



Research Network

Creating Safer Space

Insights into civilian capacities for nonviolent (self-) protection in conflict-affected areas.



Arts and
Humanities
Research Council



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Above: Still from La Fiesta theatre production, Medellín, Colombia (see p. 42-43 for project details). Photograph by Laura Diosa Vera and Sofia García 'Ponchis'.

Cover image: Introducing UCP to Thai Society (see p. 46-47 for project details). Illustration by Wanwisa Intarakanchit.



Art That Protects Mural, painted by local participants under the direction of Maestro Carlos Tobón, plastic artist, Medellín, Colombia (see p. 42-43 for project details).

“ States don’t build peace – people do. ”

Participant’s reflection at workshop with staff of the United Nations and diplomatic missions to the UN, organised by Nonviolent Peaceforce. New York, 2019



Introduction

Professor Berit Bliesemann de Guevara, Aberystwyth University

Principal Investigator of the Creating Safer Space network

ACCORDING TO THE UN REFUGEE AGENCY, there are now a record high of 108.4 million people forcibly displaced by violent conflict, and the majority of deaths in conflicts are among civilians.¹ This makes the protection of civilians from physical harm in contexts of war and other political violence a pressing issue of our time. While the international community has acknowledged the need for protection, the physical safety of civilians is still imagined predominantly as a task of armed actors (UN blue helmets, national police or militaries, armed local self-defence groups, etc.). Yet not only does the demand for protection from physical harm exceed the offer by far; armed actors are often also rather (part of) the problem than the solution.

The originality of the *Creating Safer Space* research network is its focus on proactive nonviolent protection provided by unarmed civilians and deployed at the local level of communities, be it by outside specialists or community protection actors. Unarmed civilian protection (UCP) is “the practice of civilians protecting other civilians in situations of imminent, ongoing, or recent violent conflict. It involves trained international civilians protecting local civilians, local civilians protecting each other, and even local civilians protecting international or non-local civilians.”²

There are over 60 international NGOs and a growing number of national and local organisations currently undertaking protection work in at least 45 countries in conflict,³ in



addition to local self-protection initiatives such as peace communities and weapons-free zones using a range of proactive strategies to create safer space for civilian life amidst violent conflict.⁴ They illustrate that the protection of civilians by civilians without the use or threat of force can work to create physical safety and may even do more: by providing a role model, and by not fuelling further violence, UCP can help break cycles of violence and thus contribute to longer-term peacebuilding. Initial research has suggested that UCP may often be more effective than armed protection and indeed, UN Security Council and General Assembly resolutions have started to mention the potential of UCP, indicating some change in thinking even at the level of governmental organisation.⁵

With its focus on enhancing and expanding existing capacities for UCP, and on fundamentally shifting the way we think and talk about security, the *Creating Safer Space* network helps develop this alternative story and approach into the go-to humanitarian strategy of the future.

¹ “Figures at a Glance”, *UNHCR The UN Refugee Agency*, Jun 14, 2023, accessed Nov 6, 2023, <https://www.unhcr.org/uk/about-unhcr/who-we-are/figures-glance>

² Huibert Oldenhuis et al., *Unarmed Civilian Protection: Strengthening Civilian Capacities to Protect Civilians Against Violence* (Nonviolent Peaceforce, 2021), p. 16, accessed Nov 6, 2023, https://nonviolentpeaceforce.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/2021_Course_Manual_Full.pdf

³ “Community of Practice”, *Nonviolent Peaceforce*, n.d., accessed Nov 6, 2023, <https://nonviolentpeaceforce.org/ucp-community/>

⁴ For the very well documented example of Colombia, see: Laura Jiménez Ospina and Beatriz Elena Arias López, “Unarmed Civilian Protection and Community Self-Protection in Colombia”, *Creating Safer Space Working Paper Series 1.3* (2023), accessed Nov 6, 2023, <https://creating-safer-space.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Creating-Safer-Space-Vol-1.3-UCP-in-Colombia-English.pdf>

⁵ This article talks about this topic: Harley Henigson, *Community Engagement in UN Peacekeeping Operations: A People-Centred Approach to Protecting Civilians* (International Peace Institute, 2020), accessed Nov 6, 2023, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep27529.6>



Drawing by a community teacher from a village in Maungdaw Township, Rakhine State, Myanmar, about life before the violent conflict (see p. 52-53 for project details).

Our Network

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

Our aim is to strengthen civilian capacities for protection and to support local efforts to transform conflict nonviolently as a basis for lasting, sustainable peace with social justice.

Creating Safer Space is led by Prof. Berit Bliesemann de Guevara (Aberystwyth University, UK) in collaboration with Prof. Beatriz Arias (University of Antioquia, Colombia), Prof. Chantana Wungao (Chulalongkorn University, Thailand), Dr Nerve Macaspac (City University of New York, USA), Prof. Roger Mac Ginty (Durham University, UK), Prof. Rachel Julian (Leeds Beckett University, UK) and Ms Rosemary Okello-Orlale (Strathmore University, Kenya).

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Our Research Themes

1 Understanding vulnerability and agency

Vulnerability to physical harm is complex, context-dependent, and often situational, suggesting that common universal understandings not only obfuscate nuance in protection needs, but also neglect people's agency. We therefore aim to better understand how different kinds of vulnerabilities interact in situations that require protection, how vulnerabilities may differ depending on the context and the identity and positionality of the people concerned, and which different protection strategies these complex vulnerabilities and agencies require.

2 Building local protection infrastructures

Unarmed civilian protection has been shown to be most sustainable, where nonviolent protection initiatives have built on existing practice or engaged in establishing more long-term local 'protection infrastructures', for example by enhancing and expanding local protection capacity through trainings and giving other types of material and knowledge support to local volunteers. We therefore explore how outside protection strategies, national protection initiatives, and self-protection mechanisms in communities can work together for best protection results and without undermining each other.

3 Developing civilian protection capabilities

The field of practice of organisations using active nonviolent protection strategies has grown over the last decades, and UCP has been successfully used in a wide range of countries, suggesting its versatility to adapt to very different contexts and types of political violence. Nonetheless, the scope and reach of unarmed civilian protection has remained limited. We therefore ask how unarmed local protection can be scaled up or broadened out in size and/or scope, or include new actors and collaborations, with a view to protect more people from violence and displacement and develop stronger nonviolent protection capacities.





Early Warning Mechanism.
Photograph by a local
community member.
Juba, Central Equatoria state,
South Sudan (see p. 22-23 for
project details).

Our Activities



Sharing Knowledge

- **Research Cafés** to share knowledge about UCP at a regional or international level.
- **Research Database** with over 700 resources so far, including academic publications, working papers and NGO documents.

Building Capacity

- **Training Course** on the objectives, principles, sources of guidance, and methods of Unarmed Civilian Protection.
- **Research Training** on a wide variety of topics, including Safeguarding and Risk Analysis; Research Methods (especially Arts-Based and Participatory); Writing Funding Applications; and Publishing Research (ranging from Journal Articles to Visual Policy Briefs).
- **Toolbox for a Decolonial Perspective** to support decolonization processes advocated by Unarmed Civilian Protection practitioners.
- **Participatory Evaluation and Learning Methodology** setting out a participatory approach to evaluating UCP activities.

Funding Research

- **Large Grants** (£80,000 - £100,000) awarded through an open funding competition.
- **Small Grants** (£20,000 - £30,000) awarded through an open funding competition.
- **Work Packages** (£10,000 - £50,000) co-designed in collaboration with our core project partners around the world.
- **Evaluation Projects** (£3,000 - £4,500) awarded through an open funding competition.

Disseminating Research

- **Working Paper Series** publishing insights by practitioners, researchers, and communities.
- **Travelling Exhibition** showcasing artwork from our research projects.
- **Events** in different locations worldwide to engage stakeholders and share learnings.

Find Out More
www.creating-safer-space.com



Our Research Projects

Mexico/
US border

Colombia

Nigeria

Cameroon

Palestine

South
Sudan

Kenya

Myanmar

Thailand

Philippines

Indonesia

Research
in **11**
countries



26
Research
Grants

6 Large Grants
7 Small Grants
10 Work Packages
3 Evaluation Projects



Led by organisations
around the world



15 projects led by organisations
in the Global South

11 projects led by organisations
in the Global North

Provided
over
£920,000
in grants





Afrocolombian communities in Nariño's pacific coast using football as a (Spontaneous) UCP strategy.

Understanding Community-level Spontaneous Unarmed Civilian Protection (UCP): A Comparative Study of Initiatives in South Sudan, Myanmar, and Colombia

The Researchers

- Prof. Mark Owen, University of Winchester, UK (principal investigator)
- Dr Andrei Gomez-Suarez, University of Winchester, UK (co-investigator)
- Dr Luke Abbs, University of Winchester, UK (co-investigator)
- Sapai Khaing, Religions for Peace Myanmar, Myanmar (co-investigator)
- Karen Arteaga-Garzón, Rodeemos el Diálogo – Embrace Dialogue, Colombia (co-investigator)
- Moses John and Flora Bringi Francis, Organisation for Nonviolence and Development, South Sudan (co-investigators)



The Problem

Broader research on nonviolent action points to the spontaneous and diverse nature of nonviolent actors, and the nonviolent action they deploy. As noted by many UCP scholars and practitioners, community-level UCP initiatives often emerge from local actors simply trying to adapt and reduce violence in their communities without any pre-emptive support from specialist NGOs. We refer to such local action as “spontaneous UCP;” community-level protection activities carried out by local actors spontaneously in response to local conditions, and not necessarily with support of specialist NGOs. Consequently, the project will explore the emergence of spontaneous UCP by local actors, and document and analyse their attempts to create “safe spaces” in Colombia, Myanmar, and South Sudan. Working collaboratively between University

of Winchester researchers, and in-country co-investigators (Co-Is), comparative data collection and analysis will be carried out in an attempt to better understand: how spontaneous instances of UCP occur in the three chosen contexts; what strategies/networks these actors have developed to broaden their UCP activities; and how the context shapes emergence of UCP activities.

The Research

The project design adopts a fully participatory approach, with in-country Co-Is, researchers, and participants playing an active role in considering the research design, data collection, and dissemination process. Data collection is taking place between June 2023 - February 2024. In-country Co-Is are instrumental in identifying local participants and actors, and initially examples of spontaneous UCP to explore in greater depth. UK-based CRRP researchers will visit the fieldwork sites to support the in-country Co-Is in 2-3 week period of intensive data collection. Data collection will comprise mainly of semi-structured interviews with individuals/organisational representatives who have witnessed and/or taken part in UCP activities. At least one focus group will also be carried out in each location/region in each country. The objective is to carry out at least 30 semi-structured interviews in each of 6 fieldwork locations across Myanmar, South Sudan, and Colombia, providing a significant body of primary data from which a greater understanding of spontaneous UCP activities can be derived.

The Findings

Fieldwork preparations have been ongoing across all three countries, with more in depth data collection in Myanmar and South Sudan to take place between November 2023 – February 2024. Due to security concerns, data collection by University of Winchester researchers will



Indigenous communities in central Nariño are creating a network of spiritual sites as a (Spontaneous) UCP strategy that includes the territory

also take place in Mizoram, India, and Northern Uganda. In Myanmar we have identified several examples where religious leaders have used their authority and sacred space to protect civilians from communal violence; and the role of religion in spontaneous UCP is of particular interest to researchers and will be a focus for a specific output. In South Sudan local CO-Is have been active in identifying spontaneous UCP cases in preparation for more in-depth interviews and data collection.

Fieldwork in Colombia has been completed, and we have identified three distinct UCP strategies in the department of Nariño, which have been developed spontaneously by local actors in response to a variety of conflict dynamics. These involve using football to regain and reaction safe space; spiritual knowledge and practices to deter violence; and communities carrying out shuttle dialogue with armed groups in efforts to prevent violent conflict with government troops. The policy brief for the Colombian case study is currently being drafted, and the production of five posters to disseminate the findings is almost complete. A public engagement event on Colombia will be held by the end of the year once the policy briefing and the posters are ready.



Community Action Boards in northern Nariño use dialogue to shape “Coexistence Contracts” as a (Spontaneous) UCP

[Find Out More](#)



Exchange of gifts and wishes between women survivors and activists. Mocoa, Putumayo, Colombia. Photo courtesy of Diana Castaneda Lopez.

Gender-just landscapes: Gender based violence and community protection in land, natural resource, and climate conflicts in Colombia, Nigeria, and the Philippines

The Researchers

- Dr Lora Forsythe, University of Greenwich, UK (principal investigator)
- Javier Lautaro Medina Bernal, Centro de Investigación y Educación Popular, Colombia (co-investigator)
- Diana Lopez Castaneda, Independent Consultant, Colombia (researcher)
- Dr Aliyu Barau, Bayero University Kano, Nigeria (co-investigator)
- Timothy F. Salomon, Center for Agrarian Reform and Rural Development, Philippines (co-investigator)
- Lilian Treasure, University of Greenwich, UK (researcher)
- Dr Uche Okpara, University of Greenwich, UK (co-investigator)
- Professor Tilman Brück, University of Greenwich, UK (co-investigator)



The Problem

Gender-based violence (GBV) is experienced by one in three women worldwide; however, the risk of GBV grows substantially in conflict. Our understanding how GBV relates to land, natural resource and climate-related conflict is limited however. Our aim is to address this gap in knowledge and improve understanding of the prevalence, intersecting vulnerabilities and resilience to GBV in these contexts, and identify community responses and local protection infrastructure to reduce GBV risks. Through case studies in Colombia, Nigeria and the Philippines, our project uses visual and participatory action research methods to understand GBV risk and identify community responses that UCP practitioners and beyond could both learn from and engage with to foster support for communities experiencing violence.



Art depicting threat of safety of women. Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria. Photo courtesy of Aliyu Salisu Barau.

The Research

The research uses a mixed-method and participatory action research design. Firstly, the project conducted literature and data reviews at both country and global levels. Secondly, the project conducted primary research in the Philippines, Colombia and Nigeria to produce case studies. This included both key informant interviews and workshops with community leaders, civil society organisations, academics and policy makers, as well as focus group discussions with men and women in communities who have experienced or are experiencing violence to understand its relationship to gender based violence and the development of community-based responses to address this. The project also engaged in art-based research activities and immersion in nature based activities.



Tedurary women playing gong. Maguindanao Sur, the Philippines. Courtesy of Timothy Salomon.

The Findings

Coming Soon (see project website for updates).

[Find Out More](#)



Strategies for Safety and Solidarity: understanding protection through creativity in South Sudan and Colombia

The Researchers

- Kara Blackmore, London School of Economics and Political Science, UK (principal investigator)
- José Fernando Serrano-Amaya, University of Los Andes, Colombia (co-investigator)
- Rebecca Lorins, University of Juba, South Sudan (co-investigator)
- Manuela Lara, Colombia (collaborating artist)
- Likikiri Collective / Elfatih Atem, South Sudan (project partner)



The Problem

Artists who create political and socially engaged work are increasingly at risk. In contexts of protracted socio-political conflicts or post-peace agreements, discussions of safety and protection for social and cultural leaders (where artists and allied activists are situated), are often reduced to mitigating risk to harm and physical violence. Less is known about how artists, allies or their organizations experience those harms and what protection infrastructures they build up to continue collective action. This project identifies how artists and allied activists understand protection and vulnerability based on lived experiences.

The Research

This interdisciplinary research connects South Sudan and Colombia. It compares findings from research conducted in South Sudan (2020-2022) with new research in Colombia (2023) to investigate two key questions:

- First, how do artists seek safety in times of conflict and unstable peace?
- Second, how can creative methods be used to investigate vulnerability and map out networks of safety, going beyond the need for artist protection and into collective solidarity within activist communities?

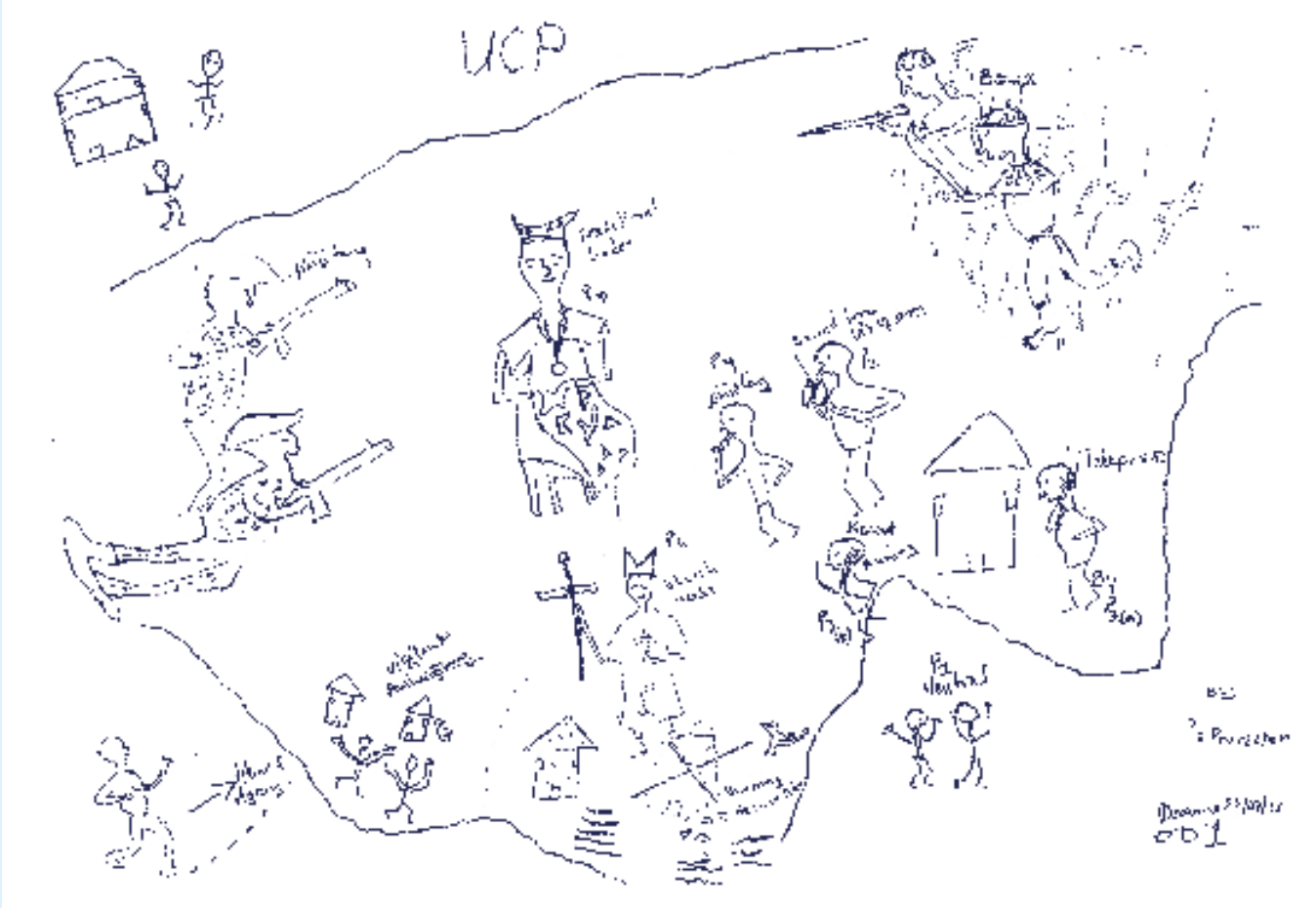
The research focuses on protection infrastructures that are rarely featured in literature on unarmed civilian protection. Art commissions, an exhibition, blogs, policy briefs and an illustrated catalogue will make the research accessible within and outside academia.

The Findings

Coming Soon (see the below websites for updates)

<https://www.lse.ac.uk/africa/research/Art-Allies>

Find Out More



Drawing by a local community member from the English-speaking North West region, Cameroon. Here the artist draws various protection techniques that they feel are utilized in their community. They have labelled things that they identify to be protection techniques with a P. One of these is the use of whistles as an early warning mechanism.

Exploring unarmed civilian self-protection in Cameroon’s Anglophone conflict

The Researchers

- Prof. Gordon Crawford, Coventry University, UK (principal investigator)
- Prof. James Kiven Kewir, African Leadership Centre, Kenya (co-investigator)
- Dr Nancy Annan, Coventry University, UK (co-investigator)
- Dr Bernard Sakah, Big Steps Outreach Network, Cameroon (co-investigator)
- Ms Atim Evenye Niger-Thomas, Authentic Memorial Empowerment Foundation, Cameroon (co-investigator)
- Dr Zoneziwoh Mbongdulo-Wondieh, Women for a Change, Cameroon (co-investigator)
- Billie Burton, Cameroon Anglophone Crisis Database of Atrocities (project partner)



The Problem

The armed conflict in the English-speaking North West and South West regions of Cameroon has been ongoing since October 2017. The conflict is between state security forces and armed separatist groups fighting for an independent Republic of Ambazonia. Now in its seventh year, this civil war has had a terrible impact on the English-speaking civilian population, subjected to violence from both warring parties. Nonetheless, despite little or no unarmed protection offered by external actors or organisations, civilians have been pro-active and resourceful in devising ways to protect each other. Such ways include the use of coded language, non-verbal communication, direct negotiation with the warring parties, early warning networks and information sharing through local associations and social media. The creation of a culture where ‘everybody is one

another’s keeper’ has been crucial in enabling citizens to sustain their lives within the conflict zones for so many years. The role of women and women’s organisations has been especially significant. Thus this research examines bottom-up approaches to UCP. It provides an important contribution to knowledge about informal and innovative grassroots efforts in civilian self-protection that involve local citizens’ own agency. The primary question being addressed is:

What approaches to and types of unarmed self-protection have been taken by local civilians in the Anglophone conflict in Cameroon; how successful have they been and how can they be strengthened?

The Research

The research was undertaken in two main stages: a preliminary mapping exercise and a main data collection phase. The mapping exercise identified most affected communities (conflict ‘hot spots’) in both the North West and South West regions, enabling us to identify the locations where civilians are most vulnerable and in need of protection. Mapping was undertaken by our project partner, the *Cameroon Anglophone Crisis Database of Atrocities*, using satellite imagery and open-source intelligence. The mapping exercise enabled the identification of four rural communities in the worst-hit conflict areas, two in the North West Region and two in the South West Region, from which research participants were selected.

Data was collected through a mixture of qualitative methods, including arts-based ones, namely participatory storytelling, poetry workshops and drawing workshops, as well as key informant interviews. The use of arts-based methods was especially important for participants who have endured the traumas of conflict. *A combination of these data collection methods provided an opportunity for different community leaders and victims of the conflict, including grassroots women, youth, religious and traditional authorities, civil society actors among others, to share their experiences, emotions, perspectives, self-protection strategies, challenges and coping mechanisms.* In total, over 60 participants from the four communities attended the workshops, and 18 interviews undertaken with key informants. For security reasons, all data collection was undertaken *outside* of the conflict zones, with research participants brought out of the conflict zones and transported to safe urban areas within the English-speaking regions or in adjoining French-speaking regions.

The Findings

Generally, civilians are their own protectors: “We are not only the authors of our stories but the authors of our own protection” (Storytelling workshop, Limbe, February 2023). The presence of international UCP organisations was almost non-existent. Therefore civilians use their own strategies, employing a blend of homegrown



Drawing by a local community member in Dschang, Cameroon. The artist reflects on some of the ways in which their community has learnt to protect each other in Cameroon’s Anglophone conflict through: negotiations and paying ransoms, teaching children about peace, and wearing dresses rather than uniform to go to school.

mechanisms as well as digital approaches through social media. We classified the various UCP strategies into four main categories: preventive measures, early warning and response, re-building relationships, and spontaneous protective measures.

Preventive measures adopted by civilians to prevent attacks and violence from the military or the separatists. Over ten preventive measures were found, including staying indoors, neutrality and protective silences, dressing appropriately, disguise, and relocation.

Early warning and early response (EWER) measures whereby civilians communicate and share intelligence among themselves using diverse tools, including phone calls, social media (WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter), whistles, pots and pans, church bells, the town crier. Other EWER measures included non-violent vigilantism through the establishment of community watch groups, and Investigation and rumour control to avoid the spread of misinformation.

Rebuilding relationships due to the breakdown of social cohesion with increasing suspicion and distrust. Therefore communities use social and cultural activities to build relationships and trust, thereby helping to prevent revenge killings and old score-settling by some civilians.

Spontaneous protective measures when violence occurs between the warring parties. These included taking evasive measures at home, running into the bushes or to farms, and seeking temporary shelter in churches, chiefs’ palaces or disused buildings.

Challenges and dangers were also highlighted, including: Illegal search and seizure of civilians’ phones by state security forces, preventing them from sharing intelligence to enable their protection

Military and separatists’ intimidation and violence against those civilians who alert fellow civilians of pending violence

Fear has forced some civilians to exit WhatsApp platforms where they are likely to receive early warning information, leaving them at greater risk.

[Find Out More](#)

Unarmed civilian protection through collective impact: Learning from the Jos Stakeholders Centre for Peace (JSCP) for enhanced civilian protection in Maiduguri, north-eastern Nigeria

The Researchers

- Sukanya Podder, King's College London, UK (principal investigator)
- Pwakit Jacob Choji, Youth Initiative Against Violence and Human Rights Abuse, Jos, Nigeria (co-investigator)
- Allamin Foundation for Peace & Development (ALLOPAD), Nigeria (project partner)



Stream bordering Muslim and Christian settlements in Angwan Damisa, Jos, Plateau State where UCP activities undertaken by the JSCP has resulted in conflict de-escalation

The Problem

Nigeria has ongoing ethnic and religious conflicts on account of the Boko Haram Islamist insurgency in the northeast, long-running militancy in the Niger Delta, climate change related violence between herders and farming communities extending from the central belt southward, and periodic resurfacing of separatist Biafra agitation in the southeast.

Jos, the capital of Plateau state in central Nigeria, serves as a divide between the South and North of the country. Jos was engulfed by deadly violence in September 2001, with neighbours preying on neighbours in violent intercommunal violence. Since then, the city has witnessed intermittent large-scale violence, and nearly 4,000 people were killed between 2001-2010 (Krause, 2016: 261), thereby creating the space for various local peacebuilding



Burnt houses due to communal conflict in Angwan Damisa, Jos, Plateau State

initiatives. This project will analyse one such initiative, the Jos Stakeholders Centre for Peace (JSCP).

The JSCP example offers the opportunity for inter-regional learning beyond Jos in insurgency affected areas of north eastern Nigeria, such as in Maiduguri, the capital of Borno state. Maiduguri has been the epicentre of the Boko Haram insurgency. Although this region is less prone to intercommunal clashes, and is largely Muslim, violent clashes between the Boko Haram and the state security agencies has resulted in the loss of lives on both sides, with the civilians trapped in between.

The Research

This research project involves a short learning video from three urban communities filmed in Jos about the collective impact model for unarmed civilian protection launched in 2017 in the area of community security. Prominently, the research has policy influencing ambitions through its partner ALLOPAD, in Borno state, to promote grassroots advocacy, capacity building; and

knowledge dissemination around unarmed civilian protection (UCP) in Maiduguri, where civilians have witnessed both state and non-state directed violence due to the Boko Haram insurgency. A growing normalisation in state-insurgent relations since 2015 has created the opportunity to build the self-protection capacities of local communities.

Towards this end, the novelty of the project is three-fold. First it will encourage inter-regional learning of the collective impact model in UCP. Second, it will build the capacity of the people at the grassroots, and those in positions of local power and influence through workshops, mobile video projection and community discussions around UCP in Maiduguri, Borno state. Third, it will develop the local capacity in Maiduguri to arrest conflict escalation and mitigate both state and non-state armed violence directed against civilians, through unarmed community security initiatives.

The Findings

Coming soon (see website below for updates).

[Find Out More](#)

Men in South Sudan illustrating the use of grasses tied together to convey a specific symbolic meaning. When the heads of the grasses are tied together, it symbolises a clash (that there will be fighting). When the heads of the grasses are apart, as the man in the middle demonstrates with his hands, it symbolises that violence will be avoided.



Visualising early warning and preparedness in civilian protection: Investigating local vernaculars of community adaptations to insecurity in South Sudan

The Researchers

- Chas Morrison, Coventry University, UK (principal investigator)
- Diria Vicky Thomas, Community Aid for Relief and Development, South Sudan (co-investigator)
- Haji Elias Hillary, Lomore Development Organization, South Sudan (co-investigator)



The Problem

This project investigates cultures of self-protection in South Sudan, used for Early Warning and conflict preparedness. Early Warning is a fundamental aspect of Civilian Protection in response to threats from conflated types of violence: political, criminal and cattle raiding. South Sudan has suffered enormously from violence and conflict, especially since 2013 when the post-independence civil war started. The research is carried out across 3 locations outside Juba city, in Central Equatoria, in Malakal, Upper Nile state, and in Yambio, Western Equatoria state.

Diria Vicky Thomas and Haji Elias Hillary undertake physical visits to villages with prior approval from state level and from local Chief to record videos and photos of cultural practices, accompanied by discussions and questions. The research engages a semiotic approach to investigate symbols and signs in messaging for Early Warning and conflict preparedness, and the anthropological dimensions and group-identity markers being employed in areas with limited formal avenues for communication. Although multiple international frameworks exist for civilian protection, there are religious, cultural and tribal practices and perspectives which are not well known or understood, complicating their integration into UCP approaches. They have few formal links to policy statements and conventions and remain under-studied. More investigation is needed on how UCP in practice can address these cultures of self-protection, and what are the implications for greater cultural engagement in protecting civilians. The overarching research question is, how are community signs, symbols and culturally specific communications used for gathering, sharing, and responding to information about impending violence? As far as we are aware, this project is the first to investigate cultural self-protection of civilians through anthropological explorations of their practices and beliefs with a semiotic approach.

The Research

This research encompasses a variety of data collection tools: group discussions, interviews, demonstrations of cultural practices and signs in practice, drumming, song and prayers. Diria and Haji have built up a library of audio-visual materials, recording people and practices such as:

- Drawing on the ground with spears or spikes, or fire ash (protective circles, arrows, crosses etc).
- Drumming to alert and convey messages
- Songs with concealed meaning, prayers, blowing horns
- Reeds and grasses cut or tied in specific ways, or positioning stones to indicate direction or abandonment.
- 'Tele-oor' -hand whistling as an alert system.
- Spiritual power is inherited, not miraculous. Only individuals with ancestor power can employ spiritual defence practices, like curses, blessings and protection. These include:
 - Defence against insect attack (locusts, red ants etc)
 - Defence against harmful 'witch animals'- half human, half beast, or ghosts and spirits
- Chase away attackers using enchanted wild animals (bees, snakes)
- Protective drawings on faces that use blessed charcoal & village Chief's saliva
- Spells to cause bombs to be dropped in the bush instead of on people
- Cursed animal skins and cursed water for doorways, trees and crossroads that produce blindness and confusion for enemies and invaders
- Fires and smoke to purify, and send messages (damp blanket on flames)
- Fasting, prayer and ritual purification by women, to provide spiritual protection for the men to enter combat.

The use of such signs tends to be ritualistic, providing avenues for negotiation before conflict, to mitigate violence, or avoid it entirely. Signs and symbols are also employed to establish boundaries and restrictions for armed combat.



In this image the photographer shows a technique for communicating that a community has left due to an attack. The placement of cooking stones with firewood in a circle symbolizes that the occupants of the community have fled. The protective ash that circles the logs is believed to keep away evil. Photograph by Diria Vicky Thomas. Kakuwa community, Juba, Central Equatoria state, South Sudan.

The Findings

Diria and Haji return to the villages following data analysis, to ask their opinion of our findings and conclusions, and ensure that we accurately portray their cultural beliefs and practices. The signs and symbols employed for early warning and conflict preparedness are generally distinct among different tribal groups, and tend to be traditional, hierarchical, procedural, formalised, low-tech, non-literate and highly divided along gender lines. Similarly, the inter-tribal violence was traditionally formalised and procedural; and elements of this persist in recent violence, although the traditional practices have become eroded due to massive acts of violence and criminal atrocities.

We have found that symbols employed for early warning and preparedness, are multi-purpose, used against different threat types (violence, ghosts, insects, natural hazards etc), embedded in tribal identities, and conflate preparing for fighting with avoidance of violence. That is, avoiding conflict is not necessarily a goal in itself, but that violence should be carried out under strict demarcated lines and in accordance with customary tribal norms. There are clear aspects of these practices that are firmly within the spiritual realm, and thus complex to investigate, articulate and contextualise. As one village chief stated, "We prefer witchcraft protection, more than physical protection".

There is a clear division between traditional and formulaic practices of inter-tribe violence and modern forms of violence which are associated with struggles for political power, criminality, and proliferation of small arms (rather than traditional weapons). For UCP organisations and programming, we recommend greater awareness of such cultural practices and world-view, engage at-risk communities with greater sensitivity, and embed this understanding into formal structures and responses to violence. UCP actors do not need to ask whether these practices are effective, or dismiss them as superstitious. Instead, they need to be understood as the lived reality of people affected by huge insecurity, political instability and years of under-development.

[Find Out More](#)

Nonviolent Artivism Against Police Brutality in Kenya

The Researchers

- Martha Okumu, Peace Tree Network, Kenya (principal investigator)
- Elias Opongo, Hekima University College, Kenya (co-investigator)



The Problem

Police brutality in Kenya can be traced far back to the colonial period and the practice was carried over to the present time. Successive governments have used it as a tool for violence over the citizens and political adversaries. In line with this, our research was conducted in Nairobi and Kisumu because these areas have significantly experienced police brutality as far back as the colonial period and until the present time. This brutality as a tool of violating the rights of citizens is normally experienced by the youth and people living in informal settlement areas of the two counties due to their economic vulnerabilities.

As a result of these violations, our research aimed to analyse the diverse artistic strategies that have been used by youth and civil society organizations in addressing police brutality in Kenya. Some of the strategies analysed included the use of murals, graffiti, songs, poems, plays, and cartoons as used by the youth and CSOs to create awareness among the public on the use of brutality by the Kenyan police.

The Research

In carrying out this research, we undertook the following activities:

- a) Key informant interviews: A total of 56 respondents were interviewed. These respondents were youth and women



community leaders, artistes, victims and survivors of police brutality, CSOs members, Police Officers and Judiciary Staff.

- b) Focus group discussions: We conducted 3 FGDs with two being held in Nairobi and one in Kisumu. A total of 36 respondents took part in these discussions.
- c) Validation workshop: Our final research activity was the validation workshop which was held in Nairobi. We presented the research findings for validation to 14 research respondents from Nairobi and Kisumu.

The Findings

From our research analysis, we found out that respondents had experienced some form of police brutality at a personal level or through family members. The major forms of police brutality experienced included:

- a) Excessive use of force by the police while undertaking their duties
- b) Extra judicial killings by the police especially in low-income areas
- c) Arbitrary arrest
- d) Torture
- e) Excessive use of teargas
- f) Beating of civilians
- g) Shooting of civilians
- h) In some cases, all of the above had been experienced by some of the respondents.

Role of artistes in addressing police brutality in Kenya

By employing their creative abilities to spread awareness, spark debate, and promote change, artists significantly contributed to the effort to combat police brutality in Kenya. Our research sought to understand the techniques employed by the Kenyan artist to help bring into awareness the cases of police brutality and also promote change by addressing incidences of police misconduct in the nation.

The respondents identified four major roles that artists play to help address police brutality in Kenya, namely:

- They act as a mirror to the society,
- They create awareness on issues of police brutality,
- They show solidarity to the victims of police brutality, and finally,
- They shape knowledge on how to deal with cases of police brutality.

Successful activism strategies used in addressing police brutality

- a) Poems/spoken word
- b) Music
- c) Plays
- d) Graffiti
- e) Cartoons

It is important to note the success of the above strategies varied depending on the location of the research.

[Find Out More](#)

Three pictures stating 'Sita rusha mawe' meaning 'I will not throw stones'. The drawings are from Kisumu Social Justice indicating the transformation of community members in their interaction with the police after going through peacebuilding and conflict resolution (UCP) training.



Strengthening Local Capacities for Unarmed Civilian Protection in Uasin Gishu, Kenya

The Researchers

- Clinton Gwako, Rural Women Peace Link (principal investigator)
- Selline Korir, Rural Women Peace Link (co-Investigator)



The Problem

Kenya is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious country that experiences different types of conflicts, both internally and cross-border, namely sexual and gender-based violence; intercommunal resource-based violence especially among pastoralist communities in arid and semi-arid lands; and cycles of elections-related violence. The conflicts are a result of ethnic intolerance, border conflicts, political party zoning, competition over land and other resources, proliferation of small arms, weak security systems, poverty, underdevelopment, and marginalization.

In Kenya, protection of civilians from physical harm in conflict situations has heavily relied on national security forces (national police

and military force). There have been multiple disarmament campaigns and increased security presence to address intercommunal violence in the pastoralist drylands. Military initiatives such as Operation Linda Nchi and Operation Usalama Watch have seen Kenya send ground troops into Somalia, ostensibly to deal with the violent activities of Al-Shabaab. Though unarmed civilian protection (UCP) is not well-defined in Kenya, there are existing capacities regarding UCP – community-driven

local protection groups such as vigilante groups, Nyumba Kumi self-protection system and local Early Warning Early Response teams are some of the manifestations of UCP in the country. While a lot of work and studies have been done on nonviolent conflict resolution and transformation, there are not many significant inquiries into the role civilians play in their own protection, and particularly focusing on Uasin Gishu County. This research project seeks to address this gap by positioning UCP

in local, county, and national peace processes and security institutions. The outputs of this research will be important in understanding and appreciating civilians' agency in local peace and protection processes; more so when considered against the backdrop of the cyclical threats of electoral violence and the resource-based and instigated conflicts in Kenya.

The Research

We have so far conducted two People-First Impact Method (PFIM) exercises in Langas (Kapseret Sub-County) and Burnt Forest (Kesses Sub-County), respectively, that engaged 240 community members. These community-driven exercises sought to establish the existing and emergent local civilian protection systems and UCP strategies in the two target areas and the extent to which they have been harnessed in the past. The exercise in Langas supported eight separate community conversations involving the following individual community groups: Women, Youths, Self-Help Groups, Village Elders, *Boda Boda* (motorbike) Riders, Religious Leaders, Community Health Volunteers, and Community Policing Forum. The exercise in Burnt Forest supported eight separate community conversations involving the following individual community groups: Reformed Brewers of Illicit Liquor, Women, Youths, Village Elders, Nyumba Kumi Representatives, *Boda Boda* (motorbike) Riders, Persons with Disability, and Religious Leaders.

We will soon conduct the final PFIM exercise in Turbo (Turbo Sub-County) and thereafter kickstart three Community Scorecard exercises that will seek to identify and understand the civilian capacity gaps with regard to UCP in Burnt Forest, Langas, and Turbo.

The Findings

The preliminary analysis of the report from the 16 two-way goal-oriented community conversations reveals that there are no elaborate and well-structured local civilian protection systems in Langas and Burnt Forest except for the government-instituted self-protection initiatives that have taken the form of Community Policing Forums and Nyumba Kumi system. Conclusive research findings will be published at the end of the project.

[Find Out More](#)



Using multimedia approaches to increase visibility of and preference for Unarmed Civilian Protection approaches in Kenya

The Project Team

- Arthur Okwemba, African Woman and Child Feature Service (project lead)
- Ruth Omukhango, African Woman and Child Feature Service



The Problem

This project seeks to address the low awareness about, and uptake of Unarmed Civilian Protection (UCP) approaches in managing conflicts in Uasin Gishu and Nairobi counties of Kenya through increasing the understanding, visibility, preference for, and advocacy on application of various research findings and good practices around UCP in the management of conflict by state and non-state actors. The project is designed to respond to perennial conflicts in the two counties: Uasin Gishu County in the North Rift Valley that are caused by political tensions, cattle rustling and contestation over natural resources-water and pasture; and in Nairobi where struggle over scarce resources and opportunities, and political tensions are the main causes of conflict.



Training of Gender Desk Police Officers at Laico Regency Hotel in Nairobi

Struggle over resources and job opportunities among young people and ethnic groups living in Nairobi's Kibera, Mathare and Kariobangi informal settlements are major triggers of conflicts, with the youth in Kariobangi, Mathare and Kibera citing widespread discrimination based on ethnic origin and nepotism as contributing to constant conflicts in these informal settlements.



Morans of Laikipia West, Laikipia County discussing their role in conflicts and peace building. Photograph by AWCFSI



AWCFSI holding dialogue with women in Laikipia County on peace and security issues and their role in peace building. Photograph by AWCFSI

The Activities

This project seeks to address the problem highlighted through the following activities:

- Conduct radio programmes to create awareness on, advocate for, and educate communities on the approaches and benefits of UCP to communities, state actors, development partners, and CSOs as a conflict management approach at the local and national levels. The radio shows will be aired on Kitwek FM Station that broadcasts to Uasin Gishu and other counties, and Ghetto FM radio that broadcasts in Nairobi, especially targeting populations in the informal settlements and low-income areas of the city.
- Conduct two, two-day trainings to build the capacity of selected media practitioners working in the two counties – Uasin Gishu and Nairobi – on UCP and how to use the gained knowledge to promote UCP as an approach to conflict management. The selected journalists will be those who reported on conflict before. The trained journalists will be key in disseminating the findings of the Creating Safer Space projects and UCP good practices by Rural Women Peace Link (RWPL) and Peace Tree Network (PTN).
- Document and showcase in-depth stories of change of how UCP approaches have been used to successfully manage conflicts in Uasin Gishu and Nairobi counties.

The Outcomes

The project is still ongoing. The three planned outcomes are:

- Build the capacity of 16 selected media practitioners working in two counties- Uasin Gishu (8 beneficiaries) and Nairobi (8 beneficiaries) on UCP and how to use the gained knowledge to promote UCP as an approach to conflict management. The selected journalists will be those who reported on conflict before. The trained journalists will be key in disseminating the findings of the studies and UCP good practices by Rural Women Peace Link (RWPL) and Peace Tree Network (PTN).
- Use multimedia approaches to disseminate and advocate for the use of UCP practices by communities, state actors, development partners, and CSOs to inform conflict management approaches at the local, national and regional levels.
- Document and showcase in-depth stories of change of how UCP approaches have been used to successfully manage conflicts in Uasin Gishu and Nairobi counties.

[Find Out More](#)

‘Ritualising’ protection in conflict: a collaborative visual ethnography of the cultural and spiritual protection practices of the Nasa people in Colombia

The Researchers

- Piergiuseppe Parisi, University of York, UK (principal investigator)
- Ana Deida Secue Rivera (co-investigator)
- Lehidý Carolina Baltam Salazar, Colombia (researcher)
- Nicolás Braguinsky Cascini (filmmaker)
- Pippa Cooper (researcher)
- Resguardo Indígenas de Huellas Caloto, Colombia (project partner)



This project seeks to understand how ancestral spiritual and cultural practices protect indigenous communities in the midst of armed conflict and what coordination mechanisms could be put in place to ensure that these practices are effectively supported by the state.

The Problem

Indigenous peoples in Colombia are caught in the midst of an armed conflict that has lasted for more than fifty years. Despite an elaborate protection architecture, the state has so far been unable to effectively protect them. Hence, in order to survive, indigenous communities have had to devise their own self-protection strategies. Not only do these strategies encompass the physical and psychosocial dimension of security, but they also draw on ancestral spiritual and cultural practices that both strengthen the indigenous communities' physical protection and reaffirm their self-determination. However, these practices are often misunderstood by the state structures, which fail to implement support strategies to support them.

The project seeks to generate a conceptual and visual representation of these practices through a collaborative visual ethnographic study of the Nasa people of the *Resguardo Indígena de Huellas Caloto*, an indigenous community situated in the North of the Cauca Department in one of the areas worst affected by the armed conflict.

The Research

The Ritualising Protection Project was co-developed by the Research Team and the *Resguardo Indígena de Huellas Caloto*. We sought to include indigenous research methods in the research design, such as narration, autoethnography, community visits, walks on the land, and harmonisation rituals.

In addition to desk-based research, the Project methodology had two main components:

(1) Observational research, through which the Research Team observed and represented, through different methods, indigenous spiritual protection practices performed by and within the Nasa community in their ancestral territory. We sought to understand and capture the significance of these protection practices



through the eyes of the Nasa community, and to contextualise them within the socio, political, and economic environment where the community live.

(2) Participatory action research, in particular indigenous methodologies, through which the Co-Investigator and the partner organisation sought to foster the (re-)appropriation and strengthening of spiritual protection practices by the community. Community meetings were convened to engage Nasa elders and families; the Research Team joined the indigenous guard in their exercise of territorial control; the Research Team also participated in harmonisation rituals. In this way, the research was also meant to fulfil an emancipatory function by allowing the indigenous community to both take control of the knowledge production process and strengthen their own protection tools.

The Findings

The findings of the research project will be disseminated through a combination of academic, policy, and audio-visual outputs in the next few months. They can be summarised as follows:

- (1) The Nasa indigenous people understand protection holistically. Spirituality and ancestral cultural practices are key to understanding protection because they relate to their cosmovision and stem from a culturally specific understanding of risk and harm.
- (2) The performance of rituals according to the spirituality and cultural practices of the Nasa people reaffirms their self-determination and ensures their survival as a people.
- (3) The exercise of protection rituals represents a form of psycho-social and emotional self-care in the midst of the Colombian armed conflict.
- (4) Spirituality – and specifically the performance of rituals – signals belonging to and generates acceptance by the Nasa community. It promotes cohesion within the community. State protection officers who refuse to participate in rituals generate mistrust within the community and around the beneficiaries of state protection schemes.
- (5) The recruitment base of armed groups or criminal gangs operating locally include indigenous (Nasa) peoples. Spiritual leaders – such as traditional medics and elders – command respect within the Nasa community but also among indigenous recruits of the armed groups. This partially explains both why key Nasa figures are targeted by armed groups and the negotiating power of Nasa traditional authorities.
- (6) The state protection architecture is underpinned by an elaborate regulatory framework, which if applied comprehensively would accommodate ancestral forms of protection. However, in practice, the design and implementation of protection schemes fails to meaningfully include the Nasa people.

In order to better support self-protection practices rooted in the Nasa spirituality and culture and to provide culturally adequate protection schemes, Colombian authorities should ensure the active participation of Nasa communities in the design and delivery of protection.

<https://www.ritualisingprotection.org/>

➔ [Find Out More](#)



Mapping and Responding to Vulnerability through Nonviolent Collective Actions in Buenaventura, Colombia

The Researchers

- Enrique Chimonja, FOR Peace Presence, Colombia (principal investigator)
- Kati Hinman, FOR Peace Presence, Colombia (co-investigator)
- Roberto Rodríguez, Colectivo ANSUR (co-investigator)



The Problem

On Colombia's Pacific Coast, Buenaventura is a region of majority Afro-descendent and indigenous people, shaped by a long history of civilian resistance. It is one of the regions that has been most deeply impacted by the armed conflict. Currently it houses Colombia's largest port, yet the economic gains have not been shared with its inhabitants, wherefore young people are more easily recruited into

the armed conflict. Because of the long trajectory of violence, it was one of the regions prioritised in the 2016 Peace Accords. However, the implementation has fallen short. This has left communities to survive in the midst of an escalating social and armed conflict, resulting from the actions of armed groups and exclusionary policies that increase their collective vulnerability to harm.

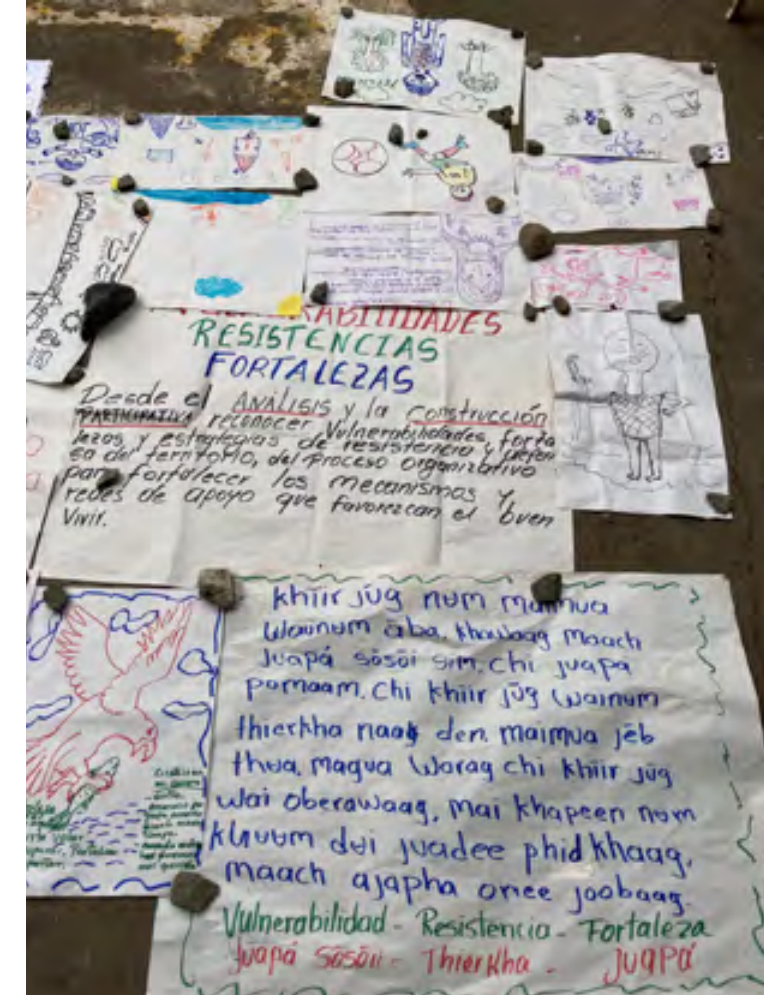
The specific aims of this research project are:

1. Map vulnerability to physical harm of Afro-descendent and indigenous communities in Buenaventura, Colombia
2. Examine how community members experience this vulnerability while navigating their specific geographical contexts.
3. Explore ways that community members have built strategies collectively to respond to and mitigate community and individual vulnerability

The Research

We conducted community workshops and mapping exercises in 6 communities as part of Aim 1: 1) the Afro-descendent community of La Esperanza; 2) the Afro-descendent women's collective AINI of the Naya River; 3) the indigenous community Santa Rosa de Guayacán; 4) the Afro-descendent community of the Puente Nayero humanitarian space; 5) the LGBTQIA2S+ and Afro-descendent community of Punta Icaico humanitarian space; 6) the indigenous community of Valledupar. These workshops focused on their collective identity and the impact of violence on their lives and the different actors that operate in their territories and influence violence. People worked in groups to make maps or representations of their communities and talk about the assets and vulnerabilities within their communities.

For Aim 2, we conducted focus groups with different sub populations to understand at folks navigate violence and keep themselves safe at different intersects of identity: 1) rural Afrodescendent women; 2) urban Afrodescendent women; 3) rural indigenous women; 4) LGBTQIA+ young people; 5) urban men; 6) rural young people; 7) social leaders and human rights defenders.



The Findings

Our project is still ongoing, but we have some preliminary data from Aims 1 and 2. From the community workshops of Aim 1, we heard repeatedly from indigenous and Afrodescendent participants how important the relationship with the land is to their cultural identities, and how displacement threatens this. For indigenous participants in particular, the greatest fear for many was losing their lands. We also heard about how communities see a link between their stewardship of natural resources and the violence they have experienced because of external interests in extracting those resources.

In the focus groups, we saw that many of the protection strategies being employed by people at different intersects of identity were collective, such as traveling to unsafe places in groups, identifying safe houses, developing relationships with neighbours to look out for each other in the neighbourhood, and discussing travel plans with family and loved ones. We were surprised to note that despite known risks of violence and mistreatment at home for LGBTQ+ people, in our focus group only one participant noted home as an unsafe space, although others commented that feeling safe at home was something they had worked to achieve over time and by being selective in who they lived with.

<https://peacepresence.org/>

➤ [Find Out More](#)



Conflicts over water, violations, and forms of self-protection: Multi-case study in Eastern Antioquia, Colombia

The Researchers

- Beatriz Arias López, Universidad de Antioquia (principal investigator)
- Hernán Dario Pineda Gómez, Universidad de Antioquia
- Mateo Valderrama, Asociación Campesina de Antioquia
- Juan David Arias, Universidad Pontificia Bolivariana
- Jessica Restrepo, Universidad Pontificia Bolivariana
- Denisse Roca, solidary consultant, CLACSO group on Political Ecologies of the South Abya-Yala
- Vanessa Vasco Vargas, Corporación Jurídica Libertad



The Problem

Water is currently positioned as the structuring axis of hydro-social relations and the conflicts that arise over its control and use in many parts of the world. Therefore, the project aims to explore the conflicts related to concession processes for hydroelectric projects in the rivers La Paloma, Santo Domingo and Dormilón, in eastern Antioquia (Colombia), located respectively in the municipalities of Argelia, San Francisco and San Luis. We also analyzed associated problems such as mass tourism, real estate pressure and mining; elements that add threats to the privatization of water. These situations have been installed strategically and in other cases insidiously, without recognizing the damage that looms over the

communities or the social actors involved. These forms of intervention, promoted by public policy, project an image of an empty space or one that is adaptable to new uses. It intensifies the degree of vulnerability of the populations, since it does not recognize their pre-existence and territorial dynamics. The aim, then, is to delve deeper into these combined threats, to explore the scope of self-protection in the face of a conflict of growing water privatization, as well as to advance in the reflections on just transitions, in a context of debate for energy alternatives and the revision of polluting, concentrated and undemocratic development models.

The Research

The research was designed under the parameters of a multiple case study, of an instrumental nature, for the analysis and particular understanding of water conflicts in the hydro-social territories of the La Paloma, Santo Domingo and Dormilón rivers. To produce data, we have used documentary review and systematization of information related to problems, violations, actors and relationships. We have also conducted and will continue to conduct territorial tours with local actors accompanied by photo-voice exercises, territorial projection workshops based on social mapping exercises, discussion groups, individual interviews and social appropriation workshops through photo-embroidery and sublimation. These activities have involved and will involve people from rural communities in the selected hydro-social territories and members of social organizations.

The Findings

Self-protection in terms of care considers not only the physical dimension, but also symbolic, emotional and ties established with the territory in which people lives. In the research it has been understood that protection can also involve the preservation, maintenance, and care of the world people inhabits, recognizing the emotional and affective links. From this arises the connection of solastalgia as a concept that allows us to understand the sense of loss of place presupposed by the potential transformations of hydro-social territories because of processes associated with water privatization.

The research has found that the self-protection strategies employed by civil actors of peasant communities and their organizations are linked to negotiations with state officials and entities; advocacy actions in municipal planning and land use planning; alliances with platforms and collectives that advocate for the care of the territory and common goods; legal actions; alliances with platforms and collectives that advocate for the care of the territory and its common goods; training processes on the implications of extractivist economies and hydro-energy projects; artistic mobilizations; creation of audiovisual products; visibility of problems through digital networks; territorial tours; experiential exchanges; dialogues



between peasant and expert knowledge; community organization and self-management.

The deployment of these self-protection mechanisms not only arises from the risks and threats derived from hydroelectric concessions, but also from the undesired and imminent change of the territory in which they live; a hydro-social territory in which affective, emotional, and vital relationships have been built around the rivers. Consequently, there is a bond with water that goes beyond utilitarian exploitation. It is understood that this liquid is a crucial common good for the development of daily life. During the research process, we found that in addition to conflicts over water associated with the construction of small hydroelectric power plants, there are others linked to mass tourism, real estate pressure, mining concessions, privatization of water management, and deforestation. These conflicts have different intensities, multiple local and foreign actors and differentiated territorial presence. Likewise, the risks and threats arising from them, in addition to community self-protection mechanisms, operate in different ways.

Phase 1
Find
Out More

Phase 2
Find
Out More

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bWLWlqO4RWo&list=PLDRfIX2tBwmI3UTHI-7y7-4ohzE3K1voa>



Protest banner reading: "That our commons are not turned into business".



Community strategies for Unarmed Civilian Protection in South-West Colombia: Local experiences and lessons learned

The Researchers

- Juan Mario Díaz, University of Sheffield, UK (principal investigator)
- Simon Rushton, University of Sheffield, UK (co-investigator)
- Arlene B. Tickner, Universidad del Rosario, Colombia (co-investigator)
- Jesús Alfonso Flórez López, Universidad Autónoma de Occidente, Colombia (co-investigator)
- Natalia Campo, Universidad Autónoma de Occidente, Colombia (co-investigator)
- Adrián Alzate, Universidad Autónoma de Occidente, Colombia (co-investigator)
- Corporación Memoria y Paz (CORMEPAZ) (project partner)
- Central Cooperativa Indígena del Cauca (CENCOIC) (project partner)
- Escuela Agroambiental El Arraigo – Comunidad del Lerma (project partner)
- Pastoral Social Popayán (project partner)



The Problem

This ongoing project investigates and seeks to strengthen the extraordinary capacity of Colombian communities to navigate the complex conflicts that threaten their security. Using a Participatory Action Research approach, we collaborate with grassroots organisations and train community researchers in three diverse communities in the Pacific region of South-West Colombia: i) the predominantly Afro-



<https://filmmakers.festhome.com/festival/i-festival-internacional-cineando-con-mi-gente-video-participativo-y-cine-comunitario>

Colombian port city of Buenaventura; ii) mestizo coca growers based in and around the town of Lerma; and iii) members of an indigenous coffee-growing cooperative in Caldoño.

The overarching goal of the project is to build capacities and facilitate an exchange of knowledge and experiences that enhances community capacities for UCP in the region and beyond. To achieve this, the project aims to:

- Document and analyse the diverse experiences, initiatives and infrastructures of UCP in Colombia's Pacific region;
- Identify and disseminate lessons for effective UCP at a regional, national and international level;
- Strengthen community capacity for self-analysis and project collaboration through training in participatory research.

Through this work, the project seeks to address four subsidiary Research Questions:

- How have communities in Colombia's Pacific region historically employed UCP, and what new strategies have emerged in the post-peace agreement period?
- In what ways have community UCP strategies been successful, and where and why have they failed?
- What capacities are required for communities to engage more successfully in UCP?
- What lessons can be learned from community experiences to support appropriate changes in practice across the Pacific region and beyond?

The Research

The project's research activities are grouped into three Work Packages (WPs), aiming to respond to the project's aims:

WP 1: Documenting experiences; learning lessons; identifying needs:

- WP1.1: Ethnographic research including non-participant observation, transect walks and community meetings.
- WP1.2: 'Semilleros' (research seedbeds), where participants receive training in a range of research methods including a 5-day Participatory Video (PV) training.
- WP1.3: Participatory research into histories of vulnerability and UCP, involving in-depth interviews, social cartographies, analysis of personal and community archives and oral history.
- WP1.4: Community-based dialogues through *Participatory Video and the Most Significant Change* (PVMSC).

WP2: Sharing lessons; identifying needs

- WP2.1: Participatory analysis and inter-community learning through using the films produced in the PVMSC projects as 'travelling Videos'.
- WP2.2: local workshops bringing representatives of the communities and partner organisations together to reflect on the most significant experiences of change shared through the travelling videos.

WP3: Building capacities and networks

- WP3.1: a two-day event at UAO in Cali to facilitate inter-community and (inter)national dialogue on PAR.
- WP3.2: Based on the success of the use of PV in this project, the research team is organising the First International Festival of Participatory Video and Community-based Cinema in Cali, 15-16 November 2023. This also includes:
 - a hybrid international forum to discuss findings within the Creating Safer Space Network
 - a two-day meeting bringing the research team, partners and selected members of each community together to further develop ideas for research proposals that we will then take forward into new applications for funding.

The Findings

The project is still ongoing, and the research team is working on the project's outputs hence, at this stage, we can only indicate some tentative findings:

Methodological findings:

- The project's participatory approach has a positive impact on the local communities. This can be identified in at least three interconnected aspects: i) the project appointed three local researches, one in each site, and trained them in ethnographic and participatory methodologies, enabling them to play a significant role in the development of the project, while enhancing their leadership and communicational skills; ii) led by local researchers, semilleros have provided ample opportunities for engagement of community members in research and facilitation of inter-generational dialogues; iii) Participatory video has proved to be an effective, inclusive and attractive tool to facilitate community-based research and dialogue.

Empirical/conceptual findings:

- Community members did not engage with concepts such as security and unarmed civilian protection as these resonate with top-down and militarised approaches to security. They preferred to use terms such as care, self-care and well-being, which are connected to everyday practices and experiences (for instance, religious and spiritual rituals, sport events and cultural gatherings, which this project has documented).
- The transition from political conflict to conflict over social control of strategic areas has had a very negative impact in all three study sites. This is evidenced by the use of terror and fear as control mechanisms and the imposition of strict rules that lead to social fragmentation and isolation. Consequently, the project has created opportunities to think, act and celebrate together.
- Communities have a wide understanding of the concept of security, which connects with socio-economic issues such as food security, access to basic services, and the right to stay and live with dignity in their territories.

[Find Out More](#)

The Social Process of Guarantees of Antioquia, Colombia: An experience of unarmed civil protection with indigenous and peasant communities of Bajo Cauca



Senú community, Las Palmas Indigenous Reserve, Puerto Bélgica, Cáceres municipality, 2023.

The Researchers

- Astrid Torres Ramírez, Corporación Jurídica Libertad (principal investigator)
- Winston Gallego Pamplona, Corporación Jurídica Libertad (co-investigator)
- Eberhar Cano Naranjo, Corporación Jurídica Libertad (research assistant)
- Juan Esteban Prado (multimedia content creator)
- Fundación Sumapaz (project partner)
- Antioquia Node of the Coordination Colombia Europe United States (project partner)
- Proceso Social de Garantías (project partner)



The Problem

The social, political and armed conflict that persists in the Bajo Cauca subregion of Antioquia (Colombia) has caused peasant and indigenous communities to develop their own protection mechanisms to confront the attacks suffered by their leaders at the hands of legal and illegal armed actors present in the territory. These protective actions have been linked with the Social Process of Guarantees of Antioquia (PSG), a platform of social and community organizations dedicated to strengthening community-internal self-protection processes and dialogue with the authorities responsible for guaranteeing safe conditions for the work of human rights defenders.

The research systematizes the experience of the PSG with the Senú indigenous people and peasant communities of the municipalities of Cáceres, El Bagre and Tarazá as a non-armed protection mechanism for civil society that is contributing to the prevention of risks emanating from violent actions in the territory. Based on the identification of factors that influence the success or failure of the implemented community strategies, the research



Community House, La Unión village, Tarazá municipality, 2023.

also contributes to the production and dissemination of knowledge about collective unarmed protection mechanisms for civil society that are contributing to the prevention of risks from violent actions.

The Research

The main research methodology consists in the systematization of experiences, using an open, qualitative approach. Activities to this end have included an ongoing review of archives and documentary sources, which constitutes a memory exercise not only for research purposes but also for the communities and organizations present. Furthermore, various meetings have been held to foster the exchange of experiences between organizations and communities, which in turn has deepened reflections on self-protection mechanisms through the 'word circles' method.

Other activities cross-cutting these methods have involved the collective creation of multimedia outputs, which in later research phases will be used to create materials for pedagogical and memory purposes. Currently, the team is reviewing the multimedia material for post-production and setting up the final project stage which consist in interviews with state agents to reflect on advocacy processes.

The Findings

Currently, the research process allows us to present the following preliminary results:

(i) The peasant and indigenous organizations that are part of the PSG, the Humanitarian and Peace Roundtable of Antioquia, as well as the Human Rights Platform Coordination Colombia Europe United States, recognize that their self-protection strategies have been strengthened since they started participating in these spaces.

(ii) Having a participatively built gender, ethnic and territorial protocol has allowed organizations to have a permanent consultation route that is suited to the territorial reality and deepening conflict in their communities.



Community House, Doradas Altas village, Tarazá municipality, 2023.

(iii) There is a need for greater ownership and appropriation of these protocols by the members of the organizations and communities, which requires reviewing the lessons learned as well as the implementation of these protocols.

(iv) Addressing the patterns of aggression and the risks faced by the leaders of Bajo Cauca allows us to maintain that ASOCBAC, ASOVIAMCLA and AHEREMIGUA, since their constitution, have been persecuted mainly by the State but also by paramilitary groups for their struggle to defend human rights, the rights of the peasantry and the right to remain in the territory, as well as for their denunciation of serious human rights violations. In the case of indigenous communities, all armed actors have violated their territories and authorities, which is why their indigenous guards have been strengthened.

(v) The experiences of Humanitarian Shelters installed in Bagre and Tarazá allow us to point out that this self-protection mechanism has served as a territorial commitment to send messages to armed actors about respect for civilian property; in this sense, the institutions have started recognizing this mechanism as a contribution to the construction of peace and care.

[Find Out More](#)

Development of civil protection capacities in women displaced by the armed conflict through popular communication and Community Legal Empowerment in Colombia

The Researchers

- Luisa María Colonia, Masterpeace Cali, Colombia (principal investigator)
- Gustavo Suárez, Universidad del Valle, Colombia (co-investigator)
- Fundación Carvajal, Colombia (project partner)
- Unicatólica, Colombia (project partner)
- Humanos: Foro Iberoamericano de Periodistas en DDHH, Colombia (project partner)



The Problem

Despite the Havana Peace Accords in 2016, which sowed hopes for a stable peace in Colombia, violence persists and intensifies, continuing the long history of forced displacement where nearly 8 million people have been internally displaced because of the armed conflict, with a notable increase in cases in recent years. These displaced populations have been thrown into poverty belts and segregated neighborhoods in cities, being re-victimized by the multiple violence inherited from the armed conflict that has been transmuted to the cities.

In that regard, our project is aim to identify the development of pacific civil protection capacities in a community of women victims of the Colombian armed conflict who live in socio-urban segregation contexts, that use popular communication and legal empowerment, to address the questions: what happens when social groups or actor appropriate popular communication and build their own narratives for their peaceful self-protection through civil mechanisms? How does popular communication participate in the restoration of community ties and the development of civil self-protection capacities? What is the relevance of community ties, which promote community advocacy, in local and community practices that manage to overcome illegal violence through unarmed civil self-protection? And How does unarmed civilian self-protection of victims of armed conflict living in contexts of socio-urban segregation interact with the regulations for



the protection of victims' rights, resulting from the 2016 Peace Accords?

The Research

This project was presented with a community-based action-research approach, seeking to establish mechanisms of collaboration and reciprocity with the women who participated in the research in order to co-create knowledge with them. The project was developed in four stages. In the first stage, data and information were collected on the type of population and the social fabric built among the members of the community, as well as on the types of violence to which they are exposed and their awareness in this regard. The second stage was focused on the analysis



and systematization of the information collected, using hermeneutics and the transcription of the life story as tools of analysis. The third stage launched intervention-creation strategies in communication to develop the transmedia product; here, women were both sources of information (testimonials), creators of content and facilitators. The fourth stage was focused on the analysis of the results of the social appropriation of the knowledge produced by the research; and on the drafting of the final report. This last stage was aimed at carrying out an analysis of the reception of the material produced and its impact, particularly on the community under study.

The Findings

- The **construction and strengthening of social cohesion through collective memory and community advocacy are crucial elements in the peaceful resistance and unarmed civil self-protection** promoted by the Semillero de Paz Llano Verde. These strategies enable the community to heal trauma, reassert its identity and fight for its rights in a hostile environment. Community advocacy turns these stories into concrete actions to make injustices visible and find solutions in a kind of autonomy from the margins.
- In the practice of community advocacy, these women have developed unarmed civil self-protection strategies, called mobilizing mechanisms, which are

broken down into different dimensions: training and knowledge, political participation, care and healing strategies, and creative community impact strategies.

- To speak of unarmed civil self-protection in the case of the Llano Verde Peace Nursery implies recognizing that **this is possible only by the construction of an identity linked to the territory as a neighborhood of victims of the conflict**, through exercises of culture and popular communication focused on a collective memory.
- The resignifications that the women of the Seedbed of Peace make both of accounts about violent past as of categories created to explain and to characterize their relationship -but also their peaceful confrontation- with the new violence to which they and their families are exposed, could be thought of tools with a political sense that do not necessarily seek the direct challenge or the dispute for power, but **the achievement of certain early victories related to security and civil protection aspects** where the force and importance of the use of language that anchors the present with that past marked by a national history of conflict can be glimpsed, but also with the existence of a Political Constitution in a State of law, in its struggle for the transformation/pacification of its territory.

www.masterpeace-cali.org

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Still from La Fiesta theatre production, Medellín, Colombia. Photographs by Laura Diosa Vera and Sofia Garcia 'Ponchis'

Art that protects: Contributions of artistic-cultural initiatives to the self-protection strategies of youth and women in the context of urban conflict in the city of Medellín, Colombia

The Researchers

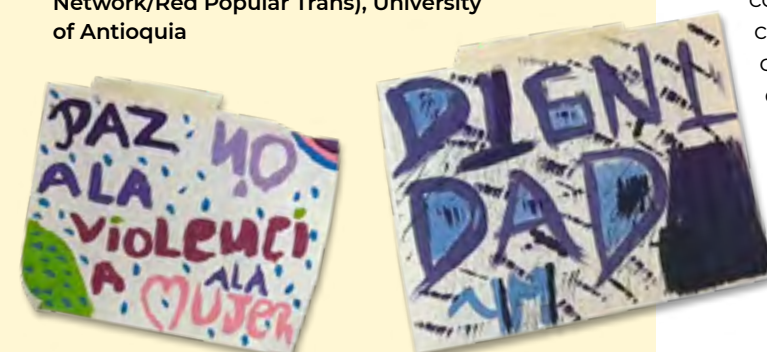
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- Adriana Diosa, Cultural corporation for development Arlequín y los Juglares
- Katherine Urrea Velásquez, Robledo Venga Parchemos
- Jeimy Catalina Guerra Correa, Corporación Consonantes
- Freddy Giovanni Pérez Cárdenas, Cultural corporation for development Arlequín y los Juglares
- Sandra Maryori Benítez Diosa, Cultural corporation for development Arlequín y los Juglares
- Victoria Strauss (member of the Trans People's Network/Red Popular Trans), University of Antioquia



The Problem

The project is situated in the context of the urban conflict in Medellín, Colombia. It is characterized by invisible borders, co-optation of urban space by paramilitarism and exercise of political violence against those who have been accused of collaborating with or being part of leftist groups. As well, the conflict is associated with differentiated vulnerabilities, where women and young people suffer sexual violence, forced recruitment and the construction of a model of masculinity related to the military.

The research seeks to understand how grassroots arts and cultural organizations in Medellín use a collaborative networking strategy to protect communities from the urban conflict and its consequences. We pay special attention to the differentiated vulnerabilities faced by youth and women. In this way, we seek to identify the type of networks that these organization have formed, how they make exchanges and the collaborative strategies that enhance the self-protective effect of artistic and cultural initiatives.



The Research

The research was designed under the parameters of a multiple case study. It is complemented with artistic research methodologies. We selected about 14 artistic-cultural organizations with a trajectory of permanence of more than fifty years in the city. We have done documentary review and systematization of information produced by organizations, interviews with key actors, participant observation of their cultural agendas, ethnographic tours in their areas of influence and discussion groups. On the other hand, we are planning the development of network mapping workshops with key actors. Finally, we will do a Forum Theater with the participation of communities belonging to the organizations' areas of influence, it will be based on a theatrical piece derived from the results of the project's initial phase.



consumption of substances, and influence on lifestyles. In the struggles for portions of power, legal supports are not enough, as they end up being secondary to the dynamics of support and social recognition. It is necessary that an organization have a sustained territorial presence over time to be seen as a legitimate social actor within a community. Art and culture are powerful and very useful tools for the reconstruction of a broken social fabric due to the violence generated by the conflict. They allow to name the unnamable and make visible the invisible.

These findings contribute to broaden the concept of self-protection to understand it in an expanded way. Hence, it can be considered in the combination of care and bonding, in association with protection and security. The actions of care, which in essence maintain existence, are a mosaic of multiple possibilities, some of them with protective purposes. Therefore, protection can be considered as part of the universe of care and at the same time a guarantee of security. Precisely, the care expressed through art is placing at its center sensitive mobilizations that contribute to the establishment of new notions, categories, and models for the understanding of reality. In the face of conflicts and forces that seek to destroy everyday life in the neighborhoods, artistic and cultural initiatives strengthen mutual aid and solidarity as privileged forms of relationships. In this way, the sense of self-protection emerges from the artistic initiatives, from the establishment of safe spaces and a critical stance towards the armed actors in the territory.

The Findings

Artistic and cultural organizations emerge and maintain themselves through a series of networks and connections. All this indicates that the networks they build among themselves are strategic elements of sustainability, permanence over time and generation of self-protection. These organizations have achieved legitimacy among the communities, including local armed actors, which allows them to influence and enter disputes over territorial and population sectors. Among those places a its people diverse interests are at stake, including recruitment, trafficking and



Phase 1
[Find Out More](#)

Phase 2
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Safety and dignity: Enhancing unarmed civilian protection amongst Palestinian communities in the South Hebron Hills

The Researchers

- Dr Marwan Darweish, Coventry University, UK
- Dr Mahmoud Soliman, Coventry University, UK and Al-Shmoh Cultural Centre, Palestine
- Prof Andrew Rigby, Coventry University, UK



The Problem

In the South Hebron Hills of the Occupied Palestinian Territories, an area known as Masafer Yatta, there are a 32 small Palestinian villages, farmer and Bedouin communities living on agriculture and herding. The Israeli state and settlers seek to expel them from this land.

To support the local communities to stay on their land, a number of actors (Palestinian, Israeli and international) have sought to support the civilian population from the escalating acts of violence by the state and settlers in which their lives, homes, crops and livestock have been targeted.

The settlers act with complete impunity, confident they would face no legal sanctions for their acts of violence, and they serve as tool of the Israeli state in its pursuance of its annexationist policies of the Palestinian land. In the words of a [report by the Israeli human rights agency B'tselem](#), 'settler violence is a form of government policy, aided and abetted by official state authorities with their active participation.'



South Hebron Hills, photo from On Our Land project.



House demolition by the Israeli occupation forces in South Hebron. Photo by B'tselem.

In this context UCP is significant as a mode of enhancing the security and protection of the Palestinians in Masafer Yatta and to create safer spaces within which they can continue to maintain their livelihoods, hold on to their land and way of life. The research examines the different forms of community self-protection measures and role of others to create safer space for the Palestinians and the challenges faced by the local community and external actors to provide civil protection in violent conflict.

The Research

We conducted two field visits to Masafer Yatta in October 2022 and June 2023. We interviewed local Palestinian community leaders and activists, in addition to members of international groups engaged in different forms of 'accompaniment' and civil protection. We interviewed about 30 people and accompanied shepherds and farmers and witnessed the UCP activities by Palestinian, Israeli, and international organisations. We are making a short film to document the experience of UCP.



The Research Team: Mahmoud Soliman, Andrew Rigby and Marwan Darweish.



Smaeha Huranin, Research Assistant for the project, and Umm Nidal.

The Findings

The research highlighted that in such an asymmetric struggle the local inhabitants have few resources of resistance beyond their own everyday courage, tenacity and steadfastness – *sumud*. To support them, different organisations and groups have sought to offer various forms of accompaniment as agents of civilian protection, assisting the Palestinians in their efforts to achieve a degree of 'safe space' within which to pursue their lives.

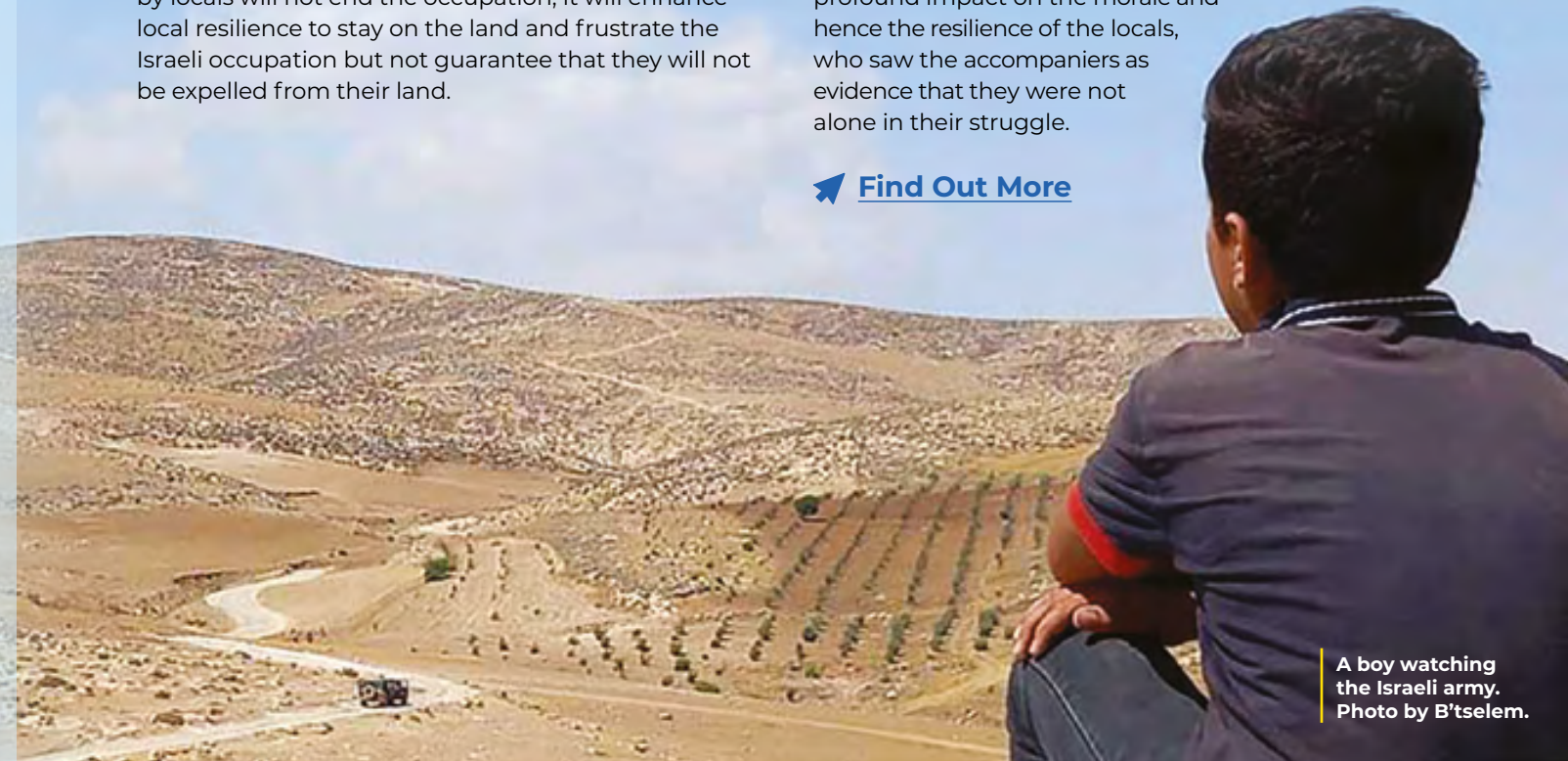
The research highlighted that community self-protection measures are a first line of defence. There is a culture characterised by an emphasis on the importance of family and family networks, mutual aid, *fazaa* (traditional collective effort), significance of personal and family honour and avoidance of shame. Community based protection methods in response to threats from outside, especially settlers, include: recognition of strength in numbers, importance of look-outs, coordination, mutual support and local knowledge. Our conclusion is that all the actions taken by locals will not end the occupation, it will enhance local resilience to stay on the land and frustrate the Israeli occupation but not guarantee that they will not be expelled from their land.

There is a symbiotic relationship between local Palestinians and international accompaniers. The accompaniers are there to enhance the security of the Palestinians, but the Palestinians in turn 'protect' the internationals – advising them of potential threats, identifying escape routes in case of attack, indicating where they should stand in order to minimise the risk of injury during encounters with settlers.

We learned how the presence of Palestinian and Israeli solidarity activists, alongside internationals from networks such as the International Solidarity Movement, the Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel, Operation Dove from Italy and the US-based Centre for Jewish Nonviolence, played a significant role in enabling locals to continue to graze their sheep. The accompaniers acted as a kind of protective presence, deterring Israeli settlers from attacking the villagers through their monitoring and documentation of human rights abuses.

Most significantly, their presence had a profound impact on the morale and hence the resilience of the locals, who saw the accompaniers as evidence that they were not alone in their struggle.

[Find Out More](#)



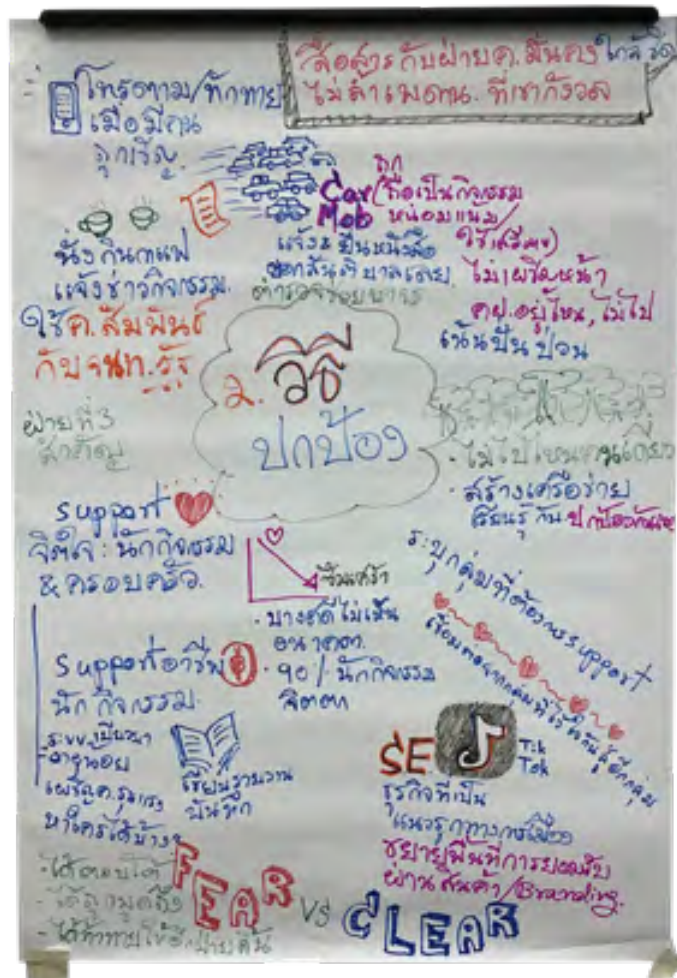
A boy watching the Israeli army. Photo by B'tselem.

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- Chaowat Moonpakdee (research assistant)
- Nonviolent Peaceforce Philippines (project partner)



Thailand is a country that is presently experiencing different kinds of violence, from the low-intensity conflict in the Deep South, to violence surrounding political protests, and to environmentally based conflicts with tribal ethnic groups. The state's application of emergency law, martial law, national security law, and the persistent impunity in the security sector, have resulted in the situation in which protection mechanisms by the state are not adequate. This research had the following questions/objectives: (1) To demonstrate that protection of civilians can also be done by civilians, and that unarmed protection can be learned. (2) To explore the opportunities and challenges of UCP practices in the Thai conflicts and political context. (3) To reiterate that UCP is part of conflict management and nonviolent struggle. (4) To compile, define, and analyse patterns of civilian protection practices in various conflict situations. (5) To identify the conditions and the social and political environments affecting UCP practices. (6) To design communication channels and a social learning platform for UCP.

The research began with identifying past protection practices since 2004. The areas concentrated on were: (i) the Patani conflict in Southern Thailand; (ii) political conflict and protest gatherings against the government; and (iii) conflict over environmental issues, tribal people's homeland and their relocation. The methods used included: (i) data from published sources (media reports, articles, speeches) over the past 20 years; (ii) interviews with NGOs, political activists, and security sector organisations; and (iii) two focus group discussions (current activists, academics, and journalists doing work on nonviolence). The types of incidents studied were: arbitrary detention, security surveillance, raids of political protests, forced disappearances, torture, strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPP measure), witch-hunts in cyberspace, and extra-judicial killings. The individuals and groups interviewed, and participants in the focus groups,



included members from witness volunteer groups, the Buddhist nonviolence network, human right protection advocates, journalists, the People's Information Center on Truth, the National Human Rights Commissioner, student activists, Buddhist monk peace advocates, university academics, and security officials. The total number of people engaged in this project was about 35-40.

The present UCP situation is as follows: (i) UCP practices have been a part of nonviolent struggle, but they have not been well and systemically integrated. (ii) Protection from physical harm, especially for the “targeted” victims, in the current political atmosphere has been limited. (iii) There is a need for the idea of protection to be expanded to family members of the targeted people. (iv) Intervention has been primarily by human rights defenders, student activists, journalists, legal aids, civic women, and peace and nonviolence activists. (v) Society is not aware of the effectiveness of UCP. (vi) There has been contestation between the state’s monopoly of protection and the role of civilians, raising the question of whether UCP will impede the idea of the state’s responsibility to protect.



There is a need for UCP and self-protection mechanisms in Thailand. The challenges in meeting this need are: (i) Seemingly, the credibility of those doing protection work is more important than the nature of the work. (ii) Increasing the capability of those doing protection work. (iii) Training issues. (iv) The challenge of dialogue. (v) Developing early warning systems as protection. (vi) Protection brings things “to light” via social media. (vii) Developing healthy nonviolence practices as a precondition for UCP enhancement.

Opportunities for UCP enhancement include: (i) Developing strategies for building cooperation for UCP activities, and for communicating the idea of UCP, in Thai society. (ii) Building UCP institutions, networks, or alliances. (iii) Sharing platforms to increase learning capacity. (iv) Bringing UCP into the community of nonviolence research and advocates. (v) Teaching self-protection as a basic skill for active citizens – as part of citizenship education.

 Find Out More





UCP in Southern Thailand: Developing Civilian Protection Guidelines for Violence-prone Communities

The Researchers

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- Miss Anchana Heemmina, Duayjai Group (co-investigator)
- Yasmin Sattar, PhD Faculty of Political Science, Prince of Songkla University (co-investigator)
- Dr. Delsy Ronnie, Nonviolent Peaceforce Philippines (project partner)



The Problem

The conflict situation between the Barisan Revolution Nasional and the Thai state has resulted in violence in the three southern border provinces and four districts in Songkhla province. It caused 7,520 deaths and 13,968 injuries between 2004 and August 2023. The government has taken steps to solve the problem of violence by enforcing special

laws, namely the Martial Law Act, the Public Administration in Emergency Situations Act, and the Internal Security Act of the Kingdom. But the situation has not improved. Instead, local people have adapted and applied their informal practices, some of which resemble elements of unarmed civilian protection. However, this phenomenon, although recognized, has not been comprehensively analyzed, since the work of NGOs both inside and outside the area has been largely fragmented. As such, this research seeks to answer the following questions:

1. How can communities in the southern provinces of Thailand design their own unarmed civilian protection program?
2. Are there any practical techniques of unarmed civilian protection from around the world that can be used to guide community practices in the region?
3. What are the existing unarmed civilian protection strategies for increasing security among communities in the southern border provinces?



The Research

The main activities in this project commenced with gathering information on unarmed civilian protection processes in conflict areas and conducting a synthesis of UCP models in countries where UCP mechanisms are already implemented. Then, in-depth interviews with 69 villagers in three different communities were carried out. After that, three workshops on UCP will be carried out separately in each of the three communities, with 60 participants. Lastly, a workshop will be held to design mechanisms for the protection of unarmed civilians in target communities, with 30 participants. The project is currently in the process of analyzing the interview results and designing the UCP model.

The Findings

From the results of the initial study, it was found that all three communities faced many types of violence related to conflict situations, such as bombings, shootings, cordons, and searches by the military with human shields. Moreover, there are also other types of violence such as drugs, and criminal gangs in communities. The villagers indicated that before violent eruptions such as bombings and shootings, most villagers could not know or detect any signs of violence but they could notice that the Thai military was patrolling in their communities. Moreover, the villagers always use a centralized approach to protect themselves from violence by informing village headmen, and community security guards, if they find any sign of a violent situation or after a violent eruption. When a violent situation (battle between insurgents and the military) happens in their communities, the villagers

always stay at home for safety. The house of the village headman is where people in communities gather to find conflict resolution (quarrels or land disputes), while the religious leaders are mediators for religious conflict issues such as conflicts over marriage, divorce, domestic violence, and inheritance. Besides formal mechanisms, villagers used social media (LINE) as a tool to communicate with their neighbors and receive warning signs from their leaders. However, many informants such as elders and people with disabilities indicated that they do not have cellphones, so they could not access any information from social media. In local communities, tea shop discussion and word of mouth are the best ways to communicate with each other. When the researchers introduced UCP mechanisms, the villagers tried to connect many UCP principles with their existing approaches. Future research will include initiatives from communities (besides existing approaches) to develop guidelines for protecting themselves from many forms of violence.

[Find Out More](#)



Scholars at Risk: Understanding Vulnerability and violence faced by Myanmar Refugee Scholars in Northern Thailand

The Researchers

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- Nonviolent Peaceforce Myanmar (co-principal investigator)
- Aung Kyaw Thein, Regional Center for Social Sciences and Sustainable Development (RCSD), Chiangmai University, Thailand (co-investigator)



The Problem

Since the 2021 military coup in Myanmar, the regime's brutality and political turmoil have escalated, leading to increased suffering and intensified oppression. Thousands of individuals have been killed, detained, or forced to flee their homes in order to escape the junta's brutality. Many of these individuals have sought refuge in neighboring Thailand, undertaking perilous journeys both with and without proper documentation. However, those without proper documents face significant limitations and risks, including the threat of being searched, arrested, and deported.

To address these challenges and shed light on the experiences of refugees in Northern Thailand, the Regional Center for Social Science and Sustainable Development (RCSD) and Nonviolent Peaceforce Myanmar collaborated to conduct research using the Co-Production of Knowledge (CPK) approach. The research is centered around gaining insights into the vulnerabilities, harms, and existing UCP practices and mechanisms in the northern part of Thailand from the perspective of refugees' daily experiences and the tactics and strategies they have developed over time to protect themselves and others. The output of this work package will contribute to knowledge development, public awareness, and policy. Based on these aims, this research explores the following questions:

1. What are vulnerabilities and harms faced by the refugee scholars from Myanmar in Northern Thailand?
2. How have unarmed civilian protection strategies formed or re-emerged to protect refugee scholars from Myanmar in Northern Thailand?
3. How resilient are the unarmed civilian protection mechanisms among the refugee scholar group?

The Research

Research Team and Method

The research is led by a dedicated team of researchers with expertise in their respective fields from RCSD (Research design and methodology) and NP (UCP principles and practices).

The research will apply co-production of knowledge (CPK) and auto-ethnographic data collection process, in which a group of refugee scholars will themselves lead the research design and implementation to reflect on how their own strategies, practices and perspectives can be situated amid the concepts and practices of UCP and the broader context of exile in Thailand.

Application and Production

1. This work package will train a primary research targeted group of ten research fellows of RCSD. They will be equipped with relevant academic skills and insight focusing on knowledge of CPK and UCP.
2. The research fellows will do auto-ethnographic research (data collection process) about their own individual life experiences and connect them to the broader cultural, social, security, and political contexts of Myanmar and Thailand.
3. The principal investigators from RCSD and NP, with assistance from an autoethnographic specialist, will closely assist, supervise and monitor their progress, development and deliverability of the output, providing advice regarding research methodology, analysis, literature, and output structure.
4. The manuscript(s) written by the ten research fellows (co-knowledge producers) will be analysed and reflected to produce abstract knowledge of their experience and surroundings.



The Findings

Coming Soon (please see the website for updates).

[Find Out More](#)

Exploring Community Perceptions and Coping Strategies on Violence in Rakhine State, Myanmar

The Researchers

- Abellia Anggi Wardani, Knowledge-Hub Myanmar (principal investigator)
- Riyad Anwar, Knowledge-Hub Myanmar
- Florian Weigand, Centre on Armed Groups and London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE)
- Tony Neil, London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE)



The Problem

The emergence of unarmed civilian protection (UCP) discourse in recent years came with the interest to document different case studies on civilian self-protection strategies. Within the Southeast Asia region, one country that has been ill-famed for its conflict context is Myanmar. Decades after its independence, the country's population still lives under a constant threat of violence, from state-sponsored conflict to intercommunal conflict. This project offers a glimpse of the nation's experience by discerning the experiences of people in Rakhine.

Different ethnic communities living in central and northern Rakhine have been exposed, to varying degrees, to diverse forms of violence. In the span of two decades, there were at least three crises that sparked violent incidents across the region: the 2012 sectarian conflict between ethnic Rakhine Buddhists and Rohingya Muslims in northern Rakhine; the 2016-2017 violent campaign against the Rohingya; and the frequent armed tensions between Myanmar's armed force, the Tatmadaw, and the Arakan Army (AA), the armed wing extension of an ethnic insurgency group, the United League of Arakan (ULA). These crises have never truly been reconciled but linger as the drivers to violence within the region. Different ethnic communities are exposed to violence in different ways.

Against this background, this project seeks to recount the Rakhine people's precarious journey of living in violence-settings with different powerful actors. Three key observations were highlighted: 1) civilian



engagement/disengagement from authorities, either from military or ethnic armed groups; 2) their violence protection strategies; and 3) the networks or infrastructures offering them protection.

The Research

To engage with our three key observations, this research project uses a participatory action research approach involving two data collection methods: semi-structured interviews and artwork elicitation. With the support of 28 trained research volunteers, our data collection was carried out on a monthly basis from March to May 2023 in five Rakhine townships: Maungdaw, Buthidaung, Sittwe, Minbya, and Mrauk U. From this period, we managed to collect around 106

semi-structured interview responses and 101 art-based research responses. Demographics-wise, the majority of responses came from civilians of Rakhine and Rohingya ethnicity, followed by other ethnicities of smaller presence in the region such as Chin, Chakma, Kaman, Khamee, Marama Gyi, and others.

The project is currently at its coding and analysis phase. Planned outputs include a dedicated panel to launch our final report, a community booklet of civilian protection strategies to be shared amongst our participants, and three themed research articles, namely: 1) civilian interaction with armed groups; 2) ceasefire and violent state-building in Rakhine; 3) the methodological usages of artworks to discern civilian self-protection stories.



The Findings

Bearing in mind the current state of our project, we tentatively offer the following observations:

1. On civilians' understanding of conflict dynamics in Rakhine state

Depending on their ethnic identity, our participants approach the concept of armed conflict differently. Our Rakhine ethnicity participants, for instance, tend to depict conflict as an isolated event between the Tatmadaw and the AA, notably after the February 2021 Coup. Meanwhile participants of Rohingya origin perceived conflict as a constantly evolving experience, associating it with how they were at risk of being discriminated against and potentially harmed even prior to the 2021 Coup.

2. On civilians' protection strategies

Different forms of capital enable civilians and communities to employ different strategies for their protection vis-à-vis different armed actors, ranging from actively influencing their behaviour to trying to be as friendly or non-noticeable as possible at checkpoints. Communities which lack capital – such as economic capital to bribe actors or social capital in the form of connections to the conflict party, for instance based on ethnicity – have a considerably reduced ability to influence their behaviour, making unarmed self-protection more difficult.

3. On the existence of protective networks/infrastructures as endorsed by ceasefire

Conventional understandings of ceasefires view them as agreements to freeze hostilities, or as a stepping stone to end wars. However, evidence from a ceasefire between the AA and the Tatmadaw in Rakhine State complicates a teleological explanation. Instead, fine-grained empirical evidence suggests that a ceasefire has been used by contending sides as a political technology that has recast the mode and repertoires of contestation from violence to competition over populations and territory. A counter-intuitive outcome is that while violence between armed actors ceases, violence against civilians persists.

<https://www.knowledgehub-mm.org/>

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Understanding the Changing Strategy and Practice of Civilian Protection under the Military Junta: A case from Kachin and Northern Shan, Myanmar

The Researchers

- Nonviolent Peaceforce Myanmar



The Problem

This research studies the changing UCP strategies and practice in Myanmar during and after the military coup in 2021. In response to the coup, armed conflict and other forms of security tensions drastically increased, which changed and intensified the forms of harm towards civilians, as well as their vulnerability to harm. This research studies community strategies and adaptations in providing (self) protection. It will reflect on lessons learned for UCP strategy and practice during and after the coup and under the military Junta.

This is a qualitative research project, conducted in Kachin and Northern Shan states of Myanmar as case



Focus Group Discussion in Kachin



Focus Group Discussion in Northern Shan

studies where armed conflict escalated in the same way as in other areas of Myanmar. This research will contribute to both knowledge and practice. In terms of knowledge, it will enrich our understanding of the rapid changes to UCP practices and approaches that have occurred as a result of the changing and increasing threats against civilians in Kachin and Northern Shan states. In terms of practice, the research findings will be reformulated into a more practical output to further support the Nonviolent Peaceforce mission in Myanmar.

The Research

The data collection process followed standard qualitative methods, which included in-depth interviews, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), and a thorough literature review. Fieldwork preparations commenced in June 2023 and involved establishing communication with partners in Kachin and Northern Shan, as well as recruiting research assistants. The recruitment of two research assistants, one for each location, was successfully completed according to the planned schedule.

Data collection took place between the months of July and August, focusing on specific areas

within Kachin and Northern Shan. In Kachin, the townships of Myitkyina and Waingmaw were included, while in Northern Shan, the townships of Namtu and Lashio were included in the data collection process. During this period, a total of two Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), one in each region, were conducted. Additionally, 11 in-depth interviews were carried out, ensuring a comprehensive range of perspectives were captured. The respondents included community members, and members of civil society organisations (CSOs) providing protection for civilians and implementing humanitarian assistance.

For the next step, the same participants will be invited to a second FGD, which will be conducted to disseminate the research findings. The second FGD in each research site will also serve as a data collection method for clarification and refinement of the research findings.

The Findings

Data analysis is still ongoing, and we will share the results of the analysis soon.

[Find Out More](#)

Exploring Local Infrastructures and Initiatives for Civilian (Self) Protection in Papua amidst Violent Conflict

The Researchers

- Delsy Ronnie, Nonviolent Peaceforce Philippines (principal investigator)
- Arfiansyah, International Centre for Aceh and Indian Ocean Studies (ICAIOS)



The Problem

Our research studies the vulnerability of the Papuan people to physical harm during the violent conflict since the 1960s, local actors' initiative to protect civilians, and their mechanism to share the initiative with other civilians and actors. Furthermore, the research also studies enabling and disabling actors and mechanisms for protection.

Looking at the nature of the armed conflict in West Papua, this research also seeks to know the presence and working mechanisms of non-Papuan organizations in Papua. All these questions aim at supporting and strengthening the capacity of local organizations to promote and build civilian protection mechanisms, as a trajectory to promote community-based conflict and peace management.

The Research

This research engaged more than 60 participants in five provinces. They were engaged as informants for data collection, participants of Focus Group Discussions and hand drawing, and participants of two different training sessions organised in two different provinces in West Papua island: Unarmed Civilian Protection training (UCP) and a combination of UCP and internally displaced persons (IDP) profiling.

Some of the participants were approached informally through casual discussions. They enriched the research's perspectives and knowledge about the local situation.

The fieldwork and data collection has been completed. Upcoming activities will be:

1. Another UCP training was requested by a Church organization for its members in the field, and we hope to be able to provide this;
2. Writing academic papers;
3. Dissemination of the research findings to one of the Central Government offices.

The Findings

This research finds that those living in Papua island, at least in the three selected areas, are very vulnerable to physical violence caused by cultural, social, and structural factors. The community is also deeply polarised into indigenous and transmigrant communities, who have been there since the 1960s. Indigenous people view the transmigrants as part of a central government occupation mission, which extracts natural resources and other capital from Papua. Papuans look at themselves as being colonised structurally and militarily by the Indonesian government, and economically by both the Indonesian government and the transmigrants.

Many local organisations and individuals have tried to provide protection to civilians from further harm and violence. Church organisations are the most significant of these, as they focus on their religious and humanitarian mission. However, the more priests engage in protection, the more they are subject to violence by military forces, as they are suspected of being part of the insurgency group.

As armed conflict is escalating, Papua has become a very sensitive issue politically and militarily for the Indonesian government. This restrains non-Papuan organisations from being physically present and working in Papua.



Drawing by a research participant, Jayapura, West Papua. The research participant is a local activist. She described how her anger always boiled over whenever she heard of violence against her people, the Papuans. After being involved in UCP training for three days, she described how her perspective changed and her emotions cooled down. During the training, she felt a breeze of hope. She found alternative ways to deal with the armed conflict, which are more relevant, can be contextualized and are more important than just protesting against the violent acts. It is protecting the community from harm. She said during an interview about her drawing that "We Papuans are very few compared to transmigrants and other Indonesians. There is no other way to survive and end violence but through peace. Otherwise,

we all will be killed and no longer exist". She drew the changes in her emotions during the hand drawing session. The outermost line in red symbolizes her anger. The second line in green symbolizes a new emotional state; calmness, which was destructed and blanketed by red (anger). She chose green as her new intended emotion that she would like to restore. Green, according to her, symbolizes happiness and joy. The third line in yellow symbolizes the spirit that she likes to embrace. Her left-hand does not clench anymore, instead it is opening. She said the clenched hand symbolizes the fight, which is no longer what she chooses to do. Instead, that hand has to be opened as a touching approach to stop violence and promote peace. The open hand filled with blue symbolizes the sky and the water.

[Find Out More](#)

Participatory Evaluation Projects

Traditional methods of evaluation are often top-down or output-focused and therefore risk missing important nuances connected with civilian protection efforts. Aware of these sensitivities, *Creating Safer Space* brought together a group of UCP practitioners and scholars in the “Innovation in Evaluation and Learning” working group. This group discussed good practice approaches to evaluation, and developed principles that should inform evaluation design. The most important

principle is that UCP evaluation should be participatory. More information about the methodology is available on our website:

<https://creating-safer-space.com/participatory-evaluation-and-learning/>

Creating Safer Space has supported three projects to pilot this evaluation methodology.

Contributions of grassroots organisations to the implementation of unarmed civilian self-protection strategies in violent urban contexts: Towards the security of diverse and vulnerable populations in socio-segregated environments

Project Team:

- **Luisa María Colonia Zúñiga, Masterpeace Cali (principal investigator)**
- **Gustavo Suárez, Masterpeace Cali (investigator)**

This project investigates from a participatory methodological design the impacts of actions carried out by grassroots organisations in violent and socio-segregated urban contexts in the city of Cali on these territories and on the

perceptions and realities among the diverse populations that are settled there. Specifically, it focuses on how actions and perceptions of security and protection relate to identity and territory among these populations.

[Find Out More](#)

Cali, Colombia.

Photo by Masterpeace Cali.



Assessing the impact of unarmed civilian protection in the South Hebron Hills between 2018-2023

Project Team:

- **Associazione Comunità Papa Giovanni XXIII (Operation Dove / Operazione Colomba), Italy**
- **Youth of Sumud, Palestine**

This project aims to assess the impact of the ongoing collaboration between international volunteers and the Palestinian community in the South Hebron Hills, West Bank. With the Palestinian residents facing violence from Israeli settlers, particularly towards school children, Operazione Colomba (OC) has provided essential support by accompanying them through

UCP. It is crucial to evaluate how this partnership has influenced safety and well-being. The project focuses on understanding OC role in creating a sense of security

between 2018 and 2023, aligned with the nonviolent resistance efforts led by the Palestinian community, and the ability in remaining responsive to the needs.

[Find Out More](#)



South Hebron Hills, Palestine. Photo by Operazione Colomba.

UCP and Migrants in the US / Mexico Borderlands

Project Team:

- **Stephen Gasteyer, Meta Peace Team / Michigan State University (principal investigator)**
- **Kim Redigan, Meta Peace Team (team member)**
- **Mary Hanna, Meta Peace Team (team member)**

[Find Out More](#)

This project investigates from a participatory methodological design the impacts of actions carried out by grassroots organisations in violent and socio-segregated urban contexts in the city of Cali on these territories and on the perceptions and realities among the diverse populations that are settled there. Specifically, it focuses on how actions and perceptions of security and protection relate to identity and territory among these populations.

Using a participatory action research design, this pilot project will engage with organizations serving migrants at the United States/Mexico border to develop tools for evaluating the impacts of unarmed civilian protection and accompaniment

(UCP/A) to protect migrants in the North American border region. Meta Peace Team has been working since 2018 with US/Mexican organizations attempting to protect migrants increasingly exposed not only to violence by militarized border security on the US side of the border, but also by both police and gangs as they waited in Mexican communities. The UCP/A initiatives aim to protect migrants through accompaniment, humanitarian relief, and documentation aimed at advocacy. The pilot evaluation will assess the impacts, successes and challenges of the UCP efforts through participant observation and guided conversations with UCP/A organizers, delegation participants, and migrant leaders.



**Creating Safer Space: Insights into
civilian capacities for nonviolent (self-)
protection in conflict-affected areas**

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