

Nonviolent Community Strategies Make Civilians Safer

Evidence shows that unarmed civilian-to-civilian protection is an effective community-level mechanism for crisis preparedness and response across the world

Key messages:

- People in Wales and the UK can suffer from different forms of violence, ranging from domestic and gender-based violence, to knife and hate crime, and to community strife such as the 2024 summer riots.
- Evidence from across the world suggests that local communities are often the first – and sometimes the only – responders in complex crises, yet their agency and potential has not been fully recognised in current approaches to crisis preparedness and management.
- *Creating Safer Space* research has demonstrated that community self-protection efforts based on unarmed civilian protection (UCP) strategies and principles work and that people engage in these crisis preparedness and response efforts because of a strong commitment to their family, community, place, and natural environment.
- These insights can inform Welsh politics and civil society action aiming at community diversity and well-being in the context of Wales’ commitment to global responsibility (Well-Being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015), and should feed back into initiatives and policies at home, such as Academi Heddwch’s Wales as a Nation of Peace report, Wales as Nation of Sanctuary, and the Anti-racist Wales Action Plan.



Detail of a collage by members of the Indigenous Guard Los Almendros II, Antioquia, Colombia. Project 'The Social Process of Guarantees'.

I am the community and the community is me... we resolved to always put Community first... to stay safe.

(From the poem 'The Four Commandments of Unarmed Civilian Protection' by a research participant in Cameroon. Project brochure 'Resilient Voices'.)

What we know

Preparedness for many forms of crisis and emergency

In-depth research by 26 *Creating Safer Space* projects across eleven countries revealed that all communities studied are using some form of nonviolent self-protection and local crisis preparedness strategies. These strategies protect civilians from many forms of crisis:

Types of crisis	Project country evidence of successful local crisis response
Combat between armed actors	Cameroon (Anglophone regions), Colombia, Indonesia (Papua), Myanmar, Nigeria, Thailand (Deep South), South Sudan
Inter-communal conflict, including elections-related violence	Kenya, Myanmar (Rakhine), Nigeria, Indonesia (Papua), Philippines (Mindanao), South Sudan
Violence related to natural resource exploitation, environmental destruction, and land grabbing	Colombia, Indonesia (Papua), Myanmar, Palestine (West Bank), Philippines (Mindanao), Thailand (North), South Sudan (Lakes State)
Dictatorial violence	Myanmar
Excessive force and arbitrary arrest by state police and security forces	Cameroon (Anglophone regions), Colombia, Kenya, Palestine (West Bank), Myanmar, Thailand, US-Mexican border
Targeted killings and attacks, e.g. on social, indigenous, or youth leaders, human rights and environmental defenders, artists, etc.	Colombia, Kenya, Thailand, South Sudan
Criminal, drug-related, and urban violence	Colombia, Kenya, South Sudan, US-Mexican border
Forced displacement and violence against refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs)	Cameroon, Colombia, Indonesia (Papua), Myanmar, Palestine (West Bank), Philippines (Mindanao), Thailand, South Sudan, US-Mexican border
Sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV)	Colombia, Indonesia (Papua), Myanmar, Nigeria, Philippines (Mindanao), South Sudan, US-Mexican border
Climate change-induced conflict	Kenya, Nigeria, South Sudan

Local agency in reducing fragility

Communities and civil society organizations often engage in practices of crisis preparedness without calling them such. This makes it difficult to detect local crisis preparedness and response mechanisms and infrastructures. Through community-focussed, participatory, and creative research methods, the *Creating Safer Space* projects uncovered and systematized homegrown crisis preparedness and management capacity and practice, much of which was entirely undocumented before. The capacity and creativity of communities to provide protection and break the cycle of violence is evidenced through the wide variety of activities and mechanisms documented by our projects:

- Communities develop **early warning–early response mechanisms** (EWER), e.g. through vernacular signs and signals for warning and communication, by using mobile phones and social messaging apps to share and verify information, and by planning for flight and displacement (e.g., designating safe routes, providing safe houses). For example, in Cameroon’s Anglophone conflict, communities identified WhatsApp groups as important means of sharing information about armed actors’ activities and avoiding interactions with them. Rural communities in South Sudan often still rely on traditional signs, e.g. reeds positioned in particular ways, to share information and warn others. In both contexts, whistles also play a major role in early warning, e.g. urging people to flee when armed actors enter a village at night.
- Civilians cultivate a range of **proactive engagement measures**. For instance, they provide protective accompaniment to vulnerable/threatened people or only travel together in groups to keep themselves safer. In Nigeria and Cameroon, for instance, women accompany each other when traveling to the market or working on their fields. Civilians also

protect communities and their living environments through civilian presence and permanence, e.g. regarding disputed land. For Palestinians in the West Bank, for example, living and working on their land is part of their identity; protection therefore revolves around the accompaniment of herders to enable them to safely remain on the land. Proactive engagement often also includes protection of and care for nature, such as rivers and forests. In Colombia, for instance, peasant organizations in the department of Antioquia have included the protection of local rivers from hydroelectric power plants and privatization into their efforts of protection from forced displacement.

- **Civilians negotiate and engage** with state officials and state and non-state armed actors, for instance through direct dialogue and by negotiating coexistence with armed actors. In Myanmar after the 2021 military coup, civil society organisations have used established UCP mechanisms to keep civilians safe from heightened levels of state violence and forced recruitment by armed groups. In other contexts, civilians have held a mirror up to the violence through art activism, for example in the case of police brutality against youth in Kenya, or by using cultural activities such as football or theatre to reclaim public space, such as in the case of the many artistic organizations working to create safer space amidst the drug-related violence in the Colombian city of Medellin.
- Communities **monitor and document violent incidents and abuses**, sometimes using legal mechanisms to address the threats and often collaborating with wider national and international advocacy networks to exert pressure on perpetrators. In Colombia, there is a wealth of national and international organizations that support communities in these tasks, for example through strategic litigation of companies using armed backing to displace communities and exploit resources.

Context knowledge and embeddedness

Across the different research contexts, *Creating Safer Space* projects found shared underlying mechanisms, which make local crisis preparedness and management more likely to be successful:

- Nonviolent community crisis preparedness and response builds on local agency and knowledge; it is **collective and rooted in communities**. As such, it goes beyond protection from direct physical violence or humanitarian emergencies and often includes struggles against structural and cultural violence as well as practices of care for the community, nature, and in some cases the spiritual world.
- **Context knowledge and relationships** are critical to local protection efforts. Communities build on traditional practices, familial relationships, respect for elders, or the social capital (status, networks) of traditional, religious, and other community leaders to negotiate safer spaces for civilians. Among those practicing local UCP are civilians of all genders, age groups, professions, and other backgrounds.
- Communities are immensely **creative in devising protection and crisis preparedness strategies**. Approaches will differ depending on the specific context, but civilians are savvy at adapting existing approaches to their specific needs or changing threat environments, like those arising from threat actors’ learning and adaptation or macro-developments such as climate change.

Policy Recommendations

Welsh government, in collaboration with relevant civil society organisations in Wales, should:

Support unarmed civilian protection abroad by:

- 1. Acknowledging nonviolent, civilian-to-civilian forms of protection** as a credible and important practice in protection policy that is broadly applicable and effective.
- 2. Exploring ways to support local communities’** own capacity, agency, and knowledge in protecting themselves and others, e.g. as part of a discussion on Wales as a Nation of Peace.
- 3. Using its influence at the UK level to improve the recognition, support, and resourcing of civilian protection initiatives** as part of debates on defence and humanitarian assistance.

Challenges

Communities engaged in *Creating Safer Space* projects also shared challenges they face, among them the following:

- Just like international humanitarian aid, communities’ **nonviolent self-protection depends on a minimum of respect for civilians’ lives**; indiscriminate violence, especially in situations of great power differentials between warring parties, is difficult to halt or deter.
- Community crisis preparedness relies increasingly on **mobile communication and social media apps**. Yet not all community members have access, devices can be confiscated, and communication channels can be misused to spread misinformation.
- Local crisis preparedness and response measures often **lack small amounts of funding** that would enhance them, e.g. to buy mobile phones or a motorcycle to connect with neighbouring communities and share information.
- Communities often **need some outside support**, e.g. through international advocacy and solidarity, to grow in credibility and be able to engage with official actors and systems with the aim to move from preparedness and protection to conflict transformation.

Further information

- Creating Safer Space website: <https://creating-safer-space.com>
- Creating Safer Space newsletter: <https://creating-safer-space.com/contact/>
- UCP Research Database: <https://creating-safer-space.com/ucp-research-database/>

Introduce lessons learned in other contexts at home by:

- 1. Supporting and resourcing organisations offering capacity training** on community-based protection strategies (e.g. active bystander training), to help scale out nonviolent civilian protection knowledge and capacity to more communities in (potential) need.
- 2. Including nonviolent community-based protection into Welsh policies and action plans**, especially around Wales as a Nation of Sanctuary and the Anti-racist Wales Action Plan.
- 3. Introducing learning about nonviolent strategies for community protection** (e.g. principles and examples of nonviolent action) **into Welsh curricula**.

Our Research Network

26

Research Projects



Research in 11 countries



Conducted by 202 researchers



Working with about 2100 research participants directly



Engaging over 8000 people so far through their dissemination activities



Led by organisations around the world



15 projects led by organisations in the Global South

11 projects led by organisations in the Global North

Provided over £960,000 in grants



Creating Safer Space (CSS) is a 5-year, £2.25 million international research network, the biggest of its kind so far. We support research on unarmed civilian protection and self-protection amidst violent conflict and aim to strengthen civilian capacities for nonviolent protection and conflict transformation.

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