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Community self-protection and Unarmed Civilian Protection/ Accompaniment (UCP/A): a way to decolonize peace

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Creating Safer Space

Creating Safer Space is an international research and impact collaboration, which aims to understand and support unarmed civilian protection (UCP) and self-protection in the midst of violent conflict. It supports research that explores how violence against civilians can be deterred or prevented by civilians without the use or threat of force.

The Network brings together conflict-affected communities, protection practitioners, academics, policymakers, and artists to jointly work on the vision of enhancing unarmed protection practices, which create safer space for communities and individuals amidst violent conflict, raise their levels of resilience and help prevent displacement.

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Abstract

This research aims to provide insights into the effectiveness and challenges associated with nonviolent strategies, highlighting the importance of self-protection, dialogue, and community-based relationship building as catalysts for sustainable solutions in conflict-ridden scenarios. The document begins with an introductory section outlining peace operations and the concept of Unarmed Civilian Protection and Accompaniment (UCP/A), followed by an exploration of decoloniality as a foundation for self-protection initiatives. Finally, it examines three selected cases of civilian self-protection strategies in South Sudan (Women’s Protection Teams), Burundi (Early Warning-Early Response groups), and Colombia (Arlequín y los Juglares), offering a description of the conflict scenario, the historical context of UCP/A in each case, and concluding with interviews conducted with members of local groups involved in civilian self-protection.

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Acronyms

EAPPI: Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel

ELN: National Liberation Army

EPL: Popular Liberation Army

EWER: Early Warning-Early Response mechanism

FARC: Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia

GPAA: Greater Pibor Administrative Area

NP: Nonviolent Peaceforce

UN: United Nations

PBI: Peace Brigades International

PCC: Colombian Communist Party

SPLA/M: Sudan People’s Liberation Army/ Movement

UCP/A: Unarmed Civilian Protection and Accompaniment

UNMISS: United Nations Mission in South Sudan

WPT: Women’s Protection Team



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Introduction

The research presented in this paper aims to comprehensively examine the dynamics associated with the self-protection of civilians in conflict scenarios, with a specific focus on the practices of unarmed civilian protection/accompaniment (UCP/A). Initially, this approach was predominantly employed by international entities, primarily US or European-based organizations. It was implemented to foster an alternative approach to civilian protection based on nonviolence, capable of safeguarding those who were not effectively protected by means other than depending solely on United Nations (UN) Peacekeeping Operations.

However, organizations engaged in UCP/A, originating from the so-called Global North, have increasingly reevaluated their roles within conflict-ridden societies and recognized the self-protection capacities in communities that already existed. Concurrently, while communities have protected themselves throughout history in certain contexts, resistance and community groups as a whole have naturally emerged to counter the violence inflicted by the warring factions using nonviolent means, thereby creating avenues for what can be referred to as “self-protection of civilians”. Although this term lacks a singular definition, it encompasses actions that are fundamentally rooted in local communities, even if they maintain connections with international organizations.

This perspective on the interplay between civilians, protection, and direct violence remains largely unexplored, particularly when coupled with existing ideas within the field of UCP/A. There is sometimes a tendency to view individuals in conflict regions solely as helpless victims in need of salvation by external actors. However, in practice, it becomes evident that local populations can and do indeed forge

pathways for self-protection. While these initiatives may not possess the intention or capability to entirely transform the conflict, they play a crucial role in ensuring the survival of civilians in the area.

Methodologically, this research will employ a qualitative analysis approach, examining three cases: Burundi, South Sudan, and Colombia. In this sense, they will serve as: “a phenomenon, or an event, chosen, conceptualized and empirically analyzed as a manifestation of a broader class of phenomena or events” (Keating and Porta: 2008, p. 226). The text aims to shed light on the effectiveness and challenges associated with nonviolent strategies, underscoring the significance of community-based self-protection, dialogue, and relationship-building as catalysts for sustainable solutions in conflict-ridden scenarios. The structure of the paper will encompass an initial section that delineates peace operations and the concept of UCP/A, followed by an exploration of decoloniality as a foundation for self-protection initiatives. Lastly, the paper will delve into the selected cases, providing a description of the conflict scenario, the historical context of UCP/A in each case, and concluding with interviews conducted with members of local groups involved in civilian self-protection.



UCP/A and peacekeeping: decolonizing peace

UN Peacekeeping Operations

During the early stages of the 1950s, efforts to ensure peace in unstable or conflicting scenarios primarily centered on peacekeeping operations. These operations involved the deployment of UN military forces to monitor ceasefires and facilitate troop withdrawals, creating a buffer between countries in volatile situations. The focus during this period was predominantly on managing inter-country relations rather than addressing internal state dynamics. These actions were governed by specific requirements, including the necessity for external actors to be impartial, obtaining consent from involved parties, and resorting to the use of force solely in cases of self-defense against direct aggression. The objective of these operations was containment rather than the resolution of sources of international instability (Newman et al., 2009).

The conclusion of the Cold War marked a transformative phase for peacekeeping operations, which gained heightened significance as a central approach embraced by multilateral institutions. Contrary to the initial generation, the second generation of these interventions prioritized addressing intrastate conflicts. As a response to the emergence of multiple civil wars, the UN deployed troops and intervened in various countries. This evolution has reshaped the nature of activities within peace operations, necessitating the involvement of a broader spectrum of actors (Newman et al., 2009).

One notable document from the 1990s contributed significantly to the establishment of the peacekeeping framework within the United Nations: the Agenda for Peace in 1992,

which became closely intertwined with the liberal peace. Its strategies were closely aligned with the objectives of fostering democratization and facilitating the expansion of market economies in conflict-affected countries (Paris, 2004).

Another pivotal reference point is the release of the Brahimi Report in 2000. This influential report recognized the paramount importance of adopting a broader approach to conflict resolution for the successful execution of peacekeeping missions. It emphasized the necessity of addressing the underlying causes of conflict, promoting human development, and enhancing security. In essence, the Brahimi Report underscored the significance of embracing a comprehensive approach that surpasses conventional peacekeeping measures.

Despite the inclusion of additional actors beyond states and international organizations, and efforts to cultivate an approach that guides peacekeepers toward a deeper engagement with local contexts, significant mistakes have persisted and critical aspects have been consistently overlooked. There is a culture among international interventions that undervalues local knowledge. This kind of attitude makes it very difficult to work with local people. Autessere (2014) provides evidence that prioritizing broad thematic knowledge and technical expertise over understanding of local contexts and country-specific experiences is one of the main reasons why international peacebuilding efforts often fail. This can extend beyond UN peacekeeping operations to include civilian protection initiatives, such as the UCP/A implemented by Western-based NGOs.

UCP/A

Throughout history, individuals worldwide have engaged in self-protection using both violent and nonviolent methods. In more recent times, particularly since the 1980s, a distinct form of protection has emerged, where international actors are involved in safeguarding local populations through nonviolent means. This development originated from initiatives aimed at establishing peace armies or peace forces –in some cases inspired by Gandhi’s call for a *Shanti Sena*, a peace army.

In this context, the concept of UCP/A has surfaced as an alternative methodology and practice to alleviate violence and safeguard vulnerable communities within conflict zones. This approach draws on principles of nonviolence, prioritizes the involvement of local stakeholders, underscores the importance of independence and direct protection. Accompaniment, as a specific facet of UCP, involves physically being present alongside individuals or communities facing threats. This presence serves either as a deterrent or to provide a heightened sense of security. In other words, UCP/A:

[...] is executed without the use of weapons. It focuses on the building of relationships rather than the employment of power, and it seeks to achieve three goals: the direct protection of civilians, the prevention of violence, and the strengthening of local peace infrastructures. This approach is diametrically opposed to the classical militarized approach which involves either providing arms in conflict zones to moderate proxies whose behavior can be very unpredictable, or relying on armed threat for deterrence as is the case in many UN peacekeeping missions (Jelínková, 2017, p.16).

Numerous UCP/A strategies have been effectively implemented in various conflict scenarios, including the Philippines, Sri Lanka, South Sudan, Colombia, Guatemala, and other locations. For many years, ever since the first UCP/A programs were initiated, it was customary for protectors to hail from foreign countries and engage in interventions within conflict-affected communities. It is important to emphasize that this does not necessarily mean that the protectors were exclusively from the Global North. However, in general, due to the establishment and headquarters of many of these organizations, such as Peace Brigades International (PBI), Nonviolent Peaceforce (NP), Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Israel and Palestine (EAPPI), and others, in developed countries, the concept of protection often became synonymous with international forces predominantly comprised of Western protectors.

This originates from a widely held notion, perpetuated for years in both theory and practice within what is often referred to as the “peace industry,” which depicts civilians as powerless victims in the face of direct violence.

Many studies suggest that civilians do not possess significant options in times of war, portraying them as little more than victims. But civilians do, in fact, possess a handful of small yet significant options through which they may be able to survive and perhaps prosper in times of war. Civilian strategies may even shape armed groups and the course of violent conflicts (Bonwick, 2006, p. 274)

Nonetheless in numerous cases where UCP/A has been implemented by local actors, comparable outcomes have been achieved as in situations where external parties led the process. This observation is reinforced by the underlying principle that inspired the concept of non-violent protection, which draws upon



the practice of nonviolent resistance developed by Mahatma Gandhi.

The rationale behind nonviolent resistance originates from an intersubjective comprehension of political power, wherein it is not perceived as a material attribute exclusive to certain individuals occupying positions of authority. As a result, even those who find themselves marginalized within the system actively contribute to its operation. Given the complex interplay between oppressors and the oppressed, empowering local groups to spearhead protection initiatives can yield superior results. By placing local communities at the forefront, the dynamics of nonviolent resistance are leveraged more effectively, allowing for a greater impact in safeguarding rights and challenging oppressive systems.

Decolonizing UCP/A: civilian self-protection

The methodologies and knowledge generation within the realm of peace studies adhere to a comparable rationale as observed in the field of International Relations, with a particular emphasis on the significance of classical ideologies. This holds particularly true when examining the intricate interplay between war and peace. Nevertheless, within the realm of peace studies, the liberal perspective has come to dominate the scientific discourse, effectively lending support to the UN peace initiatives. Consequently many *modus operandi* were transferred to all organizations that were somehow involved with peacebuilding, conflict transformation or, in this specific case, with UCP/A

Nonetheless, as the studies progressed, alternative viewpoints began to emerge, advocating for distinct perspectives. One such perspective is the decolonial approach, which endeavors to explore fresh avenues for understanding power dynamics that impede self-determination. It thereby challenges the rationalist, humanist, and other universalist

paradigms that posit Europe as the repository of ideal rationality and morality. Furthermore, within the current dynamic, decolonial ideas serve to expose the persistent presence of dominance by developed nations that continue to perpetuate the vestiges of colonial influence. To elucidate this ongoing continuity, a differentiation is made between the terms colonialism and coloniality.

As per Quijano (1992, p.14), the initial term, colonialism, pertains to the historical reality itself, which is evidently of an older nature. In contrast, the second term, coloniality, is linked to the concept of a continuous process, signifying its role as the underlying foundation for the entire extant system in the present. “Coloniality survives colonialism. It is kept alive in books, in academic performance criteria, in cultural standards, in common sense, in people’s self-image, in aspirations of the self, and in so many other aspects of our modern experience” (Azarmandi, 2018, p. 720).

Understanding peace through the lens of decolonization allows for an analysis of how knowledge on this topic is constructed and the practices that emerge around it. Decolonial theory “[...] differs from other postcolonial critical theories by its focus on the global South and by identifying mechanisms of subordination and marginalization in Eurocentric scientific and political worldviews” (Rodríguez and Inturias, 2018, p. 92).

It is a matter of breaking with previously established roles and relieving developed countries of their responsibility as saviors. In this sense, it is understood that “the idea of how we, the global North, can stand by while they, the South, starve or kill each other [...] stems from a civilizational mission structure [...]” (Fontan, 2019, p. 113). Hence, it is crucial to question the role played by organizations originating from the global North that engage in various peacebuilding initiatives outside their

own territories, particularly in marginalized countries.

On the contrary, it is crucial to recognize the underlying causes while also acknowledging that the pathways to protection and, ultimately, peace can be discovered within the unique context of each community. It is important to understand that the concept of 'peace' itself varies across different cultures, individuals or groups. The supposedly universal perspective of peace, often seen as the objective of much of this work, is inherently influenced by colonial perspectives.

In this context, the strengthening of community self-protection initiatives holds great significance. Apart from providing unarmed protection, these initiatives can effectively challenge and transform power dynamics, knowledge systems, and practices. By reclaiming or reinforcing agency and knowledge, local communities can actively shape narratives, values, and approaches to peace, thereby confronting the historical legacies of external interventions.

Communities directly affected by conflict often possess profound knowledge of the underlying contexts, histories, and cultures that may not be readily apparent. By taking the lead in developing UCP initiatives, communities can utilize and prioritize their own systems. This not only fosters the recognition and validation of local wisdom as a legitimate means of promoting peace but also allows for the reclamation and revitalization of traditional approaches that have been marginalized or suppressed due to colonial influences. These approaches may include restorative justice, community dialogues, customary dispute resolution mechanisms, or other self-protective practices. Moreover, such initiatives foster self-determination, and the creation of vital networks.

In addition, it also challenges the dominance and dependency on external actors in peacebuilding. By assuming leadership roles, communities assert their autonomy and reduce reliance on external assistance. Local communities can advocate for equitable partnerships and decision-making processes, emphasizing the engagement of diverse community members, including marginalized groups such as women, youth, and indigenous communities.

To gain a comprehensive understanding of these dynamics, this study will focus on three case studies of community self-protection within different conflict scenarios: South Sudan, Burundi, and Colombia. The structure of the study will involve a historical approach to describe these cases, followed by interviews with community members involved in self-protection initiatives to ensure security and peace in their respective regions.





South Sudan

Civil War in South Sudan

South Sudan gained independence in 2011 after a decades-long civil war. However, the euphoria of that moment was short-lived, ending in December 2013, when an internal political dispute between South Sudan's president, Salva Kiir, and the then vice-president, Riek Machar, exploded into a long conflict that was premised on the ethnic cause. The United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) was initially established for a period of one year from 9 July 2011, which was preceded by the UN Mission in Sudan that began in 2005. One of the key initiatives undertaken by the organization was the establishment of the Protection of Civilians mandate.

The root causes of the Civil War in South Sudan can be traced back to a historical context. In 1955, even before Sudan gained independence, the first civil war erupted due to the lack of representation in the central government and a sense of discrimination among the southern Sudanese population. This led to the emergence of a military movement in southern Sudan. Various factors, including the lasting influence of colonial heritage, contributed to the disparity and division between the country's two main ethnic and religious groups (Sharkey, 2012).

Following nearly fifty years of conflict and numerous attempts at dialogue, the Government of Sudan and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLA/M) signed the Comprehensive Peace Agreement in January 2005, marking a significant political milestone in Sudan's history and signaling the end of the second civil war in the country (Ahmad,

2010). The agreement aimed to establish power-sharing arrangements in the political, economic, and security spheres.

South Sudan's referendum of independence in July 2011 marked the end of the peace agreement and led to the appointment of Salva Kiir, a member of the Dinka ethnic group, as the first president of South Sudan. Riek Machar, a member of the Nuer ethnic group, became the vice president, and the SPLA/M was designated as the official army of the country (LeRich and Arnold, 2012). Ideally, the transition to an independent nation would have eased tensions between the two regions. However, several factors, including ethnic and cultural disputes, governance challenges, natural resource disputes, and the desire for self-determination, have continued to fuel the years-long civil war.

The civil war in South Sudan, which reignited in 2013, originated from a power struggle between President Salva Kiir, belonging to the Dinka ethnic group, and his vice president, Riek Machar, who is from the Nuer ethnic group. This rivalry escalated into a nationwide conflict, dividing the South Sudanese army into two factions. Santos (2019) explains that one faction consisted of Dinka soldiers from the SPLA/M, the regular army of South Sudan, while the other faction was composed of Nuer soldiers led by Machar.¹

In the capital city of Juba, evidence of ethnic cleansing perpetrated by SPLA members against Nuer military personnel and civilians emerged. The escalation of violence in the city led to an extremely insecure situation, prompting UNMISS to operate in a hostile

¹ It is well known that these two groups are not the only ones who contribute to the conflictive scenario in South Sudan, but for the purposes of this research, we are using this simplification, since we don't have the space to go deeper into the description of all of those aspects.

environment. This situation even necessitated the evacuation of civilians from the mission and humanitarian agencies. The hostilities spread to other parts of the country, particularly in the northeast, where the population is predominantly Nuer and rebel forces had established positions. As a result, a significant number of Nuer individuals sought refuge within UNMISS bases in Juba and other cities such as Bor, Bentiu, and Malakal.

The civil war in South Sudan has had a devastating impact on the population, resulting in mass displacement, loss of lives, infrastructure destruction, and severe human rights violations. The complexity and delicacy of the situation have required substantial efforts from the international community to seek a peaceful resolution and ensure the safety and well-being of the affected population. However, the actions taken by UNMISS have not yielded the desired level of effectiveness.

As pointed out by Rahman and others (2022), “the loyalty of the majority of Dinka ethnic group members in the South Sudanese military force to President Kiir, coupled with the army defectors and allied militias loyal to Machar, has further exacerbated the plight of civilians. In essence, regardless of their ethnicity, whether Dinka, Nuer, or belonging to any other ethnic group, the lives of civilians have been at stake” (p. 104). Considering this issue, we will analyze the entry of the United Nations into the conflict, its actions, and finally, the actions of the NP.

The UN entry (UNMISS)

Primarily, the relationship between civilians and the UN has been built on a vertical approach, where their treatment by the mission has created difficulties in building a peaceful relationship, since the organization continues with the defining concepts of peacekeeping based on military movements of mission members seconded from other countries, which often exclude the ethnic, cultural and

historical context of the country in which they will be operating.

Also, there is a relationship due to the length of time UNMISS has been operating, where there are many civilian members of the mission, working on economic, governance, and education. The South Sudanese parliament is predominantly composed of members from the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement (SPLM). Additionally, the SPLM holds sway over nine out of the ten state governorship positions within the nation, underscoring its significant influence over the majority of government institutions (Young 2019). In South Sudan, for Richmond and Ginty (2022), the difficulty started from the number of civilians in the UN and the exclusion of non-member civilians, creating procedures that generated for the South Sudanese the instantaneous ineffectiveness that was necessary for their security.

This ineffectiveness is the result of a long process of UNMISS action, since the first peace treaty in 2005. Their presence, by which it is meant: armed presence, has made the deployment of armed military troops, such as UNMISS, increasingly escalate the violence. The presence of armed troops can cause fear among local people, making them vulnerable to attack. Furthermore, the fact that troops are armed can lead local residents to take the law into their own hands, as Kaplan (2015) argues. The presence of armed actors also attracts “opportunists” seeking personal gain. These opportunists are not only found among the rebels and paramilitary groups, but can also be identified within the military and peacekeeping forces.

The United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) was reformed by the United Nations Security Council, suspending its mandate for a period due to the violence perpetrated by both the mission’s military personnel and rebel army



members against the civilian population. The mandate of UNMISS, which initially focused on capacity building, was transformed and replaced, with a new focus on the protection of civilians. This measure was taken to dispel the perception that UNMISS was supporting a government involved in violent acts against its own population, as well as being one of the parties involved in the conflict (Sharland and Gorur, 2015).

Given this context, the party of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM), which led the opposition to Sudan during the fight for independence and managed the transitional period established by the peace agreement, was elected to govern South Sudan. Due to the attacks between opposing groups, many civilians sought refuge in United Nations Peacekeeping facilities, leading to the creation of Protection of Civilians Sites. In September 2015, a peace agreement was ratified, establishing a transition period leading up to the elections, which were supposed to happen in 2018.² The aim of this agreement was to address the issues within the State and the Comprehensive Peace Agreement, as well as restore the population's trust in their leaders and the political system. However, there were frequent reports of violations of the agreement. Both parties continued to vie for power, raising doubts about their commitment to peace.

Considering the UNMISS's continued presence in South Sudan and ongoing reports of violence against the population, actions to protect civilians were established beyond the protection provided by the UN. The entry of the NP, with the objective of implementing the UCP, yielded positive results aligned with the organization's goals, as well as establishing

protective logistics for the South Sudanese citizens.

The entry of the NP and the formation of the UCP groups

As peacebuilding organizations have used military and exclusionary methods, it is alleged that the inclusion of the population and non-armed peacebuilders would be effective in the case of South Sudan, as in 2003 in Sri Lanka, as reported by NP. From this assertion, NP has implemented UCP programming in first in southern Sudan and then in South Sudan since 2010.³ With the escalation of the conflict — and an understanding of the aspects in which the UNMISS operation had failed — NP defined strategies that included the use of Women's Protection Teams (WPTs) for peace and security in their communities to somewhat dissuade those specifically involved in gender-based violence (GBV).

Recognizing the gaps in the effectiveness of UNMISS's interaction with the South Sudanese population and the persistence of GBV, NP decided to adopt alternative strategies to transform the experience in South Sudan. The decision to deploy WPTs stemmed from the numerous cases of community-level violence, particularly the high incidence of GBV reported among women and girls in conflict-affected areas. This research aims to demonstrate, through interviews with the protection teams, their perspectives on the effectiveness of NP's actions, as well as exploring their experiences in relation to the conflict and their motivations for adopting nonviolent approaches within the region.

Furthermore, initiatives such as the Early Warning-Early Response (EWER) mechanism,

2 The elections had been postponed several times and has been scheduled to 2024. "Since there was no chance that the transitional government would implement the preconditions for conducting elections, [...] the R-ARCSS signatories, on 4 August 2022, agreed on an extension of the transitional period by 24 months to February 2025. National elections are now scheduled for December 2024". (Deng et al., 2022, p. 2).

3 NP began the project to address conflicts at the community level that preceded the 2013 new conflicts.

as highlighted by Shaw (2014), played a crucial role in providing civilians with the means to evacuate attack zones and seek refuge, thus minimizing the risk of being relocated to unfamiliar and potentially unsafe areas. NP has responded to the conflict in South Sudan by employing protection strategies that effectively prevent violence through active engagement with local actors. These strategies include the WPTs, the Weapons-Free Zone, the EWER mechanism, and the NP Mobile Team. By implementing these measures, NP has been able to include the local population in the peacekeeping process.

According to the analysis conducted on Community Violence Reduction in central-southern Jonglei and the Greater Pibor Administrative Area (GPAA) between January 2021 and December 31, 2022, the NP project in GPAA and Akobo has made significant strides. During this period the project successfully reached a total of 6536 beneficiaries, demonstrating tangible progress in its efforts. The “Community Violence Reduction in central-southern Jonglei and the Greater” Report says that efforts have been made to respond effectively to conflict shocks and mitigate their impact in various communities. NP, in collaboration with various stakeholders interested in peacebuilding, has established mechanisms such as Youth Protection Teams, WPTs, and EWER mechanisms in Central Jonglei. These initiatives aim to reduce intracommunal violence, enhance social cohesion through intergenerational dialogues, and resolve conflicts successfully. Additionally, the Peace committee’s efforts have contributed to conflict resolution and a decrease in reported violence in affected regions, highlighting a holistic approach to conflict management and peace promotion.

Also, NP’s program in the GPAA and Akobo

County has played a significant role in reducing violence and enhancing civilian safety. In Walgak, they established a civilian weapons-free zone to address intracommunal violence and revenge killings. NP introduced an inclusive conflict resolution methodology, improving community understanding of conflict dynamics and empowering them to resolve disputes non-violently; They also effectively managed information related to potential intercommunal mobilizations, preventing conflicts between various ethnic groups in the region. Overall, NP’s proactive approach has contributed to increased security and peace in the GPAA and Akobo West (Nonviolent Peaceforce, 2023).

In 2024 the team conducted intergenerational dialogues to strengthen social cohesion in Greater Akobo (Nonviolent Peaceforce, 2024). The Pibor team, in collaboration with peace partners, has achieved significant milestones, including the successful Wuno mission⁴ in partnership with Peace Canal and partial support from VSF-G. Furthermore, in collaboration with DT-Global (Shejeh Salam), NP facilitated the Akobo women’s peace conference, fostering inter-cultural exchange between women representatives of the Murle and the Lou Nuer.

Understanding that NP’s action in the Greater Pibor Administrative Area was driven by issues that tapped into gender perspectives, where inequalities reinforced by gender roles and norms practiced for decades inside communities, manifested in gender-based forms of violence, such as the lack of representation of women in politics, forced marriages and the behavioral standardization of men. As a result of this lack of representation in one of the main institutions of the community and as part of efforts to increase women’s participation in peacebuilding

⁴ Wuno mission was a conducted protection assessment that led to a scoping mission by Access Working Group (UN Multi-Partner Trust Fund, 2022.)



processes (the structural basis of the organization) and development opportunities, NP initiated advocacy with local authorities, using meetings and other discussion spaces to highlight the importance of women's inclusion and representation in these institutions.

In addition, NP provided members of the WPTs with training on a range of topics that primarily involved peacebuilding and peacekeeping. Key leaders of the WPTs have been able to conduct women-focused conferences addressing important issues such as conflict resolution and mediation specific to the Greater Pibor Administrative Area (GPAA). In the process of compiling the reports on NP's activities, Mama Awa, a member of the WPT in 2022, became part of the traditional court in Pibor. She reported how NP's influence led to the decision of her inclusion: "They know that I am a strong woman. They have seen me throughout the community speaking about GBV, and we used to walk in the market and community, encouraging the youth to live in peace. You know, NP provided us with training in leadership, GBV, and all those things, and remember that I was leading the women during NP's conference here in Akobo, where we wanted to address violence between communities. So, as a WPT member here in Pibor, they know that I am strong, and they are looking for good people, that's why they chose me".

Interview with WPT in South Sudan

Bentiu Field site

Catarina: What group are you part of? Why did you become a part of this group and what do you do inside of it?

Mary Nyabura: I'm part of the ICC Group, but this ICC group is from the church. There are women from different churches, so they came together and then they formed the interchange committee, but the group is for

women. The reason why I decided to join is that I realized there were a lot of problems and then I was interested on how to support and also protect the community. I knew I would not do it unless I become one of the WPTs. In this way my voice also could also be heard so that I could address the existing protection concerns in my community.

Catarina: Well, thank you. And are supported by other groups? Is there any other group that work together?

Mary Nyabura: We work together with ICC, the church committee. So, we came from different churches.

Catarina: And did you receive any kind of training before starting to work with WPTs?

Mary Nyabura: Yes, we first started receiving training in the ICC on how to work on social cohesion, on how to coexist. And then also, with NP, we received many trainings before becoming WPTs, including nonviolent communication.

Catarina: Okay, thank you. What do you think is the basis or the reason, you can provide protection to others in your own community? How do you get that to happen? And why do you think people listen to you?

Mary Nyabura: Usually, you know, inside the community when there is a fight between women, men don't get involved. So that one was a challenge because the violence continued, and then now especially among women since they were the majority. Then there is no peaceful resolution of the conflict. So, we thought maybe we can accept in so that we will understand one another when we understand the problem, women are facing and how also to solve the issue. So that was the main reason. One of the main reasons that we, we decided to provide this protection because there was a gap actually. Women also need to talk to other women.

Catarina: Okay, so you do this work only with women or also with men?

Mary Nyabura: We have actually many who are working with us, those who are followers, who are part of the gender champions. We work with them. We invited also men to form a team that they can also work with us so that when men see us, they will not ignore us, as they will know that there are men who standing also beside us.

Catarina: Okay, so, how did you get the men to not ignore you? How did you get them to pay attention to what you did?

Mary Nyabura: So, first instead of talking to the man, we started talking with the women. Advising the women about what is good and what is not. We talk with women so that they can like help their husbands also to understand our work better. Now when we talk to men, they know that we're only there to support them, both men and women in the community. So, the reason that they listen to us is because we use nonviolent communication with them.

Catarina: And you were saying that you started working with different churches, right? So, do you think that helped also because you had like the support from religious people around the area?

Mary Nyabura: Yes, are they helped us to be more influential, because we come from different churches like Presbyterian and Catholic, among others, and our leaders have helped, they have entrusted power and thought us how to speak in front of people. This also has helped people to understand our work and respect us in the community. And also become very influential. When we say that something is wrong, they just leave it. So, this is one of our treasures also, that we are from the church. You know, in the church, they teach us in many ways, even including trauma healing and peaceful conflict resolution and all these

good things like NP does too. So, churches also empower us with these non-violent techniques.

Catarina: Oh, that's great. And do you have some examples, maybe one or two that you could share with me about when your team was able to stop some violence to happen?

Mary Nyabura: One example happened earlier this year. So, what happened was that there were two men who almost fought. When we heard this from the community members, that there was a fighting almost occurring, we went to them and started talking to them, saying that violence is not good. That they could understand each other as man. Because if they fight, one person could be injured. And the other person, could go to jail. So, we would be losing both of them because of this conflict. So, we said: "what will remain in the community? Because you are very important in the community, both of you". So, at that time they said okay and that the community was lucky because they had the WPTs. After, the WPTs were going to the same house again and again, because we told them that we were not going away from there until we made sure that they had solved the conflict peacefully and were able to go back to the normal way. Now, the two men they gave up on fighting and they appreciate the WPTs for standing with them. They said the WPTs were mothers before they became part of the peace team, so they were able to listen to us. I take this as an example that NP has truly empowered me to be who I am and to be able to stand and resolve conflicts also.

Catarina: That's amazing. Do you think that being elder then the men helped you? Do you think that also empower you to be peace leaders?

Mary Nyabura: Being an elder is not enough in the community so that they can listen to you. Because there are some elderly people who also influence badly on fighting or killing



in our communities. But being empowered elder person is also more important and that is the reason why they listen to us. Yes, the age matters. But if you are elder and what you are doing do not corresponds, then, the age will only be number. So, I think yes, I'm older, they can listen to me because of the age of but also because I'm influential. I got training and I'm in power, I'm doing many things for the community, for example, when they see them there is fighting somewhere even between kids. So, it's because they know that we are not violent. Like we advocate for peaceful coexistence in the community.

Catarina: Okay, thank you and about the organizational part. Do you make patrols or some kind of EWER?

Mary Nyabura: Yes, we have different groups. Actually, we have eight groups of different WPTs. We divided ourselves according to the sectors because they are very big areas. So, each people who are staying in that sector, they form a team so that they respond to protection there. We do patrol every morning. We go for patrol so that we are able to identify the issues and, for example, once they were patrolling and then they found many kids who were playing on a lake. We told them that it might not be healthy for them, because they might get drowning or even, can have some waterborne diseases. Also, we work with early warnings of every problem that happens in the community. And this we do it also through the patrols because if we stay at home without going outside, we won't know what's happening outside. So, what we do as teams early, every morning around seven or eight, is that each team go around that block. In this way we detect problems early enough and then we report it to the authorities so that they can do something and help us.

Catarina: Was there some moment that you did something, and it didn't work as you had expected? Or some moment when you were

not able to stop violence to happen?

Mary Nyabura: Something that we are dealing with now and that didn't work, are the actions during the flooding. So, previously, we used to accompany and train women on remote villages and also, we used to do awareness raising in those places. But since the flooding started in 2016 we reduced our activities. Now, when WPTs go visit those remote areas, they face a lot of issues. We cannot do our work as before, because we don't have ways to move in the water. And this is something we're not happy about because where there is need, we cannot access.

And It never actually happened that we went and then people continued fighting. Because we are very famous. When we're close, they just stop the fighting. We became very famous because where there is conflict, we bring peace. So maybe they fight before we arrive, but when we arrive they never continue it.

Mel: The fact that you are very famous now. And that you are able to change conflict. How has that changed you personally?

Mary Nyabura: It changed the way we understand violence. I became more careful not to say any word that will provoke the other person. I live the values of NP also when I'm not wearing these clothes. This means that before you do something you go back to yourself and think "If I say this, how this person is going to hear it and how is that person going to react about it?". So, to be part of WPTs, has also helped preventing conflict in our own houses. Even now when you come to our homes, you find that they're very peaceful homes, because we apply the values that we tell others to apply.

Mel: And have you seen a lot of people coming down from Sudan?

Mary Nyabura: Yes, we have many refugees who came from Sudan and we're expecting more to come. This has also made the protection work

more difficult. Now the protection cannot be done by women alone. Of course, we have Youth Peace Teams, but they are few in number.

Juba Field site

Catarina: The first thing I would like to ask you is what group you are part of? And why did you become a part of this group and what's your function on it?

Mama Sandy: She's working as a Women Peace Team. She's doing protection and also a lot of community engagement.

Catarina: Okay. Did you receive some kind of training to do these activities? How does that work?

Mama Sandy: I've had a lot of capacity-building trainings organized by NP. And those capacity-building trainings help me to go outside to the community who did not have the chance to participate in NP trainings. For this reason, I'm doing most of the awareness work in the community, doing mediation, teaching them about how they can protect themselves and how they can prevent violence.

Mel: Was there anything new that you learned? Or were these things that you already knew? From your life experience.

Mama Sandy: Before I become part of WPTs, I didn't believe in protection or that I could work and protect the community. Because of the conflict that happened with us, I was frustrated and I didn't know even what I could do to have peace of mind. But now since I joined WPTs, I managed to know what I can do. For this reason, I'm also sharing the same message to the rest of the community. Because I can reach out, people, and share with them my experience and those who cannot believe in peace will identify with my story. So, they can also become part of peace or part of the protection teams in the community.

Catarina: Amazing. I have another question. Is there any other group that supports you on your work there?

Mama Sandy: No other group is supporting us. But the community leaders give us approval. They support our work and they love our work. We also count on youth protection teams and the gender champions. Those are the voluntarily groups that are working together, but there's no other agencies who are supporting us apart from NP.

Catarina: Okay. And what do you think is the reason why you can provide protection to others in your own community? Why do people respect you and listen to you inside your community?

Mama Sandy: In the community, everyone knows me, and I used the principle on how to love everyone. People from the community knew me already because I was part of the church. Also, whenever there was a violent situation, I was never involved. I used to respect myself, and I respect other people as well.

And, whenever there is any bad conversation, or that can generate a negative impact in the community, we don't get involved. Another aspect is that we handle things with confidentiality, we don't go and share information of some other people to the rest of the community. In this way people accept our presence and whenever they need help, they look for us.

Catarina: So, I know you work more like with women, right? But do you also work with men and how is that? Do they respect you and listen to you? How is that dynamic happening?

Mama Sandy: At the beginning, it was not easy. But now they listen to us. And during the time, NP has created also the youth protection team and gender champions. So, when I work, whenever we have engagement in the community, we use to have engagement



together with the youth protection team and women. So, the community respect us because we are mothers and whenever they need another person to talk to them, we can count on gender champions. At the beginning we used to be ignored, but now whenever they see us, and they respect us. The gender champions are men, all men, who serve as the role model for the community. They are example by action in the community. They do the gender roles whereby, they don't separate what are men and women duty. They are the ones who coach others, and they protect us against other people. They go to those men who are resistant, they go and talk to them. They explain to them the importance of raising awareness in the school to the upcoming generation, for the young children, so that there will be no division between females and males in the future. So, they're trying their best in the community, and they are important to our work because they legitimate what we do. So, they support us in most of the activities that we used to do in the community.

Catarina: I have one more question. I'd like to know if you have any examples of when your team was able to stop violence and protect people? Maybe one or two examples.

Mama Sandy: Yeah, so one of the scenarios was one of a family which was having a fight. Due to the financial situation. They had six kids and at that time they didn't have any financial support. They didn't have any income. The woman was blaming the husband saying he was the one who was responsible, the head of the family, that was supposed to provide, to give them something to eat, and instead that he was used to go sit and wait for the end of the day. The woman wanted the divorce. She wanted to leave because she said she had nothing to cook for the kids. She said to the husband: "if you are not able to provide for me and for the kids, you're not married anymore, there's nothing I can do in your house".

Four of us, from the WPT, went there, and started talking with the women. We told her that the men should not be the only one to provide. Women can also do something in order to provide. And we said: "Because of the situation your husband is not able to provide, but you can also remember some time back when he was working. He was able to provide for you. He was also able to provide for the kids and you used to put your kid in their school. Then now those are gone, you are complaining. Where's your house? The beautiful house you had, is it not there anymore? You know what brought you to this situation? Don't blame your husband for it. This situation is something that need the union between the two of you. So, then you can be able to think properly on how you can overcome the situation".

We followed this family and this woman for two weeks until the she left the idea of getting a divorce. Two months later, the husband, who had a brother in Australia, was called by the brother and he told him that his kids were suffering and that he had nothing to feed the family, and then the brother sent for him, some money and the guy started the business. So, the guy managed the money and now they got a place for them in Uganda in Uganda town, and they are good. The wife was very happy. She's still our friend and she always thank us because we did not let her leave her family.

Another story I can share is about when we used to do protection in the water points. People used to go and get fresh water in these water points. There was a lot of violence happening to people that were in the line. There was not much water so people used to start fighting, and those fights happened in almost every water point, where they injured themselves. They bite the nose, they bite the ears, lips, most of the fat in the body. And then this become extreme.

Then what we did was that we started to go to

the water point. We talk to them, and divided the water. After a while and until now we don't need to go there anymore. Now, they divide the water, two jerrycan for each and then if the water remains again, they divide between each and then from there they make it to be constantly. Then from there, violence is not happening anymore and even now we have had a reduction in the quantity of water that we receive, but now people don't fight anymore. They appreciate us because there's no cases of violence that woman is fighting in the water point. The community leadership is very happy for what we do to the community. And now what we use to do is only patrolling, but when people see us, we say hi to them. And we also make awareness on it in southwestern.

Catarina: It's just wonderful. I would like to ask one more question: do you receive support from any religious group or have connection with some religious leader?

Mama Sandy: I'm part of a woman groups in the church, so with this group we do charity, visit people who are sick, do contribution with money and visit the prison. And whenever someone is having like, it's not feeling okay, we go and visit that person, or when someone is in a bad financial situation, we help this person. So, members of WPT are also members from the church and we do some things together.

Catarina: Okay, so, about the structure of the group. The WPT do patrols there? Do you have some kind of EWER system? What other methods you use to provide protection?

Mama Sandy: We work closely with the rest of the community leadership. Especially the chiefs. So, whenever we see that violence is arising and the communities are starting to fight, whenever we receive that kind of news, we go and talk to the chiefs. We talk with the chief, they report to them the case, and then the chief will be the one to handle the mediations.

Here there's so many communities and sometimes, the incident can happen between the two communities where they have two different chiefs. So, we report to their two different chiefs and our chief will be the one to go and call the families of those people who are involved in the incident. So, we have this kind of interconnection. We are not only doing it ourselves but also, we are doing it with the help of the rest of the community.

Mel: And what happens when there's a conflict between the chiefs?

Mama Sandy: Most of the time they don't use to have disagreement. But when it happens, when they are not be able to understand each other, they would call a third chief. They come and sit together and then they see. They also can call the council of elders, if they fail to understand each other. These elders are people who are respected in the community. So, people would always listen to their advice.

Catarina: Okay, so you were talking about the elders and the respect they receive because of it. Do you think that your age, and the age of the WPT matters of influence the respect you receive from the others?

Mama Sandy: Yes. Sometimes the leader, can be a young child, but there's always the need for an advisor. Who had experiences in the leadership. Because for us in our culture, we have a huge respect for the elder. At the same time, young people are also respected, they have the right and opportunity to participate because sometimes they can remember something that an elder person will forget. So, we don't just discourage someone because they are young.

Catarina: Yes. Thank you. Oh, I think I have only one last question. If you could give us an example or talk about a moment when the WPT intervention didn't work as you expected. When something went wrong or when conflict



that you were dealing with didn't stop when you arrived?

Mama Sandy: Yes, once there was a conflict happening between a couple. They lived near to my place. She went there to talk to them and stop the fight. But now, they are still angry. They were using abusive words. I tried to stop the woman and also the man. But what I found out was that they were not ready to listen. And then I just took a step back and went back to my place. Until they manage to stop. They were even making me feel bad, I was about to be annoyed. And then I said, instead of being annoyed, it's better for me to go back.

So, I'm able to control everyone and to control all the situations. Sometimes people don't want to dialogue.

Mundri Field site

Catarina: The first question I'd like to ask is which group are you part of? And how did you become part of this group and what do you do inside of the group?

Raile Paul: I joined this group in 2017 when NP came here, and we were trained. Our work is to take this awareness to our community. So that they can understand what is good and what is bad. And if something is coming like which is going to hurt their lives, how are they can protect themselves.

Catarina: So, you told us that you received training from NP. What was about this training?

Raile Paul: Yes. This training is about child protection and nonviolent dialogue within the community.

Mel: Was there anything in the training that was new information? Or were things that you already knew before the training?

Raile Paul: Before NP came, we didn't know any of this. So, it was new for us. But now they've given for us enough knowledge, and we can

share it with the community and to train them or give awareness on what NP has done for us.

Mel: And what was biggest change that the community has made?

Raile Paul: The biggest change which I've seen here in the Mundri is community acceptance. Whenever we go to them, they accept us. And the behaviors which are not good has already changed. So, when they have problems they can be able to solve among themselves in the community. Through the knowledge, which we got from NP.

Catarina: I have another question. What do what do you think is the basis or the reason why you can provide protection to others in your own community? Like why do they respect you? Why do they listen to you?

Raile Paul: They respected us or they listen to us, because the things which we are doing we do together with them they are not harming them. It is in peaceful way, in non-violent way. So they recognize us so much.

Catarina: Do you feel like men also listen to you? How is the relationship happening between women and men?

Raile Paul: Men also understand us as WPTs members. Because in the community the trainings that we do, we do it for both women and men together. So, in the training they understand the awareness and knowledge which we are giving to them. So, they are able to stand with us, listen to us and support us.

Mel: I really appreciate your answers. Thank you. Has it been harder? To train the men then women.

Raile Paul: Okay. At our level at the community level. I think it is not difficult. In some communities, because then we have many tribes, yes. But where we are it is not difficult. To train them or to give awareness for them.

Catarina: Thank you. Maybe now you could share with us some examples of when your team was able to stop violence. Like maybe one or two examples.

Raile Paul: The first example, which I can give, it's a personal example. That was a time I was at home and at my neighborhood there was a fighting. But the fight, when I got deep with some questions, it was about lands. I wasn't able to stop that fighting, not until we sit together and we talk about it, like using the NP training on peace dialogue. We talked about it, then we showed the problem and both of them and then, they came back to a normal relationship.

And as a group, together with the WPT members, there were sometimes we intervened in conflicts, especially between wife and husband. Such things, if we hear and as they know us in the community, if things happening in the area, the information can reach us immediately. We shall take off to go, where this fighting. And we reach there, we have a connection. Yes, because they know if we are there with them, you know, nothing can harm them. So, they can accept us and tell us what is wrong. From there we can talk to both sides, so then they can come together and stay as normal.

Mel: That's very interesting, that when you arrive, they know nothing can harm them. Why do you think they know that?

Raile Paul: Because we are very well known inside of the community.

Mel: And what makes you well known?

Raile Paul: Our being close to the community. Because, as a WPT members, we are close to the community, to the chiefs, the community leaders and even government officials and, we are linked to other groups like Youth Peace Group. That's why they can accept us in any area.

Catarina: Okay, I'm curious. You said that you are well known there because you are very close to the community. You think it would be the same if someone from other country would come and do what you do? You think these people could be as close as you are to the community?

Raile Paul: Um, yeah. If the person may be from, if it's from NP, I think it could be. Because she or he won't move alone. We move together because it is teamwork. And people from here could translate the language and explain what they are saying to our community.

Catarina: Thank you. Another question: do you receive some kind of support from any religious group or any kind of group that is connected to religions?

Raile Paul: Yeah, because we have women group which is Mother's union that belongs to church, and they support us. We can do what we do, because we do things together with many other stakeholders.

Catarina: And with the WPTs, do you make patrols? Or some kind of EWER system? What are the methods that you use?

Raile Paul: Yeah, here we use to do patrol. These patrols depend on the information we receive. If we are going this side in the morning we have to ask how is that area this morning. So, if it is safe, then we go. And we have community leaders, like if we need to reach somewhere like in the jungle, we can ask the community leader, the chief in the area. If there's any bad thing happening in that area so that chief is that right person to give you the information. If there's something going wrong, then we can get the information from the chief and then we will protect ourselves. It means we should not go. Then, in those cases we have to come back and report to NP.

Victória: I have a question. I want to know, how do you feel being part of this process? How do



you feel being a leader and doing this thing, which is beautiful?

Raile Paul: I feel very proud of being part of WPT, and very happy because I do these things for my community.

Catarina: It there any time you were not able to provide protection or that you were not able to stop a conflictive situation?

Raile Paul: Every time that there we have someone who is armed, it is very complicated. We cannot go there and do anything, because we cannot risk our lives. So, we take a step back and we do not work when there's armed violence.

Themes extracted from the interviews and important reflections

1. Women report feeling a sense of agency which is extraordinary in a culture where women are often treated like property. Some women had this before becoming WPTs, others after joining the team.
2. Women reported often being connected to a church as basis for their involvement with WPTs.
3. Training was very important to them.
4. Reasons they are effective include:
 - a. Visibility
 - b. They are nonviolent
 - c. They are close to the community. People know them and they know the community.
 - d. They have ongoing presence.
 - e. People trust them: "They know if we are there with then nothing can harm them. They accept and tell us what's wrong".
 - f. They are elders but that alone doesn't always work.

g. Status: "Because we are famous, when we are close, they just stop fighting".

5. They focus on domestic and community-based violence: "Doesn't worked when armed violence".
6. They do prevention, dialogue, mediation, conflict resolution, patrolling.
7. One important reflection that we were able to make was about the importance of the presence of an external organization. In this case, NP was responsible to present to them nonviolent tools, so they could work with their own community. This means that providing the knowledge and letting the community act in a self-protection logic can be the best way to work with UCP/A in a decolonial way.



Burundi

A summary of armed conflicts in Burundi

The historical records of Burundi do not contain any substantial accounts of ethnic strife prior to the colonization of the country in the late 19th century. Instead, during the pre-colonial era, the nation is depicted as having a well-organized, centralized, and robust structure, with authority vested in a secular monarchy whose control was generally unchallenged throughout the land.

The kingdom of Burundi enjoyed a position of considerable strength among the kingdoms in the African Great Lakes region for many centuries. This is exemplified by the military defeat inflicted upon an army of Arab slave traders who entered the country in 1884 in search of slaves, thereby distinguishing Burundi from other kingdoms in the region that fell victim to the slave trade. However, in the late 19th century, it transitioned into a German colony until the conclusion of the First World War, after which it became a Belgian colony (Gahama, 2001).

Consequently, the Belgian colonizers undermined the traditional State to establish their authority in the country. They employed “divide and conquer” policies that eroded the secular identity of the Burundian people, thus undermining the traditional governance system. During this period, rivalries between the two main ethnic groups, the Hutus and the Tutsi, were fomented by the European power, creating an accentuated hostility. The same practice was implemented in Rwanda, which until 1962 was jointly administered with Burundi, the two countries being constituents of the Belgian protectorate of “Ruanda-Urundi”. In the years of Belgian rule, a portion of the Tutsi ethnic group was privileged by the imperial force to occupy administrative positions in the colonial organization. Although Belgium used

local governance structures, colonial practice simplified the complex local system by giving preference to Tutsis and marginalizing the Hutu majority. All this context led to the gradual polarization of the Hutu and Tutsi communities. It created one of the main divisions that would generate numerous internal conflicts in Burundi and Rwanda (Langford, 2005).

The country achieved independence in 1962, and since then, Burundi has witnessed numerous violent conflicts, including a civil war that lasted from 1993 to 2005. The first parliamentary election of the newly independent Kingdom of Burundi resulted in the victory of parties of Hutu origin. However, the monarch Mwami Mwambutsa IV, of Tutsi origin and constitutionally responsible for choosing the Prime Minister, ignored the polls and appointed a Tutsi to the post. Thus began a long period of political instability. In 1966, in response to the attempt to seize power by the Hutus, a coup d'état led by the then captain, and newly sworn in as Prime Minister, Michel Micombero, of the Tutsi ethnic group, was successful and established a republic. Micombero abolished the remaining political parties, establishing one-party rule in the Republic of Burundi. The ten years of Micombero government would be marked by governmental authoritarianism based mainly on the support of the Tutsi ethnic group (Chrétien, 2008).

A couple of decades later, in 1992, Tutsi ministers and soldiers participated in a failed coup d'état attempt to prevent further reforms. That same year, with the support of several countries in the international community, the end of the one-party system was decreed, and the adoption of a constitution with the power vested in a president with a five-year term, with elections scheduled for June 1993. The



general elections of June 1993 resulted in the victory of the candidate Melchior Ndadaye of the Hutu ethnic group, who was immediately assassinated. Based on this event, the civil war began, with violent confrontations between the Hutu and Tutsi communities. Rebel groups and government forces engaged in a protracted conflict that claimed an estimated 300,000 lives (Siegle, 2015; International Crisis Group, 2017). After many attempts to put an end to the war, a peace agreement called the Arusha Accords was signed in 2006.

Despite the formal conclusion of the civil war, Burundi continued to experience sporadic violence and political instability. From 2006 until 2010, the peace agreement was not translated into practice. This led to the return of direct violence episodes, which started with the contentious elections led by President Pierre Nkurunziza's ruling party, exacerbating tensions between the Hutu and Tutsi communities. The opposition boycotted these elections, contributing to a deteriorating political climate.

After this point, following a few years without remarkable situations, the Burundian Crisis erupted again in 2015. President Nkurunziza announced his intention to seek a controversial third term, deemed unconstitutional by the opposition and civil society groups. This declaration sparked widespread protests, a failed coup attempt, and a violent crackdown by security forces. The crisis resulted in a significant loss of life, the displacement of thousands of people, and a severe deterioration in the human rights situation. A constitutional referendum in 2018 allowed President Nkurunziza to potentially extend his rule until 2034, further entrenching divisions within the country. The country has also experienced the presence of rebel groups, particularly in the eastern provinces near the Rwandan border. Notable among these groups are the National Liberation Forces (FLN) and the Red-Tabara

rebel group. Their attacks on government forces have contributed to ongoing instability and further displacement of civilians.

The recurring political violence in Burundi should not be regarded as a series of distinct civil wars. Rather, it stems from the failure or unwillingness of the state and political elites to address the underlying causes of violence since the early years of independence. Violence emerges as a result of asymmetric power struggles between the political elites of the Hutu and Tutsi groups. Each faction seeks to seize control of the state and its resources, as will be discussed in more detail below. The group in power holds a distinct advantage over the other, utilizing all available state resources to suppress its adversary. This pattern of political instability and violence, shielded from accountability, means that each conflict leaves behind numerous aggrieved victims whose grievances remain unaddressed. As each bout of violence feeds into the next, Burundi's political instability can be understood because of one unresolved conflict that manifests itself through cyclic episodes of extreme violence.

UCP in Burundi

Parfaite Natuba's narrative

I'm Parfaite, and I am the national coordinator of the Quaker Peace Network Burundi. The Quaker Peace Network Burundi is a consortium of nine or eight organizations, two of which are international, and six of which are local. We have been involved in election observation since 2005, not only in Burundi but also in other countries such as Kenya and Rwanda. In 2015, Burundi experienced significant violence during the elections, resulting in the displacement of 300,000 people. As the Quaker Peace Network Burundi, we were determined to prevent a recurrence of such violence in the 2020 elections.

Fortunately, in 2017, I had the opportunity to benefit from training in UCP and LAMP (Local

Capacities for Peace) from Selkirk College in Canada. The training took place from January to March 2017, with an online component followed by a two-week face-to-face training in May 2017. During the UCP training, we learned about international organizations that apply these skills, including NP. In November 2018, I attended a workshop on UCP practices in Nairobi, Kenya, organized by the NP. This workshop further inspired me on how we could utilize UCP skills to prevent violence. In November 2019, with support from the NP, a delegation of five people from Burundi, including myself, visited South Sudan to witness firsthand how UCP skills were applied in the field. We visited various locations where the NP was working, such as Bentiu. After the visit, we received training from NP experts in Juba and developed a project titled “Contributing to Violence Prevention and Civilian Protection before, during, and after the 2020 elections in Burundi”. Throughout this process, we had remote coaching from Mel Duncan and Ashlyn Schwaiger from Canada, who was also a teacher at Selkirk College. We had weekly Zoom calls to receive guidance and support. Through connections with Mel and the organization WellSpring Philanthropic Fund in Washington, D.C., we secured funding for our 2020 project implementation in Burundi.

Under the project, we organized trauma healing workshops for 125 participants who represented different political parties and religious backgrounds, including Christians and Muslims. These workshops aimed to facilitate healing and reconciliation among participants who came from communities affected by violence during the 2015 elections. Each community had a three-day trauma healing workshop, and afterward, five individuals were chosen as leaders from each community to form EWER teams. The selected individuals attended a three-day training on EWER, facilitated by five trainers who were previously trained in UCP skills. Due to the

COVID-19 pandemic, the original plan for a trainer from the NP to conduct the training in Burundi had to be modified. However, alternative arrangements were made, and we successfully conducted the training ourselves with the support of the NP.

The trained EWER team members then returned to their communities and trained the remaining 20 participants in each community. These EWER teams have been effective in their work. They share information and report on indicators of violence in their communities on a weekly basis. They have been particularly instrumental in providing protective presence and responding to incidents during the election period. For instance, they supported individuals who felt threatened to vote and accompanied them to polling stations.

After the 2020 elections, we were pleased to see a decrease in the number of refugees and internally displaced persons. The EWER teams continue to work on the ground, focusing on addressing GBV, particularly domestic violence. In July 2020, we conducted a field visit to assess their progress and found that they were still actively engaged in their communities. Throughout our journey, we have learned the importance of trauma healing workshops in bringing people together and fostering unity. Participants who initially had differences and came from diverse backgrounds found common ground and started working together to prevent violence. We have also realized the value of including individuals from different political parties within the EWER teams, as it brings positive impact and helps overcome partisanship. Building relationships and connections with local administrations has been crucial to the success of the UCP skills application. The EWER teams have been invited by local administrations to share their learnings and experiences. We have witnessed how a small group can make a significant change when unified and working together within a community.



Thank you for the opportunity to share our experiences. If you have any further questions, feel free to ask.

Interview with Parfaite - Member of Quaker Peace Network Burundi

Catarina: What do you think is the basis or the reason, you can provide protection to others in your own community? Your team seems to be able to protect, or interrupt violence, how does that work? Why do you think people listen to you?

Parfaite: They trust us because, first of all, we focus on building relationships. When they feel that we are not there to repress them but rather to empower them, they become more willing to experience security and peace in their communities. Additionally, they trust us because they see that it's not just one political party involved, but everyone is represented. People from different political parties are part of our team. Moreover, since most of us are youth, we are young people who are often manipulated by politicians. When they witness young individuals advocating for peace and non-violence, it becomes another way to convey the work we are doing. The fact that these younger individuals have changed their behavior, such as a case where one young man was previously manipulated by politicians but now collaborates with young people from a different political party, contributes to the understanding that positive change is happening. This, in turn, encourages support and collaboration with our particular group.

Mel: There is one particular youth group that has been noted for its violence. So, even when your teams meet or confront other youths who are still members of Imbonerakure, do you listen to the young people who are still part of Imbonerakure?

Parfaite: Initially, it was very challenging. I remember one member telling us that they started suspecting him, thinking he was no

longer with them but instead affiliated with the CNR political party. However, with time, they understood that he was more involved in non-violence and bringing about positive change. As they observed us working and bringing together those in conflict, they began to realize the need to join even those who were involved in peacebuilding efforts. It's a process, as some people take time to embrace change and join a group that promotes peace instead of violence. Nevertheless, some have now understood the importance of supporting and working together with the group that is actively engaged in peacebuilding.

Catarina: You talked about EWER. Do you use any other methods, or are these the only ones you employ for self-protection and protecting the community?

Parfaite: Yes, thank you for asking. Along with EWER, we also employ methods like protective presence and protective accompaniment. Protective presence involves being there for individuals who feel threatened, while protective accompaniment applies to victims of GBV. Sometimes we need to accompany them, provide referrals, or accompany them to health centers. We continue to carry out protective accompaniment and protective presence. Even on the day of elections, our teams were present at polling stations, ensuring a protective presence.

Catarina: You have already shared many examples, but if you have one remarkable instance where you successfully prevented violence or averted a potentially violent situation, could you share it with us?

Parfaite: One example that comes to mind is when someone expressed their inability to vote on the day of the election. While sharing our experiences with the Quaker Peace Network called Center What was Happening, I was deeply moved by this individual who believed they wouldn't be able to vote. It resonated with me because in 2005, I couldn't vote as my name was

not found on the voting list. Therefore, I followed up on their case until they were accompanied on the election day and could cast their vote. This was a powerful example that highlighted the importance of ensuring people's right to vote, as voting is a fundamental human right.

Mel: In that case, did one member of the EWER team accompany them, or were there multiple members?

Parfaite: They were accompanied by a team from EWER. It wasn't just one person, but a group of individuals. I don't recall the exact number, but there were more than four people who accompanied them. They were well known in the community for advocating non-violence, and that's why their presence was respected, enabling the individual to vote and return safely.

Catarina: Can you tell us about any initiatives that didn't work as expected or didn't work at all? Why do you think they failed?

Parfaite: On the day of elections, I was involved in the observation process in one community, while Louis Pasteur, who was in a nearby community, was also engaged. When the election results were known, people started claiming that the elections were stolen and approached the polling station in a threatening manner. The police present at the scene fired shots to disperse the crowd, ensuring everyone's safety. This unexpected situation created fear among us, the EWER team, as we believed in protecting ourselves before protecting others. I recall Louis Pasteur running from his location of violence and coming to my polling station to share what was happening. However, members of EWER team from different political parties went and explained to the crowd that the elections were fair. They emphasized that attacking a polling station was not justified. Seeing these representatives of various political parties, people retreated. This incident highlighted the presence and influence we had, as the police

refrained from using their firearms once people backed off. Thankfully, there were no casualties. So, this was an example of an unforeseen event where we faced a situation involving guns. We were relieved that the situation was de-escalated due to our presence. Another aspect we learned from each other before the election monitoring was the need to adhere to COVID-19 restrictions. This helped us keep ourselves safe by avoiding physical contact such as hugging or shaking hands. This is an example of an event that we didn't anticipate, involving the presence of guns. We are glad that our presence played a role in preventing violence and protecting lives.

Mel: Were the individuals from both parties who explained that the elections were fair also part of the EWER team?

Parfaite: Yes, they were part of the EWER team. They were local individuals, whereas Louis Pasteur had come from Bujumura. He was there as their coach, and he wasn't familiar with the local community. He was the first one to realize the need for his own protection. The local actors remained there to help people understand that the elections were fair.

Themes extracted from the interview and important reflections

1. Trust and Relationship Building:

- The significance of building relationships within the community. The trust established through these relationships is foundational to the success of their initiatives.

2. Inclusivity:

- The team's inclusive involves members from different political parties, enhances their credibility.
- The fact that they had youth members on the team challenge stereotypes and showcase the positive influence of young individuals.



Colombia

The Colombian Conflict

According to Pizarro Leongómez (2015), the armed, political, and social conflict in Colombia has its roots in the history of nation-building and its *geological faults*. This latter term serves as a metaphor to understand the major problems of Latin American nation-states. Just as Latin America has an area prone to strong earthquakes in the Pacific, politics is traversed by geological faults that fracture democracies (CEPAL, UNDP, IDB, FLACSO, 1999, p. 22). In the case of Colombia, these faults, also known by some authors as the structural factors that caused the conflict, include: “the agrarian issue, institutional weakness, deep income inequality, the tendency to use both arms and the ballot box simultaneously, or the precarious, and in some cases traumatic, presence of the State in many regions of the national territory” (Pizarro Leongómez, 2015).

In addition to the geological faults, the Truth Commission, established after the Peace Agreement with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia; FARC, by its initial in Spanish) in 2016, identifies other structural forms of violence that exacerbate the conflict: racism, patriarchy, and discrimination based on religion, social class, or political beliefs (Comisión de la Verdad, 2022a). Therefore, the conflict cannot be reduced solely to its armed and violent manifestation; behind it lie numerous political, social, and economic elements that must be addressed to achieve a stable and lasting peace.

The wave of massacres and killings that occurred after the assassination of Gaitán could not be contained by the civilian governments of the Conservative Party. This led General Gustavo Rojas Pinilla to overthrow

Roberto Urdaneta in 1953 and initiate a military dictatorship. His main promise was related to peace, prosperity, and reconciliation. He attempted to regain control through amnesties, social reforms, and the use of military force to combat bandits, guerrillas, and suppress civilians. Finally, after four years, Rojas failed to pacify the country and resigned in 1957 following several civilian protests supported by traditional political parties (Comisión de la Verdad, 2022b, p. 36).

After Rojas Pinilla’s resignation, leaders of the Conservative and Liberal parties reached an agreement aimed at ending political violence. This agreement became known as the “National Front” (Frente Nacional) and initiated a historical period in Colombia bearing the same name. Over the next 16 years, Liberals and Conservatives alternated in the executive branch every four years. This pact served to quell confrontations between party members but excluded other groups and parties aspiring to govern, such as the Colombian Communist Party (PCC, by its initial in Spanish) (Comisión de la Verdad, 2022a, p. 46; Grupo de Memoria Histórica, 2013, pp. 115-118).

The PCC not only was excluded from politics during the National Front but also was banned during Rojas Pinilla’s dictatorship. In response to this and the intensified persecution of communists in Latin America after the Cuban Revolution, in 1961, during its Ninth Congress, the PCC declared it legitimate to seek power through “all forms of fight,” referring to the combination of political and armed struggle. As a result, many groups emerged with the aim of reforming the existing political system: the FARC, the National Liberation Army (Ejército Nacional de Liberación; ELN, by its initial in Spanish) and the Popular Liberation Army (Ejército Popular de Liberación; EPL, by its initial

in Spanish) (Hylton, 2017). Initially, the political aspect was stronger. However, over time, due to their association with drug trafficking and the violence perpetrated against civilians, these groups gradually lost their legitimacy within Colombian society.

As seen so far, Colombia's nation-building has been marked from the beginning by war. However, it has also been a history of continuous peacebuilding efforts and attempts at dialogue between adversaries. During the 19th century, the governments signed many peace agreements and amnesties as a result of civil wars. Subsequently, in 1954, Rojas Pinilla initiated dialogues with the commanders of liberal guerrillas, and some of them laid down their arms (Velandia Jagua, 2021, pp. 83-95).

Following the diversification of the forms of struggle declared by the PCC, multiple left-wing guerrilla groups began to emerge in the 1960s. The State's response was the implementation of the counterinsurgency doctrine of the internal enemy. According to this theory, fueled during the Cold War by the United States and the fight against communism, guerrilla groups were an internal threat to the country's stability. Under this doctrine, the Colombian State promoted counterinsurgency and anti-guerrilla actions, including the militarization of different areas, the excessive use of force, human rights violations, forced displacement, and the stigmatization of civilians who allegedly collaborated with guerrillas (Comisión de la Verdad, 2022b, pp. 95-96. Ahumada, 2007). This last element has had the most significant and ongoing impact on social movements, human rights defenders, and community leaders, as it is assumed that their causes are motivated by alleged ties to guerrilla and/or left-wing groups.

With the advancement of the internal enemy doctrine and the international promotion of the fight against communism by the United States, it became increasingly difficult to

envision a political and negotiated solution to the conflicts with the guerrillas. However, after two decades of military response, the government of Belisario Betancur opened the window to initiate peace talks with left-wing armed groups. As Chernick (1996) points out, although no agreement was ultimately reached during Betancur's presidency, the shift in the State's discourse allowed the recognition of armed opposition as a political actor and initiated a process of democratic opening.

Betancur's successor, Virgilio Barco (1986-1990), established the Office for Reconciliation, Normalization, and Rehabilitation of the Presidency (Consejería para la Reconciliación, Normalización y Rehabilitación de la Presidencia), which sought negotiations with guerrilla groups through disarmament and the civilian reintegration of combatants. The problem with this strategy is that it did not seek to address the geological faults that had led to the formation of insurgent groups. After several dialogues between 1986 and 1989, the M-19, the EPL, and the Quintín Lame disbanded. Many former combatants from these guerrillas entered the political scene and participated in drafting the 1991 Constitution, which is still in force and the result of an extensive national discussion among various civil society actors (Chernick, 1996).

After the failure of peace talks between the government of Andrés Pastrana and the FARC between 1998 and 2002, it was difficult to see new attempts at reconciliation on the horizon. The civilian population and the prevailing climate in the country were skeptical, and there was a push for the state to escalate military action against guerrilla groups. Promising to restore the country's security, Álvaro Uribe Vélez assumed the presidency in 2002. However, during this government, negotiations began with paramilitary groups. Between 2002 and 2005, several agreements were reached, ultimately leading to the Justice



and Peace Law in 2005. This law established a legal framework facilitating the demobilization of paramilitaries in the country. Several groups, including the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia; AUC, by its initials in Spanish), adhered to the law and reintegrated into civilian life (Grajales, 2016).

The last successful peace treaty was signed between the government of Juan Manuel Santos and the FARC guerrilla in 2016. After four years of negotiations, particularly in Havana, the process of disbandment and disarmament of the group began, allowing former combatants to reintegrate into civilian life. One notable aspect of this agreement was the creation of a Comprehensive System of Truth, Justice, Reparation, and Non-Repetition (Sistema Integral de Verdad, Justicia, Reparación y No Repetición), composed of the (Truth Commission Comisión de la Verdad), the Unit for Searching for Persons Presumed to be Disappeared (Unidad de Búsqueda de Personas Dadas por Desaparecidas), and the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (Jurisdicción Especial para la Paz). Through these mechanisms, the truth about the war was expected to be revealed, missing persons were to be found, and penalties were to be imposed with the ultimate aim of restorative justice. Additionally, the agreement included other points related to the political participation of ex-combatants, Rural Integral Reform, the solution to the drug trafficking problem, and verification of the agreement's implementation.

However, it is true that while progress has been made in implementing the agreement, there have been multiple problems related to financing, the political will of different social sectors, public opposition to the signed agreement, government non-compliance with various provisions, and more. The arrival of a new progressive government seeking dialogue

with different armed groups raises the specter of peace agreements that were never realized, such as the Caguán. It also highlights that, despite negotiations, the conflict will persist as long as geological faults and structural problems remain unresolved.

Arlequín y los Juglares (Harlequin and the Jugglers) Corporation and its work in Medellín

Medellín is the second most populous city in Colombia after the capital, Bogotá, with a total population of 2,376,337. It is in northwestern Colombia in the Central Cordillera, in the Aburrá Valley, an inter-Andean valley with a temperate climate and an altitude of 1,480 meters above sea level. The city is divided into 16 districts, which contain 249 neighborhoods. Its rural area consists of five corregimientos (sub-municipal rural districts) and 54 veredas (small rural settlements). The Medellín River is its main source of water and has shaped the city's urban development, along with several streams that flow from the hills into the river (Municipio de Medellín, 2023).

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the city entered a phase of industrial production, driven by Antioquia's thriving coffee economy. Over time, factories and working-class neighborhoods occupied the land of the Aburrá Valley (Vélez Tamayo, 2016; Botero Herrera, 1983). Throughout the 20th century, industrial expansion and increasing rural violence led to rapid urban growth. Municipal authorities allocated land for development, but some people also bought "pirate" plots, while those with no possessions beyond their belongings and clothing occupied various parcels of land (Perfetti del Corral, 1995). By the 1970s, Medellín had grown from a small settlement with Spanish grid streets to a city of over a million inhabitants (DANE, 1973).

Urban conflict in Medellín has been studied by various academics, social organizations, NGOs,

independent researchers, and even the State itself since the 1980s, when three key processes marked the rise of violence in the city: the infiltration of drug trafficking into all aspects of daily life in the Aburrá Valley, the emergence of private justice groups that preceded paramilitarism, and the reorganization of militia groups in different neighborhoods (Dávila, 2016, p. 110).

There are three systematic studies of the armed, political, and social conflict in the city: *Medellín, memorias de una guerra urbana* (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, 2017), *Medellín, tragedia y resurrección* (Martín, 2014), and the *Informe de la Comisión de la Verdad* (2022c) on the city. The information used in this article comes from the Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica (2017), although the other two works provide historically valid and very important perspectives. This study examines the actors involved in violence in Medellín, the types of aggression used, and the responses of civil society, establishing a periodization of the conflict. The first period (1965-1981) marks the emergence of factors that triggered urban violence, including the rise of private justice practices and the increasing visibility of the demands of residents of different neighborhoods. The next period (1982-1994) saw the Medellín cartel at the center of extreme violence, while the so-called “dirty war” turned political beliefs into grounds for persecution and assassination. During this time, the first paramilitary groups emerged, targeting community leaders, while small militias—some independent and others linked to guerrilla groups such as the ELN and FARC—also gained ground. Several scholars argue that Colombia’s armed conflict urbanized during this period, with cities becoming strategic battlegrounds due to their military, economic, and territorial importance.

Between 1995 and 2005, Medellín became a major epicenter of the armed conflict, as both paramilitary and guerrilla groups expanded their urban and rural presence. While some urban militias engaged in peace negotiations, other armed organizations continued to fight, leaving civilians caught in the crossfire. The city witnessed military operations such as Mariscal and Orión, where the collaboration between the armed forces and paramilitary groups revealed a security policy that, instead of protecting citizens, turned the city into a prison for its own inhabitants. In the period that followed (2006-2014), there were negotiations with paramilitary groups, but their territories were soon occupied by new criminal structures. Violence did not disappear, but evolved, with processes of rearmament, murders of community leaders, and the intensification of invisible borders between neighborhoods. GBV also increased, highlighting the differentiated impact of the conflict on different sectors of the population.

Despite the ongoing violence, civil society played an active role in resistance. Through cultural and artistic collectives, social movements, and human rights organizations, residents of different neighborhoods sought strategies of self-protection and denunciation to make the city’s realities more visible. These initiatives not only created temporary safe spaces where the invisible borders imposed by violence were blurred but also promoted the reconstruction of social fabric. Although studies of urban conflict in Medellín have highlighted the work of social movements and human rights defenders, artistic and cultural initiatives have been less explored in the academic literature. For this reason, this study focuses on expanding the understanding of the conflict from a perspective that values these expressions as fundamental tools of resistance and social transformation.



According to the Mayor's Office of Medellín, there are ten Grupos Delictivos Organizados⁵ (Organized Criminal Groups; GDOs), eighty Grupos de Delincuencia Común Organizada (Organized Common Crime Groups; GDCOs), and 196 subgroups in the Aburrá Valley, most of which are subordinate to the GDCOs (Alcaldía de Medellín, 2024, pp. 289-290). However, a study by the EAFIT University and Innovations for Poverty Action (Blattman et al., 2020; Blattman et al., 2023) estimates that approximately 380 combos operate in the city, organized around fifteen to twenty criminal gangs, with a presence in 14 of Medellín's 16 comunas. Only Laureles-Estadio and El Poblado-areas with higher purchasing power do not experience direct territorial control by these groups, although specific criminal activities still take place there. Organized crime in the city has a hierarchical structure in which combos, composed mainly of young people, control defined territories and engage in activities such as extortion, drug trafficking, and conflict resolution. These functions allow them to exercise a form of criminal governance parallel to that of the state. This model allows them to generate income, consolidate their authority, and maintain control over their territories without being denounced by the community.

Since the beginning of the 21st century, organized crime in Medellín has shifted from direct confrontation between armed groups and the state to a dynamic of agreements and pacts that have reduced homicides but not eliminated the presence of these organizations. In 1991, during the Medellín cartel's war against the state, 6,809 homicides were recorded; in 2002, amid clashes between militias and

paramilitaries, the number reached 3,829; and in 2009, following the extradition of leaders of the AUC, another spike in violence occurred. Today, agreements between combos, gangs, and authorities have helped to reduce homicide rates, but they have also allowed illegal activities to continue, consolidating a balance between state governance and criminal control in Medellín's neighborhoods (SISC, 2024).

In this context, Arlequín y los Juglares has been working since 1972, when it was founded by graduates of the Escuela Municipal de Teatro and Teatro El Taller at the University of Antioquia. The collective was born during a period of intense political and social activism marked by the rise of revolutionary movements throughout Latin America, the growth of the labor movement, and massive migration from rural areas to the city. From the beginning, the group took an active role in social transformation, using theater as a tool to denounce injustices and highlight the struggles of the most marginalized sectors of society (Filippini, 2020).

For more than five decades, it has worked alongside social and human rights organizations to strengthen community processes through the arts. Its intercultural and itinerant artistic training school, with a focus on gender equality, human rights and ethnic recognition, has become a key space for rebuilding the social fabric, especially in the context of Colombia's post-peace agreement era. Beyond its theatrical productions, Arlequín y los Juglares has developed civilian self-protection strategies in communities affected by violence, providing training in community organization, collective

5 Grupos Delictivos Organizados (GDO) are criminal structures composed of at least three individuals who operate in a coordinated manner, assigning specific roles to commit various crimes. These groups can have a range of influence from local to transnational levels. In contrast, Grupos de Delincuencia Común Organizada (GDCO) are also made up of three or more individuals, but their activities focus on crimes that affect public security and social coexistence, with the aim of generating economic or material profits. Unlike GDOs, GDCOs have a more limited impact, usually restricted to the neighborhood or local level. As a result, many of these smaller groups may be subordinate to larger-scale criminal organizations (Policía Nacional de Colombia, n.d.).

security, and social resilience. These efforts have enabled communities to build peaceful defense mechanisms against the structural and political violence that continues to persist in the country (Castro Ospina et al., 2017).

From its headquarters in Manrique Central, the society continues its work through spaces such as the Café de Juglarías and its theater, where performances, trainings, and workshops take place. Its work has gone beyond the artistic realm to become a point of reference in the struggle for historical memory and social justice. In a society where repression and forgetting have been used as strategies of control, Arlequín y los Juglares proves that art can be an act of resistance and a tool for transformation (Filippini, 2020).

Interview with Arlequín y los Juglares

Part 1

Adriana: [...] To tell you about the house [where the organization's headquarters are located]. This space has been a theater for many years. In 2018, Arlequín y los Juglares was going to buy a house in Aranjuez, a very beautiful house. We were paying this extremely high rent with the goal of buying it, and we even won a prize from the Ministry of Culture to buy it. On the one hand, we had to secure a loan, and it was approved. But then, when everything was ready, the owner raised the price by 400 million pesos, apparently to avoid selling it. So, we were left without headquarters and had to start looking again. Finally, with a lot of effort, we bought this house with a loan. In December [2019], we started the process, closed the deal at the end of February, and then in March, the pandemic hit. So we were in a tough situation, almost to the point of backing out of the deal [...].

Laura: And did you put on any plays?

Adriana: Well, as soon as we moved in... We spent the whole of last year here [2020], but

since this place was already a theater, another group was renting it. We rented it to them so they could apply for a project with the mayor's office. So, we supported them, and we shared the space, but it was closed for a long time because of the pandemic. So, we haven't really done that much here...

Laura: And when are you going to start again?

Adriana: We're going to open in March [2021].

Laura: Oh! (*surprised*) That's great. Very cool, yes [...].

Adriana: I'm going to show you what it looks like now so you can compare it later when you see it. I just wanted to tell you a little bit about it first. And here it is. Óscar is the founding director of Arlequín y los Juglares and he's been with the group for 49 years.

Laura: And how was Arlequín born?

Adriana: The maestro [teacher] will tell you.

Óscar: It's a very long story.

Adriana: He founded it with two other friends [...]. They were crazy, totally crazy. In the '60s... No...

Óscar: In 1972. It was born in the heat of all the youth revolts that were happening in America and around the world. Why do I say that? Because in 1960 the American continent was shaken by the Cuban Revolution, and the Cuban Revolution became a very important reference for the youth of America and for its people in general. Also, in the 1960s, the Beatles and their music came out, which was a complete break—a very strong break from the traditional music that had been made up to that point.

Adriana: There was a boom.

Óscar: Yeah, there was a boom in a lot of things. In '68 you had the May protests in France, where one of the slogans was: "Be



realistic: demand the impossible”. So, we were asking for the impossible (*laughs*). There were so many things that seemed impossible at the time, but those protests also shook up the whole student movement. I was studying at the University of Antioquia, in one of the many programs I explored before deciding on arts and humanities. Well, humanities, because first I studied anthropology - although before that I studied chemistry... Anyway, at that time all these movements were in full swing.

In Colombia, the artistic and cultural movement was also gaining momentum. For example, we had a municipal theater school that was part of the old Escuela Popular de Arte (EPA)-now it's something else. That school eventually became independent and got an alternative space behind the Pablo Tobón Uribe Theater. So, behind the [Pablo] Tobón Theater, the school operated with very good professors. There was Gilberto Martínez Arango, a cardiologist and theater enthusiast, who at one time was the Secretary of Education and the director and founder of the Escuela de Teatro group. He was also involved in other groups, such as Tinglado.

Then there was Yolanda García Reina, who had graduated from TEC (Experimental Theater of Cali; Teatro Experimental de Cali), Edilberto Gómez Rodríguez, also a graduate of TEC, and Jairo Aníbal Niño, the wonderful poet and playwright of tenderness-he was a professor-along with several other teachers. Well, when I started studying there, some of the students were also very strong at that time, like Luis Carlos Medina, who is now deceased, and José Fernando Velásquez, who founded the Caja Negra (Black Box) theater group. There were intellectuals, researchers, and many people connected to this initiative.

That was in '68 - I studied from '68 to '71 - and just as I was about to graduate, something happened that was very common in Colombia and in Medellín: an administration decided

to close the Escuela Municipal de Teatro. We had already experienced several unpleasant incidents. For example, during a performance at the Pablo Tobón Uribe Theater, a curfew and dry law were suddenly declared in Medellín. We were in the middle of a show when army dump trucks arrived, evacuated the entire audience, and carried us off like sacks of potatoes, throwing us into the trucks and detaining us for a while.

At that time, the Escuela Municipal de Teatro was closed by decree of some politician in office. It was the first theater school in Medellín and had existed for about ten precious years, producing many important things. After that, the professors went their separate ways. Gilberto Martínez went in one direction - somewhere near where El Real Laundry used to be, or where El Suave was. Do you remember that? La Bahía, the bar La Bahía...

Laura: No.

Óscar: La Bahía was a pure salsa bar, or El Suave. That was downtown [in Medellín], on Bolívar Street, a little past where the Prado metro station is now. That whole area had the laundromat, El Suave, La Bahía, and El Oro de Munich. These were three very interesting cafes full of salsa, culture and conversation. Next to El Oro de Munich there was a big garage, I remember, and in it was the headquarters of the Communist Party, as well as the office of Voz Proletaria (Proletarian Voice), a newspaper published by the party that year. Well, Gilberto went to that area and founded Teatro Libre (Free Theater).

Jairo Aníbal concentrated on the National University, where he was a professor. I don't remember where Yolanda García went at that time, and Edilberto Gómez started another initiative with another group. The students of the Escuela Municipal de Teatro (Municipal School of Theater) divided themselves into these different groups, according to affinities

or circumstances. Another group of us went with Edilberto Gómez to San Antonio de Prado, where we founded an organization called the Corporación de Arte Popular y Artesanal (Corporation of Popular and Artisan Art). In this Corporación de Arte Popular, we held workshops in theater, puppetry, music, mime, and crafts—we had a kind of artistic village. We lived in a big, beautiful house, a world of dreaming artists. This project also came to an end because Father Nelson, from the neighborhood of San Antonio de Prado, started a campaign against what he called in his sermons: “The Communist House of Arts and Crafts”. Of course we resisted strongly. He would say this in church, and at night we would put up posters all over the city in response. The next day Father Nelson would come back. And so, it went on - until finally the police started arresting us.

We had a school with about fifty young people from San Antonio de Prado who attended classes in drama, puppetry, and handicrafts. But eventually the situation became unbearable. There’s a funny story about that time. When you’re young, you can be very naive. We would get off the bus on our way home, pass the police station, and they would stop us: “Where are you going? Oh, up there? To that communist house? No, you can’t go up there.” They would search for us. But we decided that we would perform no matter what. I remember one time we made a little puppet theater out of cardboard and wood. We’d leave the house, which was a block and a half uphill from the church, and we’d go up to the atrium of the church and do a show—all of us crammed into that little puppet theater so they wouldn’t recognize us. Not that that made us any less obvious! (*laughs*).

Well, during those difficult times, just before the end of that initiative, three of us got together and decided to form a group. Edilberto and his partner wanted to go to another place; Elkin

Peláez, a sculptor involved in the project, went back to his workshop; Hincapié, a painter from the working class - Arturo Hincapié, who sadly died last year - went his own way; and Alberto Gómez, who was the businessman or the one who kept things going, moved to Santa Marta. That left us behind.

So, it was Humberto Múnera, Óscar Manuel Zuluaga Uribe, and our other companion. I suddenly feel overwhelmed telling this story - it was so many years ago. We got together and decided to form a group. I proposed that we start with a puppet theater company. The other companion was Jorge Mario Álvarez, so it was the three of us. I suggested puppetry because in our previous organization we had worked with poetry, theater, and puppets, and the puppet theater had been particularly successful. We used to travel to the rural areas opposite San Antonio, places like La Verde and El Astillero, and bring puppet shows to share with the farming communities there. I had written a series of scripts called *El mundo del sufrido* (The World of Suffering) in which we told a different story each week based on real community experiences. The project was very well received, so we decided to create a puppet theater company. That’s how the Teatro de Títeres Arlequín (Harlequin Puppet Theater) was born in March 1972. When the Corporación de Arte Popular y Artesanal disbanded and everyone went their separate ways, we regrouped in Medellín and began working with Teatro de Títeres Arlequín.

That’s where the show begins. Our first performance was in the Divino Salvador school, right there in the Salvador neighborhood, behind the Asomadera hill, and then the whole journey and construction of this project began. I could say that the school of the Teatro de Títeres Arlequín were the schools of Medellín and the space of the social and political movement. That is, the strikes, the tents, the congresses, the union headquarters, and all the



schools in the neighborhoods of Medellín. So, if there were, let's say, 3,000 schools in Medellín at that time, at least 2,500 of them were visited by Arlequín. We went to all the schools.

It was a school for our educational, pedagogical and training project. I mean, you develop your voice, you have a strong actor's voice, with projection, and you do a show and everything, but all of that was learned through practice. We would come to the schools in these neighborhoods and after a lot of effort - because it was a long process - we would manage to put on performances. I remember going to the school, talking to the teachers who oversaw arts and cultural activities, and then talking to the principal. They would finally say, "Okay, let's come to an agreement, both for the school and for you". We discussed it, and then we had to go from classroom to classroom, announcing and motivating the children, letting them know that there was going to be a performance by the Teatro de Títeres Arlequín.

Then I went back to college. I had dropped out before, but I re-enrolled in music and studied for two semesters. Later, I applied for the theatre preparatory program because, having left the university without fulfilling the requirements, I had to apply for re-entry, which meant taking a long preparatory course. After completing this program, I took the classification exams, which included a performance piece, a written work, and other tasks. I passed and was admitted directly to the fourth level of acting, where I eventually graduated.

From 1976 to 1981, we moved to Bogotá and established a headquarter in La Candelaria neighborhood. We were able to participate in a television program called Amigos (Friends) on the National Channel. It featured Magda Evans, María Isabel Salazar de Lince, and other personalities, and we worked there producing puppet shows for television, while also performing regularly at our headquarter

in La Candelaria. After a while we returned to Medellín. During this time, we collaborated with Los Juglares and Arlequín, working through three artistic companies: Títeres Arlequín (Arlequín Puppets), Grupo Teatral Los Juglares (Los Juglares Theater Group), and dueto musical Los Juglares (Los Juglares Musical Duo), alongside Teatro Antioqueño. Those were years of exploration and experimentation. When we returned to Medellín, we settled in the facilities of the Olaya Herrera Aeropark, later renamed the Juan Pablo II Aeropark. This was part of an initiative by Metro Parques, and it became one of our main venues. We stayed there from 1985 to 1991, when we were evicted again.

Between 1985 and 1991, we integrated the different projects and groups that we had strengthened and created into a single entity: Grupo Teatral Arlequín y los Juglares. This new formation brought together Teatro de Títeres Arlequín, Teatro Los Juglares, Dueto Los Juglares, Los Trovadores de Cañada Honda, Teatro Antioqueño, and Teatro Los Nuevos Comediantes-different initiatives that we had developed over the years. This consolidation marked the official establishment of our project.

We remained there until 1991, when we were threatened with eviction and had to fight for a new space. After much struggle, the city government finally assigned us a location under the east stand of the Atanasio Girardot stadium. We stayed there from 1991 to 2014 - about 25 years - developing a cultural project for the city. During that time, we faced three or four eviction attempts but always managed to resist and reclaim the space. Around 2016, however, a final eviction took place when an official came to claim that he was going to restructure INDER (the city's sports and recreation institute).

Óscar: What was the name of the guy who was

going to restructure INDER?

Adriana: I don't remember.

Óscar: The one who kicked us out of the artistic area of the stadium.

Adriana: I don't remember... David Mora.

Óscar: David Mora, who was the grandson of Juan Gómez Martínez, the mayor at the time when we got the space under the east stand. And after that, a lot of things happened that you might find in other interviews online. And now here we are, about to celebrate fifty years (*laughs*). Fifty years since the group was founded, but in 1968 I was already in the Escuela Municipal de Teatro, and in 1966 I was doing theater in high school. So that's roughly how Arlequín was founded.

Laura: From the work you've done, how do you interpret the term self-protection? Or what does it mean to you?

Óscar: In the first place, art is a refuge. For those of us who are dedicated to it, art is a refuge amidst all the chaos of the contemporary world, allowing us to focus on certain areas of thought and creation. On a second level, as we develop training and creative processes, communities become a space where people can express and process their tragedies, traumas, and painful experiences. On a third level, through pedagogical theory, we teach people to work on their limitations and recognize their abilities. This expands their thinking and helps them to identify risks, empowering them to stand up to different levels of government and power structures to defend their rights. On a fourth level, artistic and creative processes bring communities together and form a barrier against external forces that seek to harm or weaken them. Well, I don't know - maybe Adriana can share experiences from places like Sincelejo, or from working with other communities in the neighborhoods, in the Chocó, or with indigenous communities.

Adriana: She has several questions, but in terms of the concept, I'd like to add to what Óscar just said, and then we can talk about our experiences. Look, in line with what Óscar said, in violent contexts such as those that our country has experienced in the last fifty years, the same fifty years that the group has existed, there are two key elements. First, as Óscar explained, the group was born and has been maintained for five decades as a theater collective that puts art at the service of communities in all aspects of their lives: organizational, social, cultural, spiritual, and more. Of course, the violence in our country has fostered deep insecurity within these communities - not just a sense of insecurity, but real, painful experiences of fear, both individual and collective. Violence has torn the social fabric, weakened communities, and even damaged cultural aspects of collective identity. For example, when an entire community is forcibly displaced from a place where they have strong ties to the water, the jungle, the forest, or their land - where their sense of belonging is rooted in the collective and the communal - it disrupts their relationship with the territory and nature, with devastating consequences. In this sense, art is healing.

So, when Óscar talked earlier, he was referring to how art itself is healing, how it brings people together and strengthens social bonds by creating opportunities for connection. Another crucial element - one that has been central to Arlequín's experience - is that art fosters essential thinking skills, especially in communities and individuals who have been deeply affected by conflict. Take, for example, the ability to think critically. In countries like ours, communities that have spoken out against their governments have been threatened or even wiped out. In this context, art becomes a tool for strengthening alternative symbolic languages, allowing communities to preserve their critical spirit, their ability to analyze and synthesize, and their means of expressing



resistance. Art sustains collective identity, nurtures creativity, and creates spaces where life can continue despite adversity.

This moment of creativity - for us, the idea of creativity as a form of self-protection - is fundamental. In the pedagogical and aesthetic vision of Arlequín y los Juglares, creativity becomes a tool for transformation. A community at risk due to the social and armed conflict in our country, when given the opportunity to use creativity, can transform its reality and collectively develop ways to protect itself, both individually and as a group. Art makes this possible.

Another key element, as Óscar mentioned, is the recognition of one's own abilities. Arlequín's pedagogical approach encourages individuals and communities to recognize both their collective strengths and weaknesses-not in a pitying way, but in a constructive way. It's about saying, "You're really good at this, but you also have challenges in this area, so let's work on that." Communities also have the capacity for self-awareness and self-protection because they recognize their own strengths and leadership. For example, if we know that one person is excellent with a machete and can clear paths in case of danger, or another has a strong, persuasive voice, or someone else speaks with authority, these are all skills that the arts help to bring to light and develop. Another important aspect is the strengthening of social bonds. Theater, as an artistic discipline, is inherently collective, but it is also holistic. It develops many skills, such as voice projection-the ability to speak in front of an audience, to speak loudly, not shyly, to project your voice. Believe it or not, this is a form of self-protection. Developing these skills is empowering.

Theater also plays a crucial role in preserving memory, both individual and collective. For us, it has been a tool for storytelling and artistic creation, but for communities, it has also

served as a means of catharsis and even a tool for denouncing injustice. For example, when a community creates a timeline of the conflict in their region and presents it through a play, the performance becomes a form of testimony - a way to bear witness, process trauma, and speak out.

Óscar: Or through a stage curtain.

Adriana: Or through a painting, a sculpture, a song, a poem. That's the idea. Arlequín has been working to legitimize these artistic languages in human rights spaces, both nationally and internationally. We're not there yet, but we're making progress. For example, the Truth Commission had to recognize and include art as a legitimate way to present testimony. Art has become a tool of self-protection for victims, collectives and organizations, allowing them to express their experiences and the injustices they've suffered. Before, someone might say, "I'm going to sing a song because I can't talk about how I was tortured." But if their testimony didn't follow the format expected by the interviewer, it was not considered valid. Today, thanks to what has been achieved through the Peace Accords, these artistic forms of testimony are recognized as legitimate ways of bearing witness.

So, for me, these are all mechanisms of self-protection. Art is also a tool to make communities visible - communities that have declared themselves peace communities or humanitarian sanctuaries. It has helped to amplify the intentions and goals of humanitarian missions that have visited these communities, and we have contributed alongside them. Art has also served to shed light on issues such as the murder of social leaders through theatrical performances. In this sense, art can be a voice for others. In the case of Arlequín y los Juglares, however, we don't see ourselves as having the legitimacy to speak for others. Rather, we are politically convinced that it is necessary to change the current situation. We don't do this

work just to acknowledge different realities; we do it because we believe in change. For many years we have been stigmatized as a leftist, revolutionary, or radical group because of the topics in our plays. But these are no longer our concerns - they have become urgent, unavoidable issues for everyone, given the socio-cultural and political context of the country. The same has happened with gender issues. Discussions about violence against women are now widespread, simply because the reality is so stark and undeniable.

Let's talk about specific experiences. Arlequín y los Juglares has faced conflict-related situations in which we've had to test everything I've just described - the healing power of art, its ability to serve as an alternative language. A particularly important experience took place in Sincelejo in the 1990s and early 2000s, between about 1995 and 2005.

We worked in Sincelejo for four years with children from communities that had suffered paramilitary incursions. These were areas where displaced communities from different parts of the country - mostly from the coast - had settled. At first, we didn't fully understand the history or memories of these communities, but we learned through theater as we began to work with them.

In Colombia, two key organizations played an important role in shaping Arlequín y los Juglares' approach to these issues, particularly in terms of systematizing our work and recognizing its potential. When I joined Arlequín y los Juglares, the group already had 19 years of experience. At that time, I had a deep passion for sociology, even though I hadn't formally studied it. I was also involved in the human rights movement and in left-wing alternative political spaces. This background is crucial for understanding what happened next and how our work developed.

Laura: And what organizations are you referring to?

Adriana: The two organizations were Corporación AVRE and ASFADDES (Association of Families of the Detained-Disappeared; Asociación de Familias de Detenidos Desaparecidos). I am a victim of enforced disappearance myself - my first partner was detained, disappeared and murdered when we were both very young. This experience has shaped my life, but I won't go into it now because that's another story. When I joined Arlequín y los Juglares, I carried that history with me - you never really separate yourself from it. Óscar was already part of a victims' support committee in the city, and his group was involved in union activities. What I did was help strengthen that work by integrating it into a structured methodology that Óscar had already developed through his artistic training. I helped write it down, systematize it, turn it into projects, and find ways to connect it to something I had always wanted to do: art, theater, and dance. I had already been doing this work informally through social activism. Thanks to Arlequín y los Juglares, I was able to study sociology and eventually meet Óscar, who became my partner and still is. But when I arrived, I didn't know him. We met through this work.

So, by combining Óscar's and my abilities, his and my stories, and those of Arlequín y los Juglares, the need arose to clearly systematize Arlequín's commitment, without losing its artistic character. Because there have been artistic groups in the world that have confused their creative work with their political stance, and this is an important element for us that I would like to emphasize. For Arlequín y los Juglares, the content of our plays is very important - we have a clear political stance, but we firmly believe that our contribution to humanity, to the movement and to society is through art. However, we do not create art for art's sake or simply for entertainment. No, we create art with a clear political and social stance, as I explained in my previous answer.



This is what I wanted to say.

So, when I joined ASFADDES and Arlequín y los Juglares, we started to think about and systematize this connection with the human rights movement - to understand, let's say, what our contribution could be, to study it, because the world of human rights is huge. And AVRE is - was - AVRE no longer exists. It was an organization that provided psychosocial support to victims of social, political and armed conflict in the country. With them, we began to understand that art was a tool for psychosocial support. We even developed diploma programs and joint projects, to the point that we helped systematize the use of art as a tool within AVRE. They were able to do this systematization with us, and we learned a lot in the process.

Óscar: There is a book that they published.

Adriana: And the educational package. That's when we began to fully grasp the magnitude of what we had, what we knew, and what we could do. That was incredibly important because it allowed us to deepen our understanding and study this experience more thoroughly. At AVRE we participated in a national meeting where they had a methodological approach called "Training of Therapists and Multipliers in Psychosocial Actions" This project was very interesting and became an excellent self-protection initiative in Colombia for leaders, activists and communities. AVRE's psychologists and psychiatrists conducted extensive training with these individuals, who in turn were able to address crises within their communities during the conflict - moments of fear, distress, and paralysis when entire communities panicked and didn't know how to respond to a paramilitary incursion.

All these efforts have greatly empowered the communities, and I have great respect for AVRE. Unfortunately, about two years ago, they made the decision to dissolve the organization because many of their members had moved

on to other roles - some to very important positions at the national and international level. They also felt that the country needed to change direction after the peace process. Their contributions led to the creation of a public policy on mental health care, and they felt that the work should now be institutionalized. But their impact was significant. That's where we met some people from Sincelejo. We came across two, no three organizations working in Sincelejo...

Laura: And do you remember the name?

Adriana: Yes, one was called Fundación Tomás Moro, which was a Franciscan foundation run by Franciscan friars. Another one was called Fundación Nueva Esperanza or Corporación Nueva Esperanza. And the third one wasn't really a foundation or an organization, it was an international cooperation initiative called Plan Internacional. It still exists, but it's no longer in Sincelejo - now it's in Chocó.

Plan Internacional was working with children and had received funding for a large, long-term project in Sincelejo. But at that very moment, the paramilitary incursion happened - that is, the paramilitaries arrived and, boom! They took over Sincelejo, including all the rural areas surrounding the city. It was like they took control of neighborhoods like Santa Elena and San Cristóbal here all at once. It was total chaos, and as always, they arrived by force. This was the first time that the paramilitaries established a presence in urban and semi-urban areas, like the neighborhoods we have now, where they are the ones in control. It was their first attempt to establish "power," in quotes, as we see today. That's when they started extorting people with vacunas (extortion fee for "protection"), imposing afternoon curfews, abusing women, enforcing prohibitions, regulating the sale and use of drugs - taking complete control. It was insane. They also engaged in the selective assassination of community leaders - brutal acts.

So, there was a background before we arrived, but we came to understand it through our daily experiences working there. There was a coercive restriction on mobility, on organizing, on collective action, on community meetings - none of that was possible there. And the place itself was an informal settlement, just makeshift houses, a harsh environment. The only community space they had was a little community restaurant that they had built.

Óscar: It's called Cruz del Rosario.

Adriana: These foundations that I mentioned, with the support of Plan International, had built it, so there was a very beautiful community space. This area was called Altos del Rosario, but there were other sectors around it...

Óscar: La Pollita, Laguna Flor, Calle Fría...

Adriana: Right. These are all small rural settlements in these semi-rural neighborhoods. This place was the community restaurant, a very beautiful place, surrounded by little shacks, in the middle of paths that weren't really roads, just paths. They were looking for a theater group - well, not exactly a theater group. They needed an organization that could support the children for four years. Originally the project was going to be for two years, but they liked it so much that they secured more funding, and we ended up staying for four years. The goal was to work with children to help maintain a certain level of community cohesion through group activities, some activities to encourage critical thinking, but everything had to be coded in a certain way. We weren't allowed to talk about children's rights - in fact, the word "rights" was completely off limits. We couldn't talk about human rights. Even less. We couldn't talk about social mobilization or anything like that. So, they asked us to take on the project, and being the crazy people that we are, we accepted the challenge.

We arrived in Sincelejo-I remember very well

the place where we started to work. Our place of work was this community restaurant. It was the most beautiful thing in the community and the thing the community loved the most. It was beautiful, with perfect sanitation. Absolutely beautiful. So, they asked us what we could come up with, and we came up with a project. I don't remember the name, but it was a project that focused on creatively reinforcing hygienic habits. That was it. We wanted to teach the children that they had to wash their hands and get organized before they went into their beloved restaurant where they also ate. The women were the ones who cooked the meals, which was an important element. Five mothers would come to prepare the food - the community provided the space and the ingredients, but the women did the cooking.

It was, in a way, a veiled attempt to bring back the traditional minga or convite - practices of collective work that were once common in these communities. We loved the project. For example, during our first weeks in Sincelejo, we would go and work there for fifteen days, then return home, then go back again, leaving tasks and assignments between visits. I remember our very first session: we worked with about sixty children. Over the course of the entire project, we worked with about 180 children, divided into groups. That first group had sixty children, and in the community restaurant there were two young men - not children - standing outside.

Then Óscar, the teacher, began to say, "All right, everyone here is going to participate; we don't allow spectators." The young men looked a little surprised. They looked at each other, then at the children. But Óscar repeated, "No spectators allowed." The boys hesitated, looked around, but we kept the pressure on - both us and the kids - until we finally got them to join in. They hung around for about two days, and on the third day we got them to join the group, but only because we insisted. Once they



were participating - doing physical exercises, because everything we did (which we can talk about later in terms of methodology) was through theater - we played theatrical games that encouraged reflection and, in an analogous way, reinforced a sense of collectivity in the children: the power to speak, to come together.

Óscar: And the kids noticed and started teasing them: “Look! Hahaha, what’s that?”

Adriana: They kept teasing them, saying that their butts were showing because their pants were falling. The guys got embarrassed and left and we never saw them again. That was the first moment where we were like, “Okay...” And they just left. It became clear that they were watching us because we weren’t from there - we were outsiders. Something was happening that disrupted their usual routine.

Óscar: Curfew was at four o’clock.

Adriana: It was hard. So, we started our first full year of work, visiting every month. We worked with different groups, we even did activities with the mothers, like meetings and discussions. It was hard. So, we started and did the first phase of the project for a year. We went there every month, worked with different groups, and even involved the mothers in activities - we held discussion meetings, for example. With Arlequín y los Juglares, and with the resources and support of all the organizations involved, we gradually became a driving force within this community.

And in the end, it was nothing less than an act of resistance against the situation they were facing. And that led us to the idea of organizing a parade that year. Since the project was about hygiene habits, we worked with the children, the mothers, and the entire community to create giant toothbrushes as props. But there’s an important point I want to emphasize - during the process, Óscar and I realized that these children and families, who had already been

displaced by violence and were now being revictimized, had a shared history. They came from different communities, but there was a connection between them. Some had been victims of the Unión Patriótica, while others had previously been involved in community work in different areas. For example, some of them were used to organizing demonstrations and mobilizing to demand access to water. Through the exercises we did with them, we discovered that they already knew what a protest sign was, what a slogan was, what rights were - all these concepts were familiar to them. So, through drama-based training and play, we created analogies. Instead of protest signs, they made giant toothbrushes, oversized bars of soap, and giant toothpaste tubes out of cardboard - beautifully painted and decorated. With Arlequín y los Juglares and the support and resources from different organizations, we became a driving force in this community. And at the end of the day, it’s really an act of resistance against the situation they were facing.

Óscar: For example, a warm-up mantra (sings). Well, this is a traditional text used in African communities, a ritual element, but we called it a mantra for exercises. So, what would I say to the kids? I’d say: “This song means: All children have rights,” because we couldn’t say it directly. I’d explain: “This word in another language means that all children have the right to life, to education, to housing, to respect for our leaders. But since we can’t say it directly, we will...”

Adriana: But we never really told the children that. They were never aware that it meant something else, no. It was part of the methodology. No, Óscar would just tell them, “This is what it means. When you sing this mantra, what you’re really saying is this. So, sing it with joy, with power.”

Óscar: When they sang the mantra, they knew

deep down that what they were really saying was: “All children want life, we want peace, we want respect.” So, out in the streets, during the parade, they sang.

Adriana: So, we spent the whole year planning it, putting together performances, doing some small plays with the group. But we also created characters, designed these big, eye-catching, beautiful props, and came up with chants - chants we could say in the streets - through rhymes, games, and carnival-style songs, because the cultural aspect was also important; we were on the coast. We had a final meeting with the mothers, the children’s families, and the organizations to propose the parade. Since it’s such a hot region, we proposed to start the event in the late afternoon... and since it gets dark later there, we thought, “Let’s do it at five o’clock”. But everybody immediately said, “No!” Everyone froze. We knew things were happening there, of course, through our work, but that was the curfew. The curfew was at four - everybody had to be in their houses by four in the afternoon. Imagine that. People working all day under the unbearable sun, in that heat, and just as the temperature started to drop, the paramilitaries forced them to stay inside. It was madness. On the coast, people live outside, they hang out in hammocks, they gather in front of their houses. But we insisted - we wanted to have this event at five in the afternoon.

Óscar: First there was the parade...

Adriana: First there was the parade, then the collective presentation of all the plays that the children had worked on. At first people were reluctant to participate. Some were afraid and said, “Teacher, I don’t know... no, no.” But we insisted - we wanted to do it. When the time came, it felt like a graduation for the whole year. It was a beautiful celebration. The art itself became an act of resistance. We

decided to go through with the parade and called everyone to meet at the community restaurant at 4 pm. Then we left. The parade was beautiful. Meanwhile, the paramilitaries stood guard in their usual places - in front of stores, sitting on their high-power motorcycles. It was an intimidating sight. But we walked out and there they were, all lined up on their motorcycles, watching. Now imagine, there were 180 kids in the program, each with their families behind them. In total, there must have been 500, maybe 600 people - at least 300 to 400, plus the organizations, the children’s siblings, and invited guests from AVRE, Nueva Esperanza, and the Tomás Moro Foundation. The priests also came.

When we started the parade, at first people walked quietly. But once the *costeño*⁶ spirit came out-their characters, their face paint, the chants they had practiced-carrying their oversized toothbrushes with pride, marching through the streets-nothing could stop them. The only thing the paramilitaries did was stand by their motorcycles and watch. We kept going. We marched a block and then the kids wanted more: “Teacher, let’s go this way!” “Let’s take the other street!” “Let’s go over there! So, we kept going. The parade lasted from about 4 p.m. to about 7 p.m.

Óscar: We went through street after street.

Adriana: Street by street. Then we gathered to present the pieces, to share what we had worked on. When we finished, it must have been around ten at night.

Óscar: And we broke everything...

Adriana: We broke the historical mold for the city, for the community, for the people, for everyone. But we had an incident - since we’re talking about everything. We had a car that was taking the children from the community

⁶ People from the Caribbean coast.



restaurant back to their homes. The streets weren't really streets, so we dropped them off on a corner near their houses, and they dispersed from there. And then one of the kids went missing. He hadn't made it home. It was terrifying. We had left him right in his corner, and yet he never arrived. We started looking, looking everywhere. Óscar and I went out with a nun, local leaders, and some people from the organizations. We retraced our steps back to where we had left him. That's when we realized that there was a military or police station near that place.

So, we went straight there to talk. We were with a nun - an incredibly brave and remarkable woman. She came forward and we told them, "We dropped off a child right here in front of you. He never made it home. You must help us find him or we'll call the High Commissioner for Human Rights (Alto Comisionado de Derechos Humanos)". We even pretended to call the prosecutor's office: "Good evening, this is Adriana, a human rights defender. We're looking for a missing child. This is what happened..." Óscar and I sat on a bench right in front of them and refused to leave until the boy appeared. Finally, after some time, the child appeared. That's when we realized - they had him inside the military base and were questioning him. They asked him who we were, what we were doing there. Can you imagine that? In a way, that was our first big experience as Arlequín y los Juglares.

From that moment on, everything changed. That moment took away the fear, at least for us. We never worried about the curfew again. We arrived and held workshops and meetings - in the morning, at night, at any time. It was a turning point. We stayed for three more years and did so much for this city.

Óscar: We organized a theater festival.

Adriana: We had a puppet festival.

Óscar: In the main theater of...

Adriana: The city, and this time it was about children's rights.

Óscar: Yes.

Adriana: It was something wonderful.

Óscar: And out of that work came several plays, ten in all. One of them I later developed into a full play called "Jugando al Derecho,"⁷ which we worked on extensively here. We staged it and we wrote the script.

Adriana: And all ten plays are written. It's a collection that we even have ready for publication: "Jugando al Derecho".

Óscar: "Trash Isn't Just for Carrying Hair," for example, is one of the pieces.

Adriana: "Your head isn't just for wearing hair" (*laughs*).

Óscar: Aaaah, "Your Head Is Not Just for Carrying Hair".

Adriana: So, this is a very specific experience. Another one...

Óscar: But you could go on - just now you were talking about what Afro-descendant women have lost in their territories. You could talk about the work that we did with Afro-descendant single mothers in those areas here [in Medellín], when we created this project-the piece that dealt with the exclusion, with the forced repatriation of all of them from their communities, and the creation of songs like (*sings*) "y estos versos pa' que son, pa' proteger la mujer" ("and these verses, what are they for? To protect women").

⁷ This expression literally means "Playing Straight." In Spanish, *derecho* can mean both *straight* (as in moving in a straight line) and *law* (as in the legal field). This wordplay creates a double meaning, making the phrase both literal and figurative depending on the context.

Adriana: Óscar is referring to a project we did with Afro-descendant women from districts 8 and 9 of Medellín. We have done two major projects with these women, but we are still connected to them. This project is also about the power of art in what we were talking about - the social fabric. These women are displaced, most of them from Chocó and some from communities in Antioquia. With funding from the Medellín mayor's office at one point, and later from the European Union, we worked on a project called "Theater as a Tool for Social and Political Cohesion in Colombia."

So, what we did was an empowerment project for these women, to help them establish themselves and gain confidence in the city. But it was also about helping them break out of marginalization, because as African women they already face multiple layers of discrimination - they are black, they are women, they are displaced, and they are poor. When they came here, they faced severe discrimination.

It was a very beautiful experience because - just to share an anecdote that illustrates this - when we were doing interviews and we asked the women, "Why do you think it's important to be here?" one of them said: "No, teacher, my name is Luisa, and I always felt that I was a very ugly woman. Everyone told me I was ugly, but here, the theater has allowed me to..." And for a woman like that - who went from believing that she was ugly, poor and insignificant - to transform herself into a great woman, an actress, and not just any actress, but an excellent one, was remarkable.

Óscar: And to become a leader in her community.

Adriana: To become a leader in the community, to influence her children, to create new artistic and cultural projects, to become economically independent and to develop a self-sustainable project. To go from living in a small shack

to building a real house in the community. Becoming a woman who can enter a dialogue with the authorities, who is confident in defending her rights with solid arguments and composure.

And this is just one example of the work we did with 160 women. Not all of them stayed, but all of them received support from Arlequín y los Juglares in these empowerment processes. They have all gone on to do different and valuable things. For example, a collective of about forty people has emerged - made up of the women and their now-grown children - who continue to participate in Arlequín y los Juglares' theater programs in these two communities. So, in general, that's what happened with the project. We created theater productions that focused on memory, like the one that Óscar mentioned, which is available online. "Éxodo (Exodus)" was a play - it still exists in our repertoire - but it was also adapted into a radio play that won first place in a competition at...

Óscar: The Ninth Ibero-American Biennial of Community Radio.

Adriana: In Mexico. It's available online, and it tells a beautiful story about the impact on Afro-descendant women when they are forced to leave their homeland and come here, but also the contributions that Afro-descendant communities have made. These kinds of initiatives help strengthen the social fabric, which is what we were talking about earlier.

Laura: These are the radio dramas that aired last week.

Adriana: Yes, those. We aired them for two weeks. But the other one is called "Éxodo," which is a complete play, just one. The ones we made are called "Voces del Palenque (Voices of the Palenque)," but we made them all with the women. The other one is "Éxodo." We have nine radio plays, and we just finished another one



about human rights. It's public - but not very public - because we didn't release it under the Arlequín name for security reasons. But anyone who knows us can see it. It is interesting, so you should have it as a reference. It's the most recent one - we made it last year - and it's a report on the effects of the armed, social and political conflict in Urabá. We turned it into a radio drama to present to the Truth Commission, so that the information would be more accessible to the entire community. They gave us this massive 450-page report, and Óscar had the task of adapting it into a radio drama script. The final product was a four-chapter radio drama - extremely intense but also engaging and well done. Really cool. I can share it with you, along with the link to where you can find it.

And the other experience I'd like to mention - because there are many - but I'm going to share a few that might even lead you to explore other aspects more deeply. For example, something very difficult that happened to us was when Óscar and I were in Nariño, Antioquia, during the FARC takeover. It was extremely brutal, cruel and violent, with many victims, and it lasted a long time. It is considered one of the longest and bloodiest guerrilla takeovers in the history of the Colombian armed conflict. Óscar and I happened to be there at the time because he had been working in Nariño for six months as a theater teacher at the city's Casa de la Cultura (House of Culture). He went there every month or every fifteen days to conduct intensive workshops with different groups of children and teenagers. I had never been to the community before, and Óscar invited me to come and spend some time there. He said, "Look, this is the town. It has two churches, but we're going to explore it after class. We left our things at the hotel and went to the class. And just as we got there with the kids, the takeover began. So, we had to experience firsthand something that was incredibly painful and

difficult.

Laura: How many days did the takeover take?

Adriana: It lasted 76 hours. We experienced it firsthand - we were with about fifteen children from the group we were working with. We were rehearsing in a school, and the guerrilla probably knew that there was no school that day, so they probably started there. There were no classes in the school that day, so they took over the room, got ready, put on their uniforms and prepared their weapons and everything. But it turned out that the lab assistant was there, the library was open, and several people were in there using it.

This situation also allowed us to test how useful it could be for a group or for two people - just two ordinary people, as they say, "dos cristianos (two Christians)", as the Paisas⁸ say - to be actors and theatre people in the middle of something so terrifying. Guns going off, helicopters overhead, in short, the whole heavy artillery of the Fourth Brigade right above us, firing at them while we were just trying to figure out how to protect ourselves. It was one of the scariest experiences I've ever had.

So, we started at the school, and they didn't know we were there. At some point we realized that they had no idea we were in there. The way they communicated made us think that this was a takeover, but we wondered: who is it? The paramilitaries? The guerrillas? What is this? We had no idea.

So, we started to shout with the children: "We're children, don't shoot! We're children, don't shoot!" And Óscar, with his deep, rough voice (*laughs*), he would say it in this rough voice. Later it made us laugh, but at the time it was intense. He would say (imitating a deep, guttural voice) "We're children!" so they could hear us, because the little children's voices

8 People from Antioquia.

wouldn't carry far enough. They sent a woman who had already been rescued - it turned out she was the school's cleaning lady. She made her way through the rubble, because by then half the school had been destroyed by these bomb cylinders they were using.

(Whispering) Oh, it was horrible, it was horrible!

Then we started to come out. I remember it was all very theatrical. We've always wanted to do something with that experience - we've written about it from memory, as a testimony, just to try and heal from at least half of what we went through. But I remember going out and saying to one of them, "Who is your commander?" like that, angry. Nobody else dared to say anything. They were more scared than we were because they didn't expect anyone to be there. When they saw us coming out, there were almost twenty of us. They were terrified and their people just started shooting. They even took us away and put us somewhere... What's the word for it? In war terms...

Laura: A trench?

Adriana: A trench. They put a line of guerrilla fighters around us and we were stuck in the middle while they fought. It was something I can't even begin to describe - it was so intense! Then we spotted a house opposite the school that belonged to a teacher that Óscar knew because he had worked with her in the city. The goal was to get to that house. We managed to climb over a fence and get there. That's where we stayed for the rest of the takeover, sleeping there with the children and everything. The things that happened while we were trapped in that house... For example, we discovered that one of the people we had rescued was a police officer. He had been taking classes at the high school in civilian clothes and was in the library working on an assignment when it all started. He had his gun with him, but in plain clothes, right there with us. We found out, but we didn't do anything - he did it quietly with someone

else. He was terrified because the guerrilla's usual practice was to capture policemen first and take them hostage. I don't know how he managed to stay calm! But this man was absolutely petrified. And then there was this total chaos, like a scene from a play. There was a hysterical woman - the lab assistant - who was completely losing it: "I'm taking these children with me!" And we wouldn't let her, we told her: "No way, how could you even think that?"

Well, we spent 72 hours in that house. There were no supplies, almost no food - almost nothing - so we had to survive on what little we had and share it with everyone. The children did these heroic things, like sneaking out to try and find even the smallest bit of food when the shooting stopped. We could see the destruction around us, how the helicopter of the Fourth Brigade had levelled everything.

Óscar: The plane, the ghost plane.

Adriana: Yes, the plane had destroyed all the houses around us, the road, the water pipes were broken, water was everywhere. We stayed there and so many things happened - things that I don't want to go into now. Like how Óscar and I tried to keep the children calm, how we had to figure out how to make a single pound of rice feed 25 people - people we didn't even know. How we did everything we could to protect the lives of those children and everyone else in that house. That feeling - that urge to protect, but also to help - was something we discovered in that moment. It takes a deep love of humanity to approach art the way Arlequin has always done. I've always said that.

Óscar: For example - excuse me - when we gathered all these people in the teacher's house, and then the evangelical woman arrived. And it turned out that there was also a policeman hiding in the library. Then there was this woman - desperate - who wanted to run away with her two children, to escape down the hill and get away, because she couldn't



take it anymore. And how everyone in the house talked her out of it, explained to her that even though the situation was difficult, it was still safer to stay there than to try to run across the open fields to get home.

Adriana: One thing was that the ghost plane was dropping flares - these bright signal flares - right in the middle of everything. It was terrifying and it had these time intervals. So, we had to come up with these crazy self-protection strategies in the middle of the conflict, just to know where we were safest. And the truth was, it was safer to stay put than it would have been if the community had tried to disperse. These moments - these decisions - show how a community organizes itself for self-protection. If everyone talks at once, it doesn't work. So, at that point we had to say: "We are making the decisions here because we are responsible for the lives of these 16, 17 children." This policeman knew he couldn't say a word. He was completely frozen, terrified, because his life was in even greater danger than ours. If they found him, we'd all be in danger. They could take him, kill him, make him disappear - I don't even know what they would have done. Maybe put him on trial, maybe kidnap him.

So, these kinds of behaviors - the woman from the lab who was completely hysterical and wanted to take the children with her - show how, amid these concrete lessons, we had to take charge. Not in an authoritarian way, but in a firm and secure way, asserting our role as artists. And it was beautiful. At one point, Óscar started singing with the children - it was very poetic, very moving - to calm their fear. I didn't join because I was panicking. I was cooking, looking for supplies, helping in any way I could. We even had injured people - one woman came in with an injured baby, so we had to find something to bandage the baby, change the baby, figure things out. I did all that, but I was trembling with fear.

But Óscar, with this incredible mastery of art, did something beautiful in that moment. That's why I say that creativity can be used for self-protection. He started singing with the children at the window, as if the bomb explosions outside were fireworks, to help them relax. And somehow, after who knows how many sleepless hours, he managed to get them all to fall asleep. He did it by singing and letting them watch, but in a safe way. He even made a small hole in the wall so that the children could look out without having to open a window, so they were protected.

We put up white flags - putting into practice so many of the things we had learned from peace communities and refugee shelters. The white flags ended up full of holes. We finally left. Óscar's body was covered in shrapnel because he had to go out to get a flag, to get water, to get firewood to light a stove - all these intense things just to survive. It was also a lesson in how the collective takes priority in a situation like that, how the distribution of roles in that conflict zone is so important. And we left when it was finally over, walking with the children over the bodies and the rubble. It was horrible - horrible. Then to get to the town square and find the families of the children - that was one of the most rewarding moments for us. The people were so grateful as we handed each child back to their families. And for us, it was like a sigh of relief - one more safe return.

Óscar: She never really got to see the city!
(laughs)

Adriana: *(laughing)* I never got to know it - when I left it was a completely different place. It was a very interesting experience. In fact, the professor who was the director of the Casa de la Cultura called us two years ago and said, "We're trying to recover some of that memory, to rewrite it, to do something". And these children - we want to see them again, now that they're all grown up.

Óscar: A year or two later we organized a solidarity caravan to Nariño and went back.

Adriana: A year later.

Óscar: And we brought groups of artists.

Adriana: Yes, artistic groups. We did different things, but the city was under FARC control. In fact, when we realized that, the situation was still very complex. The FARC had taken over the city and there were many complaints about them. It was difficult to organize the event - we had to do it with the support of a local priest. We even had to talk to them because there was a lack of legitimacy because of some of their problematic behavior, like drinking, shooting in the air and other things like that.

And, I have to mention how the army came in when it was all over - the so-called retaking. That's when the military came in to take back control, and it was terrible. They arrived, firing shots in the air, and after everything we had been through, we were still terrified. The army came in and the place was in ruins - rubble, bodies, destruction everywhere. And they immediately started accusing everyone of being guerrillas, as if the whole town was guilty of the guerrilla takeover. For them, we were all guilty. And to make matters worse, we realized that we were probably the only outsiders in the whole town at that moment. So, we were scared - really scared. Getting out of there was an odyssey. They even offered to fly us out in an army helicopter, but we were terrified. It didn't feel safe for us.

So, we kept looking for a way out until a journalist, a friend from El Mundo newspaper, saw us and said, "What are you doing here?" And he took us out in a press van and drove us to Sonsón. By then we had returned all the children to their families. The parents were so grateful - they wanted us to stay, eat, drink, anything we needed. But I was in my period, and I remember leaving all my things at the

hotel because we were only going to be there for a short time. I was completely sunburned. When I left, all I wanted was a place to shower. Luckily, I found a house where I could clean up and change, but there was nowhere to buy anything. And while we were stuck there during the takeover, I had to make do with rags and old T-shirts... Oh no, it was just... an experience.

Even a woman came with a battered baby, so I treated the baby's wounds. But I always talk about this event because even though I was terrified, I kept moving. And Óscar's mastery in keeping us all calm - while I was shaking - was remarkable. It was like seeing two sides of what art could be in that moment: action and expression. I did a lot - I took care of people, calmed them down, told them to lie down and rest. But Óscar was the real juggler there, using art - telling us stories, making us sing songs. The whole experience was incredibly healing. It was intense. It tested us in ways we never imagined, especially in terms of what Arlequín y los Juglares really stands for. I think any group doing a workshop there could have found themselves in the same situation. But I don't know if any group would have responded the way Arlequin y los Juglares did. I doubt it. Because we carry this whole tradition, this lineage of storytelling and performance in the face of adversity.

Laura: So, you've already told me a little bit about the threats you've faced. But you just mentioned that you were threatened - can we talk a little bit more about that or would you rather not...? (*Silence*)

Adriana: No, I can talk about it.

Laura: Okay.

Adriana: I have been a human rights defender since I joined ASFADDES - since my partner was disappeared. That was when I decided to get involved and try to understand the issue of



enforced disappearance, which is something that you never really understand until it happens to you. And even then, I had some awareness of these issues. So, I started working extensively on human rights, and through my work with ASFADDES I ended up in leadership positions - I was part of both the national and regional leadership of the association. As a result, I have faced threats and security issues. But the last threat I received wasn't just related to my involvement with ASFADDES. It was also related to another factor: the Urabeños had infiltrated the Limonar neighborhood in San Antonio de Prado, where we lived. That was a complicated neighborhood because it was made up of people from different areas of Medellín who had been displaced when the government demolished their homes. The state had to provide them with housing after declaring their original neighborhoods to be high-risk seismic zones-meaning their homes could collapse. So, in El Limonar you had people from Caicedo, La Iguaá, El Popular-places with gangs, with all kinds of problems.

They came with their own problems, and all those problems came together. It was already a troubled neighborhood, but on top of that, the Urabeños paramilitaries moved in, fully organized. There was a priest in the neighborhood who was supposedly trying to mediate peace between the gangs and had started promoting dialogues. But somehow, I don't know why, this priest became involved in paramilitary activities. His behavior always seemed suspicious to us, and in the end he was deeply involved.

This guy went around with the paramilitaries, always with a gun under his arm. Once we were at an artistic performance for an event organized by Fe y Alegría, and he showed up, supposedly just to greet people. We listened to him speak to the community, and I'll never forget what he said-almost word for word-"Welcome to the new people arriving from La

Iguaá. Understand" - and he was speaking in a rough, streetwise way - "that there are rules here. If you screw up once, you get a beating. If you screw up twice, you get a warning. And if you mess up three times, you go in a coffin."

When we heard this priest talking, it seemed very strange to us. He started threatening people right from the pulpit. He said that women who stayed out late, who worked in cafes, or who were prostitutes would be beaten. At first, we didn't believe it - until we heard him talking like that. Then we said, "Yes, it must be true." He was beating people. He would take off his belt and whip them-children, teenagers. He would make threats from the pulpit.

And we had a theater group and had been working in the neighborhood for several years in partnership with an organization called Corporación Penca de Sábila. It was a collective care initiative for the community, focusing on self-care as a response to the conflicts in the area. We worked to keep the community engaged with activities like a community recycling program, creating a community garden, and developing small business initiatives. The work we did with them was interesting. As part of this, we had a youth theater collective where we put some beautiful performances. The young people who were part of Arlequín would leave rehearsals and go to a park to practice their roles, do vocal exercises (she hums as an example), warm up, and do things that might have seemed strange to others. Then this priest went up to the pulpit and declared that our group was Satanic, and that's when the problems started. At first, we didn't take it too seriously because it just seemed ridiculous - how could that happen in the 21st century? *(Laughs.)*

But things escalated. One night we had a drama class with the kids at one of the Fe y Alegría schools. Óscar was leading an exercise when someone knocked on the door: "Teacher."

I went outside and a young man said to me: “Profe, get out of here with all the kids, they’re coming to shoot you all. I have come to warn you because I grew up with them and I don’t want anything bad to happen.” I was terrified. It was 9:00 p.m. - we usually rehearsed from six to ten. We had to leave immediately, just as we were. I was barefoot. I gathered all the children, and we left. Óscar went home to be with our little children, and I took the theater group with me. I called Penca de Sábila, and we went to the city center, where we met twenty young people, all in a state of shock, still in their work clothes. They had told us that they were going to kill us.

Then Penca de Sábila asked for a meeting with the archdiocese. The mother of one of the children, Penca’s legal representative, and I am not sure if Óscar and I were there, went to the meeting. While we were waiting in the hall of Archbishop Giraldo’s office, we asked him to be very discreet. We didn’t want any trouble... but then the priest arrived. As soon as we saw him come in, we turned around and left - we didn’t want to stay for this meeting. Imagine how frightening it was! So, we went back to the neighborhood.

Laura: And were you still living there?

Adriana: Of course. We lived there. The kids from our group stayed somewhere else for a while - we paid for rooms for them until we decided: Let’s try to keep working in the neighborhood. We organized parades, rehearsals in the streets, cultural and artistic events. That helped to calm things down for a while. But then the following year, in 2005, I got a phone call with a direct threat. I was already working with ASFADDES at the time, although I was no longer in a leadership role. We always believed that what happened was connected to everything that had happened before.

The paracos⁹ settled in the neighborhood. In our block, for example, some terrible things happened. In our street there was a group of women who were widows of the armed conflict. We had organized ourselves and, with international support, bought 16 houses in which we all lived. There were fifteen women and one man-the only man was a widower from the Unión Patriótica. His wife had been murdered in front of their eight children. One day, the paracos wanted to rent one of the houses from one of the women, but this man told her not to. He said to her: No, don’t rent it to them, how could you even consider it? It seems that they found out that he was interfering, and one day they came and sprayed our whole block with gunfire.

It was terrifying - just bullets everywhere. They were screaming: “You nosy bitches, meddling where you shouldn’t!” Nobody even knew what was going on. The next day, I took the lead and gathered everyone at a neighbor’s house. We made sure that the new people in the neighborhood stayed inside, and we met t’ discuss what had happened. Then we called the priest - the one who ruled over everything in the neighborhood - to come and explain what was going on. He came and told us that the shooting had happened because of exactly what I just told you - because someone had interfered by refusing to rent out the house. It was all against this man. He left right after that. Fortunately, no one was killed, but the fear was overwhelming.

Things got worse and worse. They started demanding money from the block, and we refused to pay. They claimed it was “for the Christmas party,” but we told them: “No, we’ll organize our own Christmas.” Then they started targeting our daughter - she was a very beautiful young girl. Since we traveled a lot, they said they wanted to take her. They took over the

9 Paramilitaries.



house of the man who lived across the street from us-one of the houses our association had purchased. Life became unbearable, and soon the threats came. One day I received a phone call. They told me that they were going to kill me, that they knew where we lived, that they knew about my human rights work. They knew about my kids, my partner. It was a terrifying threat. They called the house phone four times. At that time, I was protected by PBI because of my work with ASFADDES. PBI stayed with me until we went to get the children. They helped us gather our things and leave the neighborhood. That was the end of our time in El Limonar.

Laura: And did the protection last long?

Adriana: No, with PBI I had protection for the two years that I was coordinator of ASFADDES in Medellín. They didn't just accompany me, but also two other colleagues who were at high risk because of our positions and the circumstances. In fact, when I was threatened, I was with a colleague - we were in a taxi. This experience really shows the power of symbolism or art in reverse. I mean, this man had declared a theater group to be satanic. Leaving was incredibly painful for us. We left with all our belongings. We left our family in another place - in a gated community - for six months with the support of an emergency human rights fund. My mother stayed with the children while we left the country. This was also a strategic decision, made with the support of PBI and even Amnesty International, to bring more visibility to our artistic work. So, we went on tour with Arlequín y los Juglares.

Laura: Where?

Adriana: We were in Germany, Switzerland and Spain, those three countries.

Óscar: Germany, Switzerland, Spain and Austria.

Adriana: Right, Austria-so four countries. We did a lot of shows, about fifty in total.

Óscar: We were part of a project called Hermanarte.

Adriana: The goal was visibility. Since I had been threatened, the idea was to reduce the intensity of my human rights work and focus on artistic work. After we returned to the country, I was diagnosed with cancer. It was in my mouth - very symbolic, given everything we had been through. We had to focus on my recovery, a whole year of treatment. That's when I decided to step away from human rights work and dedicate myself entirely to the artistic work-to put all my energy into it.

Óscar: Not to retire, but to change the focus.

Adriana: To lower our profile. We had high-level positions in the leadership of ASFADDES. After we retired, we stayed involved, but from an artistic standpoint-creating pieces, offering support-more quietly. I think that also helped me to heal from cancer and to deal with it in a positive way. It was a high-risk cancer, in my mouth - the first organ of the digestive system - so there was a risk that it could spread to my stomach. But I survived. After that, about three years ago... Well, that happened in 2006, so for about six to eight years I was more focused on artistic work. Then I returned to human rights work through the Coordinación Colombia Europa Estados Unidos (Coordinating Platform Colombia Europe United States). I applied for membership as Arlequín y los Juglares, and at first, they thought it was strange for an artistic organization to join. But I really missed human rights work, so we had a political discussion about how art could influence policy, support communities, and contribute to that space.

We spent two years doing support work, and eventually we were granted membership. Today, we are the only arts organization among the 285 that make up the platform. And since last November, I've been elected technical secretary of the Antioquia chapter, which means that I'm now part of the national

leadership of the platform. I'm happy to be doing both things at the same time. But that's the story – that's my experience.

Part 2

Laura: I wanted to ask you about the role of organizations like PBI. You already told me that PBI supported you when you received death threats and when you were part of ASFADDES. I'd like to know if, in the history of Arlequín y los Juglares, besides those two situations, what other role has these types of organizations played?

Adriana: To answer this question and the next one you're going to ask, I'm just going to focus on expanding and clarifying what we've already discussed in a previous session. When we talk about the relationship between Arlequín y los Juglares and PBI, it's important to clarify that, institutionally, Corporación Arlequín y los Juglares and PBI never signed an agreement for direct accompaniment in relation to the challenges we faced. The support we received was essentially due to my role as a human rights defender and as the coordinator of the Medellín chapter of ASFADDES, which experienced significant security problems - phone tapping, a bombing, and even the disappearance of two members of the association. Because of this, those of us on the leadership team were given escorts. So, it wasn't Arlequín y los Juglares and PBI that had an agreement, it was ASFADDES and PBI.

It was in this context that I received the threat we discussed in the interview, and the proposal to go on an international tour came from a PBI member at the time. This colleague suggested this option to make my role as an artist more visible, to raise my profile in that capacity, and to lower my profile as a human rights defender and activist due to security concerns. The idea of the tour was proposed, but in addition, some PBI offices in Europe were willing to host us, promote performances, and facilitate

workshops and discussions. I think this was very important because it was a solidarity-based, beautiful and meaningful relationship, even though it was a little bit outside of PBI's mandate. It was a form of support where we contributed our artistic proposal, and they provided logistical support in these places to enable us to perform. We paid for the tickets ourselves. We took out a loan. There was no direct financial cooperation from PBI, but rather an alliance for the sake of life and in response to these threats. This gave the corporation a sense of autonomy, independence and contribution. The workshops, our testimonies, our discussions, and our performances also served as a contribution to PBI's work in these countries.

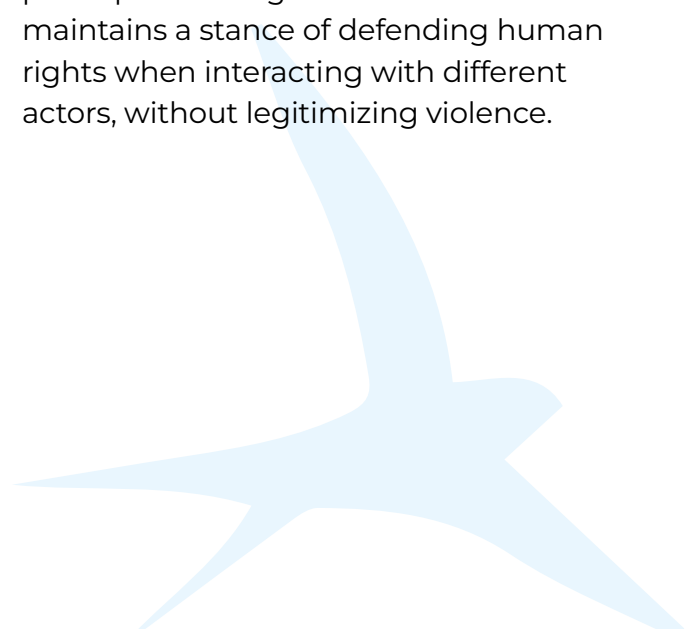
In other situations, in our journey of artistic, cultural, social, and human rights work, we have used artistic expression as a means of self-protection-for the youth, for ourselves, and for the physical spaces we occupy. We have also used symbolic forms of activism and political action, such as what happened in Sincelejo, where we organized a festival at times not allowed by armed actors to make joy visible. We carried out a whole artistic endeavor aimed at strengthening the community and ourselves in the face of imminent danger. When we experienced the takeover of Nariño, we put all our artistic skills at the service of the people we were with, especially the children. We also used our knowledge to interact with an armed actor without generating any kind of sympathy or approval for what he was doing. Instead, we maintained our position in defense of the children, the people present. It was not a neutral stance - it was a firm stance in defense of those who were there, demanding respect for their lives. We also faced situations in the neighborhoods where we worked that required us to interact with armed actors and deal with difficult circumstances. In these cases, we have not always needed the support of international organizations, but we have engaged in mutual



assistance with organizations such as the human rights collective Semillas de Libertad (Seeds of Freedom) in the past and, for several years now, with the human rights platform Coordinación Colombia Europa Estados Unidos. We have sought solutions together, sometimes relying on the support of institutions such as the Personería and the Defensoría del Pueblo.

Themes extracted from the interview and important reflections

- 1. Art as a form of protection and resistance:** The interview reveals that art serves as a refuge for those who practice it and as a space for communities to process painful experiences. It also highlights its role as a tool of resistance in contexts of violence, allowing communities to maintain cohesion and creatively confront adverse situations.
 - 2. Developing critical thinking and empowerment:** Through its pedagogical approach, Arlequín y los Juglares aims to develop critical thinking skills within communities, enabling them to identify risks and defend their rights. The recognition of collective capacities and skills within the community becomes a key element of self-protection.
 - 3. The healing and unifying power of art:** The ability of the arts to have a healing effect on communities affected by conflict is emphasized, as well as its power to strengthen the social fabric and foster connections. Theatre, as a collective discipline, strengthens community bonds and enables the construction of collective memory.
 - 4. Creativity as a tool for transformation and self-preservation:** Creativity is presented as a central element for transforming adverse realities and as a means of collective self-protection. Through artistic expressions such as theatre, music, and painting, communities
- can find ways to protect themselves individually and collectively.
 - 5. The importance of memory and denunciation:** Art is used as a tool for building both individual and collective memory, and as a means of catharsis and denunciation of victimizing events. The legitimacy of art as a way of presenting testimonies in human rights spaces is emphasized.
 - 6. Autonomy and independence in collaboration:** Arlequín y los Juglares has built a support network based on friendship and solidarity, which has allowed them to maintain a degree of independence from traditional international cooperation. Their approach focuses on mutual support and the exchange of knowledge.
 - 7. Art as a protective shield in situations of risk:** In contexts of threat and conflict, artistic work becomes a “shield of protection” for the participants and the spaces occupied by the organization. Artistic skills are put at the service of the community to alleviate fear and create a sense of security.
 - 8. Prioritizing security and defending rights:** Despite its artistic commitment, the organization prioritizes the safety of participants in high-risk situations and maintains a stance of defending human rights when interacting with different actors, without legitimizing violence.



Conclusions

Community self-protection encompasses a myriad of strategies used around the world by civilians to protect themselves non-violently in contexts of violence and conflict. From the perspective of UCP, self-protection is still a topic where much remains to be explored and understood, especially in the Global South. This article takes three case studies from Burundi, South Sudan and Colombia to show that agency for protection lies with communities. Although international accompaniment and the presence of foreign organizations may serve as a support point for capacity enhancement, the local actors play a crucial role. They are the ones who, on a daily basis, have to face different armed actors who can exercise all kinds of violence.

The paper is part of a joint effort to continue the commitment to decolonize UCP/A. Various practitioners, organizations and researchers of this approach have taken on the responsibility of deconstructing the established relations between the global North and South in order to leave behind the white savior complexes imposed for several centuries by some societies over others. Decolonizing the knowledge of UCP/A involves understanding the mechanisms of community self-protection promoted by different groups, discussing their lessons and establishing channels of dialogue to create a universal network of learnings.

The particular circumstances of each case studied have allowed us to understand how civilian self-protection goes beyond avoidance of physical harm. It also involves deep ethical commitments to nonviolence. During the 2020 elections in Burundi, the EWER teams were involved in observation processes in several communities. Their task was to provide protective presence for civilian voters. They also had to identify potential conflict situations and

de-escalate them. These groups also provide accompaniment to victims of GBV and have become a point of support and confidence for communities in solving problems. The WPTs in South Sudan have focused on peacekeeping and peacebuilding work. Therefore, they have enhanced their abilities for conflict resolution and mediation. It has helped women to take more leadership roles in their communities. They have also become focal points for resolving situations of violence. Finally, Arlequín y los Juglares has used theater as a tool for denunciation and social transformation, supporting human rights organizations and strengthening community processes. It has also developed strategies for civilian self-protection in communities affected by violence, becoming a reference for resistance, historical memory and social justice in Colombia.





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