effectiveness of community-centred protection of civilians; the importance of collaboration between humanitarians, peacekeepers, peacebuilders, and local communities; ensuring flexibility in programming; the allocation of sufficient resources; increasing accountability; and finally, the importance of internalizing and fully accepting civilian-centred efforts in POC in international policies and practices.

**Ambassador Antonio M. Lagdameo, Permanent Mission of the Philippines**, noted that UCP and community-led protection approaches to POC are relevant and applicable in very different environments and particularly important in the context of sustainable peace and transitions. The Ambassador recounted that since 2009, NP has been a member of the International Monitoring Team for the Bangsamoro, a sterling example of how UCP can be done successfully in a non-UN peacekeeping setting that has both complemented and strengthened the peace process and did not interfere or stifle the government's interests or aspirations.

The Ambassador summarized key principles for successful, sustainable POC:

- (1) deep, respectful engagement with local actors that allows their full participation in decision-making and actions for protection;
- (2) respecting the primacy and participation of local actors because it builds on indigenous practices that will be sustainable, develops new relations of trust and cooperation, breaks habits and cycles of violence, and helps communities adopt new attitudes and nonviolent modes of operating that get embedded in community processes going forward.

The Ambassador summarized the sentiment in the room in his hope that showing this evidence of success will encourage the UN and international policy makers to see this work as a welcome complement to the UN's POC work and consider fully accepting and supporting it as part of their repertoire of POC strategies and practices.