



Report of the

International Gathering on Unarmed Civilian Protection and Accompaniment

Monday, 9 October 2023 – Wednesday, 11 October 2023
in Ferney-Voltaire (France) and Geneva (Switzerland)

Compiled by Ellen Furnari and Christine Schweitzer
with Mel Duncan

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**CREATING
SAFER SPACE**
STRENGTHENING CIVILIAN PROTECTION
AMIDST VIOLENT CONFLICT

Ellen Furnari, MSW, PhD

Ellen Furnari has been researching and evaluating Unarmed Civilian Protection and accompaniment projects, as well as several peacebuilding projects, since 2004. Her Ph.D. thesis (2014), titled *Understanding Effectiveness in Peacekeeping Operations: Exploring the perspective of frontline peacekeepers*, highlighted the centrality of relationships to all peacekeeping. Dr. Furnari has been involved with Nonviolent Peaceforce's Good Practices process since the beginning in 2014. Starting with editing as well as writing several chapters in *Wielding Nonviolence in the Midst of Violence*, she has helped shape the Good Practices/ Community of Practice Process from the beginning. She recently co-edited *Unarmed Civilian Protection: A New Paradigm for Protection and Human Security* (Bristol University Press, 2023). Dr. Furnari was part of the content coordinating team for the UCP/A Community of Practice Gathering in Ferney-Voltaire.

Christine Schweitzer Ph.D.

Christine Schweitzer is a researcher at the Institute for Peace Work and Nonviolent Conflict Transformation (IFGK, www.ifgk.de), Executive Secretary of the German organization Federation for Social Defence (www.soziale-verteidigung.de), and co-editor of the bi-monthly magazine *Peace Forum* (www.friedenskooperative.de). She has published on conflict transformation, nonviolence, unarmed civilian protection (peacekeeping), and social defence. She co-founded and co-managed the international volunteer project Balkan Peace Team in the 1990s and worked as a Research and Program Director for Nonviolent Peaceforce most of the 2000s. Since 2017, she has accompanied the Good Practices process of Nonviolent Peaceforce by documenting the regional workshops and was part of the content coordinating team for the UCP/A Community of Practice Gathering in Ferney-Voltaire.

Mel Duncan

Mel Duncan recently retired from Nonviolent Peaceforce (NP), a group he co-created. He served as their first director, and represented them at the United Nations where the group was granted *Consultative Status*. Recent UN global reviews as well as Security Council and General Assembly Resolutions have cited and recommended unarmed civilian protection. *The Utne Reader* Magazine named him as one of "50 Visionaries Who are Changing Our World." In September of 2022, Mel received the *Vision of Gandhi Award* from the India Association of Minnesota. In 1997-98, he embarked upon a spiritual sojourn which led him to Plum Village and Thich Nhat Hanh. It was on leaving Plum Village when he received the vision of NP. He most recently has headed up the formation of a UCP/A Community of Practice. He was part of the content coordinating team for the UCP/A Community of Practice Gathering in Ferney-Voltaire.

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Compiled by Ellen Furnari and Christine Schweitzer with Mel Duncan

Editor: Nonviolent Peaceforce

Photos: If not otherwise indicated, pictures of the Gathering by Mary B. Hannah or Christine Schweitzer

St. Paul / Geneva, January 2024

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Acronyms

CoP = Community of Practice

CPT = Community Peacemaker Teams (formerly Christian Peacemaker Teams)

CR = Civil resistance

CSS = Creating Safer Space

CBO = Community-based Organization

HR = Human Rights

HRD = Human Rights Defender

IDP = Internally Displaced Person

ICRC = International Committee of the Red Cross

MILF = Moro Islamic Liberation Front

MPT = Meta Peace Team, USA

NGO = Nongovernmental Organization

NP = Nonviolent Peaceforce

OC = Operazione Colomba (Operation Dove, Italy)

ONAD = Organization for Nonviolence and Development (South Sudan)

PBI = Peace Brigades International

PPM = Permanent Peace Movement, Lebanon

UCP/A = Unarmed Civilian Protection / Accompaniment

WPT = Women Peace Team (NP)

Notetakers of the working groups and plenaries

Honoring Relationships: Decolonizing UCP/A	Anna Zaros
Engaging Community Voices: Exploring Ethics & Principles	Randy Janzen
Learning What Works in UCP/A	Ken Solberg
Advancing Structural Transformation	Marna Anderson
Mental Health and Wellness in the Context of Socio-Political Violence	Jacque Wiersma
The Role of UCP/A in Contemporary Peace Processes	Charles Johnson
The Power of Women's Peace Teams	Sharon Slettehaug
Plenaries	Christine Schweitzer



The participants at the Gathering.

Photo: Brian Lundy

Introduction

Unarmed Civilian Protection and Accompaniment (UCP/A) refers to the direct protection of civilians, human rights defenders, nonviolent activists, or especially threatened groups like IDPs/refugees from violence in conflict situations by unarmed civilians. There are at least 60 known groups practicing UCP/A—as well as a vast range of community-level initiatives that continue to emerge around the world. The awareness is on the rise that there is a Community of Practice (CoP) developing.

The forming of a CoP was helped by a good practices process initiated by Nonviolent Peaceforce (NP) in 2014, and culminating in this Gathering. It included:

- Case studies in four areas of the world where UCP/A is being practiced: South Sudan, Colombia, the Philippines (Mindanao), and Israel/Palestine. Their findings were published in the book “Wielding Nonviolence in the Midst of Violence”, edited by Ellen Furnari.¹
- Six regional facilitated consultation groups made up of UCP/A practitioners, field partners, and academics for three-day sessions to review their work, analyze findings of the case studies, and validate good practices and emerging themes; as well as identify dilemmas or challenges raised but not answered by the cases. The workshops took place in Manila in December 2017, Beirut in June 2018, Nairobi in November 2018, Paynesville, Minnesota in October 2019, and Bogotá in January 2020. The final workshop for the European region took place online in February 2021.²

¹ Furnari, Ellen (ed.) (2016): *Wielding Nonviolence in the Face of Violence.*, Ed. Institut für Friedensarbeit und Gewaltfreie Konfliktaustragung, Norderstedt:BoD

² The documentations of these workshops can be found here: <https://nonviolentpeaceforce.org/ucp-community/>

- An international UCP/A Good Practices Gathering. Due to the Covid pandemics, this Gathering was split in two parts, an online Gathering taking place in November 2021, and a face-to-face concluding Gathering in Ferney-Voltaire (France) from 9-11 October 2023. Between the two Gatherings, three international working groups formed by representatives of various UCP/A organizations and UCP/A researchers were convened who prepared material for the Gathering in Ferney-Voltaire on:
 - Decolonizing UCP/A
 - Engaging Community Voices
 - Learning What Works in UCP/A (part of the Creating Safer Space research network coordinated by Aberystwyth University)³

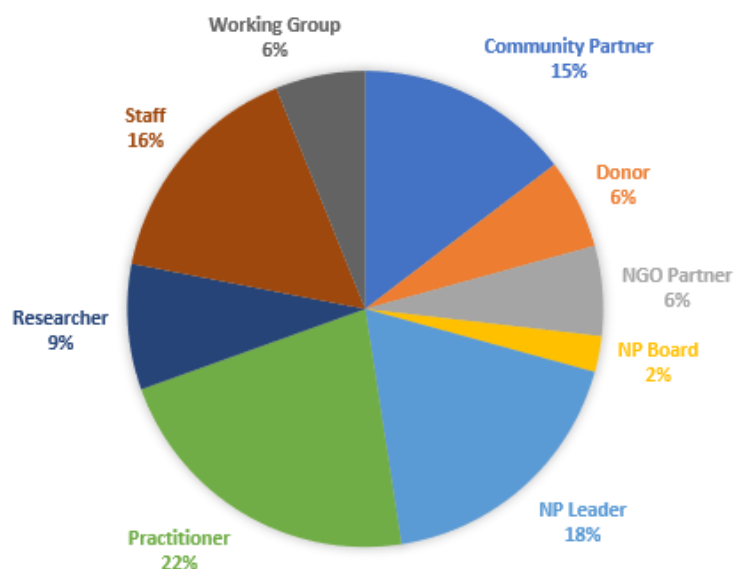
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The Gathering in Ferney-Voltaire, 9-11 October 2023

A total of 84 practitioners, community and NGO partners, and academics plus a few supporters from 31 countries and about 30 organizations – NGOs, CBOs, universities, etc. - from six continents attended the Gathering.

The Gathering started on Monday morning with a plenary and different exercises for getting to know each other, including three timelines asking: Which key events were significant in your personal life? Which global or regional key events have shaped/are shaping our work? And which key events were significant for my organization/community? The personal timelines spoke of key events like losses and experience of violence, and the eventual joining of a movement, as well as spiritual growth. There were three typical lines in the first timeline: concrete cases of violence in the community, concrete acts of resistance and people joining together to protect each other.



PARTICIPANT TYPE ANALYSIS

³ See <https://creating-safer-space.com/>

The global influences varied a lot depending on the continent where people were based. There were a lot of smaller conflicts listed, as well as 9/11 and the fall of the Berlin wall. (The latter raised the question in the plenary how Eurocentric this timeline was.) Covid was not mentioned by anyone.

Regarding the Community of Practice, especially the third timeline on organizations was interesting. Starting with the founding of the organizations, there was a clear trend in organizations to localize more, shifting the focus from global to local policy issues. A second trend was to start to reflect on internal questions like power relationships, leadership, accessibility, developing resilience, and colonialism. For local organizations it seems to be typical that they started out with protest and later turned to UCP and shifted into more programmatic work.

In the afternoon, three workshops based on the topics of three of the international working groups listed above took place.

On Tuesday morning, the working groups reported back to participants, followed by a plenary session on “Looming Threats: Shaping Challenges into Strategies”. Two threats were discussed: Land and human rights defense, presented by the environmental activist Sr. Maudila Lopez (Guatemala), and Digital Threats, elaborated by Joelle Rizk (ICRC Digital Risk Advisor). Three Community partners responded to the presentations.

Participants spent the afternoon in four concurrent workshops dealing with

- Mental Health and Wellness in the Context of Socio-Political Violence,
- Advancing Structural Transformation: How can UCP/A and Nonviolent Resistance mutually enhance each other?
- The Power of Women Peace Teams, and
- The Role of UCP/A in Contemporary Peace Processes.

The final part of the afternoon was reserved for self-organized groups initiating new topics or continuing discussions.

On the morning of the third and final day of the Gathering, the participants discussed the forming of a Community of Practice, and decided on concrete next steps.



In the afternoon, a Policy Roundtable took place in Geneva, with four Ambassadors from the Missions to the UN from the Netherlands, the Philippines, Sierra Leone, and Costa Rica speaking and listening to inputs from practitioners from South Sudan, the USA, and Colombia, and members of the Creating Safer Space research network as well as CURE Violence.

The report

This report summarizes the main Gathering highlights in roughly chronological order, based on the notes taken by various notetakers (see list on page 4), the material prepared in advance of the Gathering, and notes taken by the rapporteurs. Many presentations and papers were developed for this Gathering. They complement and expand on the topics of the sessions described in this report. They are archived and available in the [Gathering Resource Guide available in English, Spanish, & French](#).

Last but not least, the authors give thanks to their colleagues in the working group that prepared the Gathering and then read and reviewed this report: Berit Bliesemann de Guevara, Mel Duncan, Adele Lennig, and Huibert Oldenhuis.

Nonviolent Peaceforce is grateful for the contribution of all speakers, participants, volunteers, technical support staff, and the donors who made it financially possible to hold this Gathering. (cs)



UCP/A - An Evolving Community of Practice

The project to explore and document good practices in UCP/A began in 2014 and included research for case studies as well as regional meetings and international meetings. These meetings validated and expanded the understanding of good practices in accompaniment and unarmed civilian protection initially documented in 2014-2015.

The case studies and regional meetings confirmed that relationships are the core of how civilians protect themselves and others, without the use of violence. These relationships manifest in many ways. They can be used to deter violence, protect civilians or encourage upholding human rights. The relationships are impacted by who is relating to whom, in what context, over what periods of time, in which countries, with what history. Over 70 good practices were identified in the analysis of the initial case studies that addressed internal organizational practices, protection practices, advocacy, intervention exit planning, and more⁴.

The regional meetings did not contradict any of the initial findings; rather, they added more complexity and nuance. For instance, while the initial case studies talked about advocating for those accompanied, it became clear there are various types and levels of advocacy – for example, for individuals, for services, for communities, and with armed groups, foreign governments, and international organizations regarding policies. Similarly, there are also several forms of accompaniment. People are accompanied to provide immediate physical protection, but there is also psychosocial, legal, and political accompaniment.

The regional meetings highlighted the extensive presence of self-protection organizations, community mechanisms, and efforts around the world. This has helped place UCP/A in a more appropriate historical understanding – it is neither new nor ‘invented’ by Gandhi or various other practitioners in the last century. Rather, there are certain new practices emerging, and the complementary possibilities of self-protection in communities joined by international organizations are more developed. Centering and holding up the work of local communities doing self-protection is an important aspect of decolonizing the study and practice of UCP/A. Other valuable learnings include clarity that UCP/A is a systems approach and more of a process



⁴ Furnari, Ellen (ed.) (2016): *Wielding Nonviolence in the Face of Violence.*, Ed. Institut für Friedensarbeit und Gewaltfreie Konfliktaustragung, Norderstedt:BoD

particularized to each context, and can not be simply replicated from one place to another. These are just a few of the many good practices highlighted in the regional workshops.

The regional meetings also highlighted the differences between various UCP/A organizations. While a statement of common commitments was developed in the lead up to the CoP Gathering, showing fundamental commonalities shared by the UCP/A community (available in full on pp. 31), organizations vary in the degree to which they understand physical protection to also include concerns about gender-based violence, health, and other humanitarian services. They vary in their understanding of and commitment to nonpartisanship or solidarity although most UCP/A groups do not find these two concepts contradictory. They vary in terms of being all volunteer, volunteers with stipends, or paid staff. There is a spectrum of organizations that are basically local efforts, those that mix local and international elements, and those that are solely international. Although for all organizations relationships are core, they vary regarding the relationships they seek or avoid with government and security forces in the country where they work. They also vary in the breadth of strategies and methods used. All this is directly related to the various missions and purposes of these organizations. This diversity is respected in the CoP and embraced as a source of strength.

During the almost decade since the good practices process began, the kinds of violence and their political contexts have continued to evolve. There has been a steady increase in the impacts of criminal and corporate violence on the communities where UCP/A is practiced. Authoritarian regimes have replaced at least quasi-democratic regimes and are less susceptible to pressure to uphold human rights. The increase in Chinese support for authoritarian, non-democratic regimes has also decreased leverage opportunities. The ever-increasing disruptions due to climate chaos are also impacting the contexts and kinds of violence being addressed. And as discussed in the workshop on Looming Threats (see page 17 below), there is an ever-expanding reach of digital technologies including the use of social media to foment violence. In the face of these changes, the practices themselves must and are evolving.

The arrival of the Covid -19 epidemic in 2020 had a huge impact on UCP/A. In particular, it was not possible for many international organizations to have international volunteers or staff in the communities where they had been working. Some organizations pivoted to focusing on physical protection from infection and related deaths. The inability to be present required both more reliance on local staff



These all add up to a very rich community that can demonstrate there is a specific field of UCP/A, not just a few random projects. There is a need for and efforts to undertake more shared learning, more cooperation and coordination across differences, and more efforts to increase funding and the use of UCP/A.

and volunteers and the development of ways to accompany processes from afar. Even as the pandemic becomes endemic, this shift has continued. It is clear that local staff and volunteers in many cases can effectively protect others without the actual presence of internationals. In fact, it has also highlighted the work already being done in local communities.

All of these factors led to the choice of two main topics to be worked on between the online international Gathering and the face-to-face Gathering. These two groups – on decolonization of UCP/A and on engaging community voices – reflect the many changes and also point to the need for further evolution of practice. The third working group on evaluation and learning reflects the endless challenges to UCP/A efforts and organizations. The belief in the efficacy of violence is so deep that while violent protection is often ineffective at best and deeply harmful at worst, it is seldom asked to prove that violence works. UCP/A efforts reflect a different paradigm based on the strengths of nonviolence and are generally seen as counter-intuitive leading to a frequent request to ‘prove’ it works.

During this time there has also been a significant expansion of research and writing about UCP/A. The research has focused on how UCP/A works, how UCP/A relates to other protection efforts, the manifestation of the work in many different contexts and undertaken by people in many different roles. The international research network Creating Safer Space, led by Aberystwyth University, includes a growing database of literature that currently holds references to over 700 related articles, books, videos, and reports.⁵

The culmination of the last decade resulted in the Gathering at Ferney-Voltaire has affirmed and deepened the reality of a community of practice. There are shared principles and commitments.

There are valued distinctions between purposes and practices among different organizations and even different projects within the same organization. These all add up to a very rich community that can demonstrate there is a specific field of UCP/A, not just a few random projects. There is a need for efforts to undertake more shared learning, more cooperation and coordination across differences, and more efforts to increase funding and the use of UCP/A. Just as UCP/A is a relational practice in communities, we are building relationships with each other and are stronger for that. This community will strengthen our abilities to protect ourselves and others, to reach new communities, and address emerging threats and violence. (ef)



⁵ <https://creating-safer-space.com/ucp-research-database/>

Honoring Relationships: Decolonizing UCP/A

In the last decade, many UCP/A organizations have become aware of the issues of intersectionality, racism, and the need to decolonize their work. The earlier paradigm of white people with passports from powerful countries protecting activists and communities in the Global South is more and more debunked. Several organizations have started internal processes of dealing with issues of intersectionality, meaning “how different systems of oppression (race, class, gender, sexual orientation, etc.) intersect to differentially affect specific groups or individuals, particularly minorities”.⁶ Colonial influence in particular “manifests in three dimensions: control over power, identity, and knowledge”.⁷



Since the online Gathering in late 2021, a working group on Decolonizing UCP/A had met twice monthly. They created four resources:

- [Toolbox for a decolonial perspective](#) in unarmed civilian protection and accompaniment
- [Stages for decolonizing UCP/A governing bodies](#)
- [Identifying barriers to decolonized governance](#)
- [Key lessons for decolonizing](#)

“Decolonizing UCP/A” was one of the three break-out groups on the first afternoon.

Three faces of decolonizing

Decolonization of UCP/A has to be undertaken on three levels: at the personal level of volunteers, staff and board; organizationally; and with regard to governance. Unless the governing body makes a clear commitment to decolonization with measurable, incremental goals with a time line and leadership of the organization held accountable chances of success are unlikely.

The Toolbox contains a variety of exercises for individuals and groups to and reflect on their status and positions like a life trajectory, identifying white privileges, male privileges, heterosexual privileges, age and other privileges. The group in Ferney-Voltaire tested an exercise on intersectionality.

⁶ Paper “Exercise on Identity and Intersectionality” presented at the Gathering.

⁷ Paper “Toolbox for a decolonial perspective in unarmed civilian protection”, p5

Organizational change

After reflecting on the personal level, the group looked at the experience of two organizations that had undertaken a process of decolonization: Peace Direct (PD) and Community Peacemaker Teams (CPT). These processes were complex, and also met with resistance – by some in the leadership as well as by some supporters – but both organizations emerged from the process with reshaped identities and inclusive policies.

Muriel Schmid, Administrative Director for CPT talked about how CPT had reframed their work to *Anti-Oppression* and started with an external “anti-oppression audit.” The process led to them changing their name from *Christian* Peacemaker Teams to *Community* Peacemaker Teams. Their governance now comes from the bottom ups with people from the field informing the board. They have developed an extensive set of anti- oppression resources available on their website cpt.org.

Key lessons shared by Dylan Matthews, Executive Director of PD included:

- Agreed to change strategy, dropping growth targets.
- Conversations are going to be hard. Be prepared.
- Prepare people with skills on how to disagree.
- Create broader pool of candidates for jobs.
- Discuss with partners about power and what could be done better.
- Requires senior leadership, staff and financial investments.

The working group that had met over the year identified in their paper on “Identifying Barriers to Decolonized Governance” five types of barriers:

- Membership of Governing Bodies do not reflect the diversity of the partner communities with which the organization works.
- Colonialized attitudes of existing Board members perpetuate colonial structures.
- Donor expectations can drive colonialized behaviors.
- Financial differences make it hard for all Board members to participate equally.
- Working in different languages creates complexity.

Key Lessons for Decolonizing

The following key lessons were gleaned from studying documents produced by INGO's that have been working on decolonizing their decision making for a number of years.

- 1 The organization has to make a commitment in writing from the top to change.
- 2 The governing body needs to create a timeline with benchmarks for change to hold themselves accountable.
- 3 People throughout the organization have to commit to do personal work and identify how they will do their individual homework.
- 4 There needs to be a focus on recognizing and if necessary, strengthening local capacity to govern.
- 5 The organization has to identify the original colonial values e.g. white supremacy, that the organization operates on and develop an ongoing plan to be aware of and mitigate such values e.g. periodic exercises with the board.
- 6 The organization has to regularly evaluate how these lessons are working.
(from the preparatory paper with this title)

The paper gives examples and suggests ways to mitigate these barriers, for example by education, exchange of experiences, and commitment of resources to participation or translation.

In the discussion it was highlighted that identities are not fixed but depend on context. This is essential for understanding how to decolonize both internally within the organizations and how UCP/A is presented to the external world. At the same time, it is the local context that matters. For Western organizations that pursue a policy of decolonizing, it is a particular challenge when a local community requests accompaniers with white skin or a U.S. / European passport.

Community self-protection as a way to decolonize

One important aspect of decolonizing is community self-protection. Three authors from Brazil and Colombia (Catarina Bezerra, Victória Barros, and Laura Jiménez) submitted a paper on [“Community self-protection and Unarmed Civilian Protection/Accompaniment: a way to decolonize peace”](#).

Three projects were presented that demonstrated that UCP/A can be carried out successfully without direct intervention from the global north:

Beatriz Arias Lopez demonstrated how art and literacy organizations claimed space and provided robust protection in Medellin, Colombia including the use of a carnival group, parades and drama. Elizabeth Akon Mading and Mary Nyachuot described how women had formed 61 Women’s Peace Teams in South Sudan with the support and training from Nonviolent Peaceforce. Working in groups, they are able to protect women from gender-based violence and prevent children from being abducted as child soldiers among many other activities.

Parfaite Ntahuba explained how the Quaker Peace Network organized and trained early warning/early response teams in the most volatile areas during the 2020 election period. The key was to include people from both parties and different ethnic groups on every team. Trauma training was required before they could start UCP/A training. (cs)



Primacy of Local Actors: Engaging Community Voices Working Group



Photo: Christine Schweitzer

South Sudan 2011, Nonviolent Peaceforce staff monitors a peace meeting.

After the virtual Gathering, “Engaging Community Voices” (ECV) was chosen as one of the top two topics for further exploration and a working group was formed to identify how UCP/A interventions, programs, and efforts interact with local communities in appropriate and ethical ways, and how local voices can be raised or amplified in wider circles. The group notes: “Since June 2022, representatives from ten organizations working in fifteen countries have explored how we can improve our approaches for engaging local communities and listening to local voices more deeply.” People in the group came from local organizations working in their own communities as well as people from organizations working internationally, regionally, or nationally. The work of the group focused primarily on activities and interventions by non-local organizations.

Out of these extensive conversations, the group developed three documents to share at the Gathering. One focused on [how to avoid harming or hindering a local community’s ability and efforts to protect itself](#)). The other focused on the need for and elements of a [code of ethics for UCP/A organizations](#) engaging with local communities. A third document referenced in the workshop was written by NP regarding their work in Ukraine, titled [“Responsible partnerships? Risk, protection and local actors in the Ukraine humanitarian response”](#).

It is a basic humanitarian (though clearly not a security sector) principle to do no harm. But how to do this in practice is not always clear. Harm can be done despite good intentions due to a lack of understanding of impact. Primarily focused on the work of non-local organizations in communities, the group noted several general categories of harm, describing specific activities that might or will cause that harm, and ways to mitigate it. These categories include: Taking away the agency of/disenfranchise communities; creating more conflict; reducing resources available to the community; and doing direct harm.

The subgroup that worked on ethics developed '[Guidelines for a code of ethics](#) for unarmed civilian protection/accompaniment organizations when engaging community voices'. This document builds on principles shared by some if not all UCP/A organizations. For each overarching principle, there are a number of potential ethical statements or sub-principles that might be incorporated or addressed in an ethics code. The overarching principles are: nonviolence; inclusivity, diversity, and equity; primacy of local actors; anti-oppression; and accountability. In addition to the exploration of these principles, the document includes guidelines for how these ethical principles can be implemented in day-to-day work. These include descriptions of field strategies and methods consistent with ECV principles. These strategies and methods address, for example: Recognizing, supporting, and strengthening local peace and reconciliation approaches and systems; creating safe space for people to transform their own conflicts; identifying and working with multiple levels of community leadership and not just the official leaders; using methods of peacebuilding that bring people together instead of dividing them; focusing on women and youth leadership; desisting from doing anything the community can do for themselves.

[NP's report on Ukraine](#) addresses concerns regarding how risk is outsourced to local protection efforts, without adequate support from international organizations and donors. It includes documentation of how NP attempts to address these concerns and inequities. While there is almost universal recognition of the need for international organizations, institutions, and military intervenors to work with local organizations and to develop some degree of cooperation, this is often driven by the agendas of outside entities and more often takes the form of consultation with a limited subset of the community, rather than true partnership. One of the key principles that manifests throughout UCP/A work is the primacy of local actors. Virtually all non-local organizations work closely with local people, though not always developed as a partnership. But when an organization claims it has a partnership, it needs to be done in a way that not only does no harm, but is truly focused on real sharing of power, resources, knowledge, etc. The NP document highlights all these issues and how to interact responsibly.

During the workshop in Ferney-Voltaire, participants brainstormed ways to prevent harm, based on principles, ethics, and responsible partnerships. These were designed as messages to specific groups – donors, the media, community partners,





Morans of Laikipia West, Laikipia County (Kenya) discussing their role in conflicts and peace building.

and UCP/A organizations. Messages developed for UCP/A groups echo many of the aforementioned themes. They include: Be very careful to obtain local consent; Seek methods for bringing expertise that do not promote dependency; Play an advocacy role sometimes, even if it is outside of your mandate; Recognize that protection evolves from the need for self-protection to the need for services, because no food and no education gives us no means to do capacity building; Commit to self-assessment with regards to colonial perspectives, and to revise training as needed; Avoid imposing outsider standards. (ef)

Messages developed for UCP/A groups include:

- Be very careful to obtain local consent;
- Seek methods for bringing expertise that do not promote dependency;
- Play an advocacy role sometimes, even if it is outside of your mandate;
- Recognize that protection evolves from the need for self-protection to the need for services, because no food and no education gives us no means to do capacity building;
- Commit to self-assessment with regards to colonial perspectives, and to revise training as needed; and
- Avoid imposing outsider standards.

Research and Evaluation: Learning What Works in UCP/A

“Learning what works in UCP/A” was the third breakout group on the first day of the Gathering. Like the other two, it was based on work that had been done by a working group over the previous months. This group with the title “Innovation in Evaluation and Learning” dealt with good practices and innovation in learning in UCP/A and explored ways of implementing them in future work. It was brought together by the international research network [*Creating Safer Space*](#) that is coordinated by Berit Bliesemann de Guevara at Aberystwyth University. Funded by the UK’s Arts and Humanities Research Council through the Global Challenges Research Fund, *Creating Safer Space* supports research on unarmed civilian protection and community self-protection. The network has currently 26 projects under way, three of which are piloting a novel, participatory evaluation approach developed by the working group. For the Gathering, they submitted a paper with the title “[*The Creating Safer Space Participatory Evaluation and Learning Methodology for UCP/A*](#)”.

The breakout group in Ferney-Voltaire started with a practical exercise in reflective inquiry and discussed how this approach can contribute to learning in the organization or community, addressing two questions:

- What is a big question which, if answered, would really move our work forward?
- Would it be useful in your work to continue to engage in reflective practice? If so, how can you make this happen?

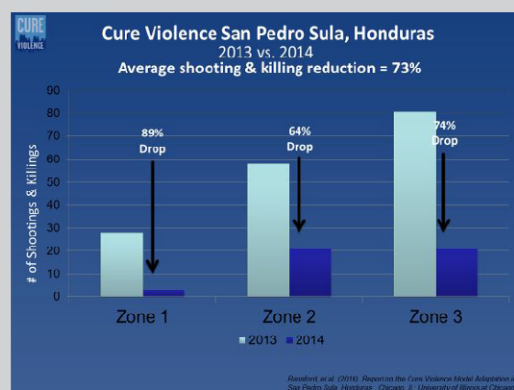
Four Guiding principles for participatory evaluations

1. **Participatory:** The evaluation design needs to have meaningful input from communities, partners and/or stakeholders so as to reflect language and context. Optimally, questions are developed with local communities, partners, and/or stakeholders.
 2. **Organisation: or community-internal:** Those conducting the evaluation are internal to the organization or community whose protection efforts they are evaluating, rather than being external evaluators.
 3. **Semi-structured conversations:** Evaluations with individuals or groups should be done through iterative, open-ended questions with room for follow-up questions. Informal conversations in natural settings are useful where possible, as are observations from the field and – where they can support participatory methods – desk reviews of existing documentation.
 4. **Ongoing reflection on process:** Questions and interactions should be constantly reviewed in light of feedback from participants. Evaluators should work *with* participants to find correct phrasing and best forms of interaction, and should think about “evaluating the evaluation” during the lifetime of the process.
- From: “[*The Creating Safer Space Participatory Evaluation and Learning Methodology for UCP/A*](#)”

PREVENTING AND REDUCING VIOLENCE USING NONVIOLENCE WORKS EFFECTIVELY

"The death sentences against each and every one of us have not been carried out, only because we are not alone, because we have Peace Brigades International's accompaniment and unconditional defence."

Francisco Campo – CREDHOS' (PBI 2017)



Research on UCP/A demonstrates that it saves lives, creates safe spaces, is inclusive and reduces levels of violence.

Participants responded were that there is a need for reflection but often there is not the time to do so, and that it requires finding a space to do so, both at local and institutional levels.

In the second part, members of the Creating Safer Space network presented examples of research projects supported by the network in different regions to show inter alia how academic research can be done in equitable collaborations with organizations and communities and does not have to amount to negative experiences of data extraction.

The third part of the session started with presenting an introduction of the four guiding principles for participatory evaluation (see frame on the right) developed by the working group "Innovation in Evaluation and Learning" prior to the Gathering, . This was followed with a presentation on three examples of projects that are funded by Creating Safer Space (CSS) and pilot the participatory evaluation methodology developed by CSS were presented: In Cali (Colombia), the project researches impact of actions carried out by grassroots' organizations in violent and socio-segregated urban contexts and on the perceptions and realities regarding security and protection among the diverse populations that are settled there.⁸ The project in Hebron by Operazione Colomba (OC ("Operation Dove") "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 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's 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."

⁸ See <https://creating-safer-space.com/contributions-of-grassroots-organisations-to-the-implementation-of-unarmed-civilian-self-protection-strategies-in-violent-urban-contexts/>



The third example presented is the research planned by Meta Peace Teams with organizations serving migrants at the United States/Mexico border. “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.”

The group then broke into two sessions, one on collaborative research and the other on participatory evaluation. There are obstacles to participatory evaluation raised by funders. They often want numbers and external evaluators to interview participants and others, but not develop a participatory methodology. Another obstacle is the time commitment this takes.

With regard to collaborative forms of research it was noted that the goals and priorities of academics and practitioners do not always align. One goal is to advance basic knowledge about the process of UCP/A, another goal is to produce knowledge which is useful for UCP/A workers in the field. It was noted that it would be good to have handbooks and other systematic material on research and evaluation.

There was also a breakout group on next steps for research. Ideas like a handbook, papers on best practices, but also peace education and training of new researchers and practitioners were reflected. (cs)



Photo: Mateo Valderrama Arboleda

Mural in the municipality of San Luis, Antioquia, Colombia.

Looming Threats: Shaping Challenges into Strategies



On the second day of the Gathering there was a plenary session on looming threats (see resource page at the end of this document for links to the many excellent pre-Gathering reading materials regarding protection in this time of environmental violence and digital threats). While there are any number of political and other threats that challenge civilian protection, the session focused on two: land defenders, particularly during climate change (also termed ecological violence), and digital threats.

Land Defenders

The plenary began with a framing of the link between climate change, the violence being done to our environment, and threats to land defenders. There has been a large increase in the murders of land/environmental defenders in the last few years ([see the presentation](#)). 1,733 environmental defenders were killed between 2012 and 2021, and the numbers continue to increase. Over 40% of those killed were indigenous people, despite their small percentage of the population.

Sister Maudila Lopez from Guatemala shared the indigenous understanding and beliefs regarding the human place in our world. Nature is our mother; we are born in her womb. Thus, when we defend the land, we are nature defending itself, rather than environmental defenders. As known by indigenous peoples in other parts of the world (see below for water defenders in the US) water is the center of life. So when mining companies extract elements from the land and pollute the water, when agribusinesses grow single crops on large tracts of land, they bring death to the indigenous people. When indigenous people speak up, to protest and try to stop this, they are imprisoned, murdered, and accused of supporting opposition political parties which is considered a crime in certain countries. We must understand how our lives are linked, in the Global North and South, and defend each other.



In the response to this presentation, Andrea Pierce of the *Little Traverse Bay Bands of Odawa Indians* shared some of the recent history of land and water protectors in the US. Many of the oil and gas pipelines in the US run on or near indigenous lands and pose threats to their water in particular. In response to activists' peaceful attempts to protest and protect (see the videos "[Water is Life](#)" and "[Police are Torturing Protestors](#)"), the police have become ever more militarized. In the struggle against the Dakota Access Pipeline, police were sent from other jurisdictions to augment the attacks and paid more for this work. The law enforcement officers have been paid by oil companies to attack protestors and share information regarding defenders. This kind of militarized response to land and water defenders is being found in many parts of the world and is a significant challenge to trying to protect defenders.

Digital threats

Joelle Rizk from the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) shared an in-depth presentation full of important insights regarding the impact of digital technologies on civilian protection (see the reading materials in the Resource Guide). The ICRC has engaged in analysis and activities related to these interconnected threats. Overall categories of threats include digital technologies in warfare itself – such as the use of automated tools and information warfare linked to psychological warfare. The various technologies bring civilians closer to the front lines in many ways, and have increased their risk of becoming targets. It further blurs the distinction between civilians and combatants and between civilian and military objects.

The use of disinformation, surveillance, and the blocking of access to the internet and information has numerous impacts. These include mistrust in any information, psychological harm and mental suffering, and loss of access to accurate information

as the basis for making good and sometimes quick decisions. There are three dimensions to the challenges posed to humanitarian organizations:

1. Impact on the behavior of INGOs and NGOs and how we handle data – what we collect, how we store and use it;
2. Changes in behaviors of conflict actors – their use of AI-augmented weapons, use of surveillance, targeting INGOs in misinformation campaigns, shutting down websites or the internet altogether;
3. Challenges posed by how people in communities themselves are using technology – believing rumors encountered on social media and spreading them, involving themselves more directly in the conflict by supporting armed actors' news, spreading hate speech, acting on misinformation.

In this environment it is critical that organizations develop sophisticated understanding of the risks. We need to train our staff to recognize information warfare and misinformation, to handle data with utmost care, and to have plans for how to respond to social media attacks. Most fundamentally, we need to develop sufficient understanding to do no harm.

Joelle shared some examples of what the ICRC is doing, in the discussion after the presentation. For instance, to protect data they do not use any commercially available apps/software, but only those developed by and for ICRC. They train staff not only in technical aspects but also how to respond to harmful narratives and hate speech.

While many UCP/A organizations have already focused on security in their digital communication and data, this presentation provided a much wider view of the many challenges digital technologies present for civilian protection. In particular, there is a need to understand how social media and digital technologies bring civilians closer to the front lines of conflicts and how that impacts UCP/A practices of protection. (ef)



In this environment it is critical that organizations develop sophisticated understanding of the risks. We need to train our staff to recognize information warfare and misinformation, to handle data with utmost care, and to have plans for how to respond to social media attacks.



QUOTE OF A PARTICIPANT.

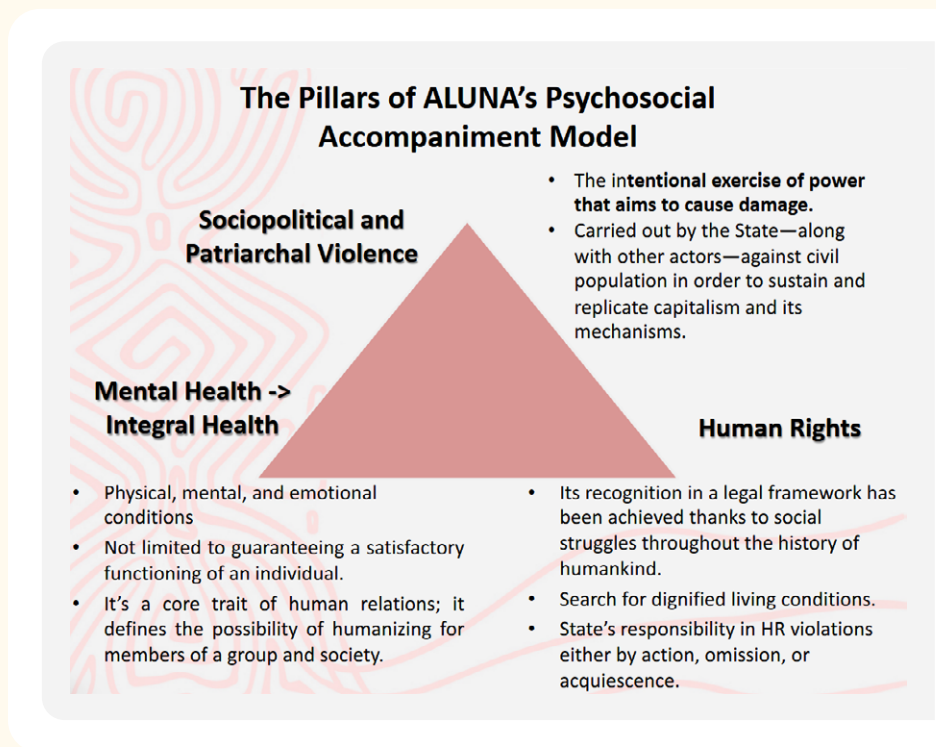
Mental Health and Wellness in the Context of Socio-Political Violence

In many countries around the world, human rights defenders and activists face a variety of types of violence, and this has an impact in several areas (psycho-emotional, political, security, group dynamics) and on different aspects of their lives (personal, family, organizational and social). Human Rights Defenders, activists and journalists carry out their work in a violent environment. They risk legal persecution, torture, forced displacement, even executions and forced disappearances. This may cause severe psychosocial trauma, which in turn damages not only the person suffering the trauma but also their family, their organization, and the social fabric at large. The work to remediate trauma looks very different in different settings.

The organizers of this workshop Gathering made two papers available beforehand for preparation:

- [Keys Toward Psychosocial Accompaniment](#)
- [As Women Defenders, How Do We Face Our Fears in the Current Context?](#)

The workshop was prepared and facilitated by Laura Espinosa from *ALUNA*, a Mexican civil society organization founded in 2013, that has worked with PBI-Mexico and many other organizations. *ALUNA* seeks to contribute to the strengthening of activists in contexts of socio-political violence. It is an interdisciplinary group with roots in Latin American Liberation Theology and Liberation Social Psychology. Its overall goal is to “help political and social actors (HRDs, HR organizations, victims’ organizations, indigenous and campesino communities, and journalists) fortify their psycho-emotional well-being, security strategy, organizations, and their political projects in order to continue their efforts and contribute to positive social transformation and the search for a dignified life.”⁹ They engage in psycho-social accompaniment, training, and advocacy.



⁹ From the PowerPoint presentation by ALUNA, [“ALUNA's Psychosocial Accompaniment Model”](#).

The Psychosocial Approach

Traditional Clinical Psychology was not sufficient to tackle **the impacts caused by living in dictatorship and war-torn countries** in the '70 and '80.
Individualistic approach / pathologization.

Psychosocial Approach Developed in Latin America, it's based on Liberation Social Psychology.
It is a way of seeing, interpreting and understanding those personal, collective and social damages that manifest in contexts of sociopolitical violence.

It seeks to strengthen the political and social strategies of resistance and autonomy of political subjects for the liberation of these relationships of oppression, violence and injustice.

It seeks to strengthen the political and social strategies of resistance and autonomy of political subjects **for the liberation of relations of oppression, violence and injustice**

Latin America

1986-1996 Guerra Civil
40,000 personas víctimas de desaparición forzada

México

Guatemala

1980-1983 guerra sucia
27,000 víctimas
1986-1992 asesinatos por
Escuadrón de la muerte

El Salvador

Nicaragua

Costa Rica

Cuba

República Dominicana

Puerto Rico

Ignacio Martín-Baró
Psicólogo jesuita

1986-1996 Guerra Civil
40,000 personas víctimas de desaparición forzada

Venezuela

Colombia

Ecuador

Perú

Bolivia

Paraguay

Uruguay

Argentina

Chile

Elizabeth Lira
Psicóloga
1973-1990 Dictadura
28 259 víctimas de prisión política y tortura
1209 víctimas de desaparición forzada

Guerra Fria
Estados Unidos contra Cuba
Años 60/Revolución Cubana
/Invasión a la región

Diana Kordon y LUISA Edelstein
Médicas, Psiquiatras y Psicoterapeutas
1966 Golpe Militar
1973-1983 Dictadura
30,000 personas víctimas de desaparición forzada

Conflicto armado años 80
Terrorismo de Estado
Paramilitarismo 1987
45 años de guerra
1970-2015
60,000 personas víctimas de desaparición forzada

Dictadura de Somoza
Revolución popular
sandinista 1979-1990

Marie Langer
Psicanalista,
marxista, feminista

It seeks to strengthen the political and social strategies of resistance and autonomy of political subjects **for the liberation of relations of oppression, violence and injustice**

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Psicoanalista,
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Dictadura de Somoza
Revolución popular
sandinista 1979-1990

Working on fear

25

Psychosocial accompaniment and UCP/A

Secondly, it is essential to dispel the myth of the “invulnerable UCP/A worker”. In the workshop it was stated that often UCP/A workers feel they must not show or admit to any fear because it may strengthen the enemy, demoralize those they are protecting, compare them unfavorably to their colleagues, and increase their own actual fear. Mental health support aims to decrease this “Messiah complex” and establish that this work is a cooperative process, entailing mutual support rather than individualistic competition. Self-care and embracing vulnerability must be seen as intrinsic to the success of personal work, family cohesion, organizational health, and – ultimately – to the success of overall social and political goals. Several attendees suggested that workers may be more accepting by realizing that good mental health—personally and organizationally—was necessary for the success of the political project.

Among the lessons learned by ALUNA were¹⁰:

- Understanding the context and the impacts helps raise awareness and give meaning to one’s experience.
- The importance of differentiating between risk and fear.
- In order to build a security strategy, it is necessary to promote and create a “culture of security” and bolster the political project.
- It is necessary to have a comprehensive understanding of what security entails because HRDs and HR organizations are affected by threats in different ways and at different levels.
- Good communication, conflict resolution, and clarity of the organizational structure are essential for developing security protocols.
- Preventive measures also include addressing emotional well-being and strengthening coping mechanisms.
- Dealing with risk entails self-care strategies, taking spiritual, political, and emotional dimensions as well as strengthening the social fabric and identity into account.

Of course, there are also many challenges. One is that staff care requires resources, such as time, spaces, funding, political support and monitoring. The urgently felt need to set aside these resources was documented by the fact that this workshop was among those with the largest number of attendees during the Gathering. (cs)

¹⁰ ibid

Advancing Structural Transformation: How Can UCP/A and Nonviolent Resistance Mutually Enhance Each Other?

Unarmed Civilian Protection/

Accompaniment and nonviolent resistance are two fields of nonviolent action. In a preparatory paper [“UCP and Civil Resistance”](#) for this workshop, Huibert Oldenhuis (NP) argues that civil resistance (CR) and UCP/A follow different principles and logics: UCP/A actors 1) often hold to the principle of nonpartisanship and 2) often seek acceptance by the government of the country they work in, at least to receive visas and work permits. Civil resisters are, by definition, fighting for a cause and challenge the government. Also, UCP/A needs time to get settled in a new area to build relationships, while civil resistance often develops very quickly, which makes it hard for UCP/A actors to support them – unless CR activities take place in areas where UCP actors are already operating. There may be another contradiction regarding strategy: UCP/A actors focus on safety – even up to the degree of being accused of risk aversion – while some nonviolent movements have adopted “Gandhi’s notion of accepting suffering to expose the violence of the enemy and by so doing discredit its legitimacy”, Oldenhuis writes. Generally, CR actors seek to escalate a conflict (nonviolently); the logic of UCP/A is to de-escalate it.

However, UCP/A:

- can support civil resistance by monitoring the safety and security of people participating in public protests without participating in the protest,
- create space for local activists so that they can do their work,
- advise on security and self-protection strategies and measures,
- provide direct protection to activists, including protestors, and
- provide channels of information.





Wall Picture by Banksy in Boston (2010).

Both sides can and should also learn from each other: “CR actors could learn from UCP to build the muscle of constructive action ... as well as how to apply de-escalation when needed. UCP actors can learn from CR to better understand power and use that to prevent threats from being actualised”, Oldenhuis argues. They also, per the paper, could play a role in the process of converging of civil resistance and peacebuilding, and they could play a role in building durable movements that do not fold if quick success was not obtained. It must not be overlooked that at local level there is often a convergence of civil resistance and UCP/A, for example when people trained in UCP/A apply (or use) the techniques to build effective resistance.

In the workshop at Ferney-Voltaire that was facilitated by Eli McCarthy, with Felip Daza (NOVAC), Huibert Oldenhuis (NP) and Michael Beer (Nonviolence International) as speakers, the focus of the discussion was primarily on the need to bring both concepts / approaches closer together. For example, UCP/A and civil resisters may have leverage on different actors. It was stated that we live in an increasingly connected world which provides a lot more opportunity for nonviolent action. Nonviolent action has an enormous role and is most effective when we have a transnational worldview. Both approaches are rooted in nonviolence and should complement one another.

The group also discussed the question Oldenhuis had raised about solidarity and nonpartisanship. It was noted that UCP/A could be seen as protecting the space, not protecting one side or another. Two dilemmas were identified:

1) Are we going to protect groups that practice nonviolence but may also support violent groups?



People often raise that nonviolent movements don't work, but don't really recognize that violence is also not working.



(QUOTE FROM THE NOTES OF THE WORKSHOP)

2) To what extent are we willing to do work that is not legal? In some contexts, the UCP/A actors need to work with the government. In others, they do not. In both cases, a focus of UCP/A often lies on the local situation, working with civil society and community-based organizations. It is important, it was found, to understand the dynamics of civil society.

The following points are made in the paper:

- Building the resilience of nonviolent actors is essential to maintain motivation and moving towards creating a changed society.
- UCP/A can play an important role in helping civilians who bear the brunt of the conflict.
- UCP/A can provide specific tools to analyze the risks to help improve nonviolent strategies.
- UCP/A can provide very critical support to civilian groups at critical moments.
- Civil resisters in turn can help UCP/A practitioners keep the issue of power structures in mind.
- Cultivating nonviolence as a habit will assist in acts of resistance.

As feedback by the rapporteurs to the preparatory paper, it should also be noted that not all UCP/A organizations are nonpartisan, and that perhaps more local groups are involved in both civil resistance and protection so that the dividing lines might not be as clear as assumed in Oldenhuis' paper. (cs)

The Power of Women's Peace Teams

The session on women's peace teams (WPT), included presentations from groups in Burundi and South Sudan. While the contexts are quite different in many ways, there were strong commonalities as well. Both groups respond to domestic and gender-based violence perpetrated against women. In many cases this is the entry point, along with trauma healing in Burundi. Many international or national organizations separate domestic violence and gender-based violence (GBV) from political violence, having different programs for manifestations of each. However, living and working in their own communities, WPTs understand and experience the connections between violence against women and children, and other forms of political violence. They also see that the culture of male domination is linked to many other forms of violence in their communities.

[WPTs in Burundi](#) are part of larger self-help groups for women. These groups include many different strategies to combat GBV including income-producing projects for women, trauma healing, and other empowerment programs. The groups in several communities have specifically focused on preventing violence related to elections. They trained for many months before the recent elections and were successful in preventing the kinds of violence that erupted after the elections in 2015. WPTs in South Sudan also have a significant focus on GBV. Because they are frequently led by older women who are already respected in their communities, they have been able



Women Peace Team in South Sudan.

to intervene directly with families. The WPTs have also addressed violence related to cattle raiding and conflicts between pastoralists and cattle raisers. These conflicts have increased in frequency with climate change and in lethality with the widespread availability of AK-47s and other powerful weapons.

Women's teams in both countries provide opportunities for women to become leaders in their communities, positively impacting the lives of local people. They often focus on supporting girls, children, and young people of both genders, and run projects to help young men develop commitments to peace and nonviolence. The opportunities for networking with women from other teams and communities, while focusing on growing their own knowledge and skills, is quite impactful and can change women's self-perception as well as the perception of women and their roles in their communities. And this can help to prevent violence at times.

Some WPTs include men and some do not. For some it would decrease the sense of safety in 'women's spaces', and for others it seems strong to demonstrate men working with women in leadership. And while there is connection between some of the WPTs, they are each autonomous in their own communities and can work out what is best for them, in their own context.

Although the teams in South Sudan and Burundi are developed and led by local women, they have received training and encouragement from international organizations, in particular Nonviolent Peaceforce. While women can be directly and indirectly involved in instigating and perpetuating violence, they can often be a strong force for violence prevention and diminishment. Although the workshop focused on women's teams in Burundi and South Sudan, women around the world, in their own communities, are often involved in and sometimes lead, efforts for peace. It is incumbent on non-local UCP/A intervenors to understand the role women are already playing in both perpetuating and preventing violence, and to find ways to support and protect, when needed, those working against violence. (ef)



Community Protection Team training in South Sudan



Burundi – GBV survivors' accompanists included in early warning early response in 2020 to prevent electoral violence.

Photo: Parfaite Ntahuba, from her powerpoint presentation in Ferney.

Women's teams in both countries provide opportunities for women to become leaders in their communities, positively impacting the lives of local people. They often focus on supporting girls, children, and young people of both genders, and run projects to help young men develop commitments to peace and nonviolence.

The Role of UCP/A in Contemporary Peace Processes



This workshop was facilitated by Juan Mario Diaz (University of Sheffield/Creating Safer Space). It examined practices, strategies, and lessons from local experiences where civilians committed to nonviolent strategies have worked together to prevent violence and protect threatened civilians – especially alternatives to Western intervention models. In so doing, it addressed questions such as: What are the opportunities and obstacles for the meaningful participation of civilians in peace negotiation processes? How can local efforts, practices, and strategies be harnessed for communities and CSOs to make war-to-peace transitions more stable?

The session had three parts. In the first part, strategic aims and specific objectives of peace processes were discussed. This was followed by two cases studies presented by Delsy Ronnie (Nonviolent Peaceforce Philippines) and Jesús Alfonso Florez Lopez (Universidad Autonoma de Occidente, Colombia).



Strategic aims and specific objectives of peace processes

Peace processes often do not take civilian protection sufficiently into focus. In the agreements, there may be mention of “safety”, “weapon-free zones”, or “peace zones” but little else. If civilian protection is mentioned, it is usually framed within the responsibility of the armed conflicting parties. Another widely shared complaint is that civil society, with the exemption of religious organizations, mostly plays a secondary role in the process. There is a need to connect official policy in peace processes to grassroots communities and bridge the gap between them. Participants in the workshop felt that peace processes should focus on how to reduce threats and risks and identify capacities and relationships in a community rather than relying on the official channels.

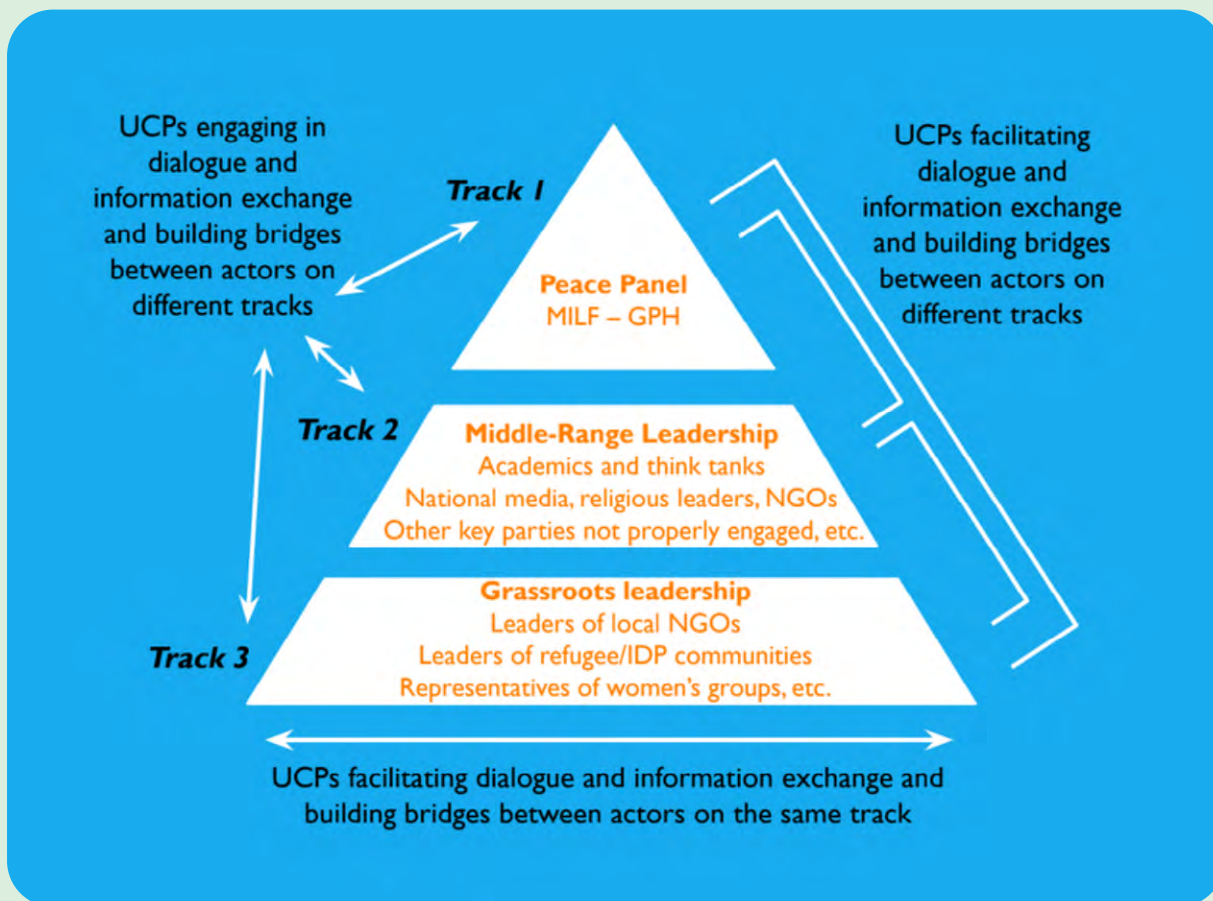
Even where armed peacekeeping missions (e.g. Blue Helmets) are established, their rules of engagement tend to keep them disengaged from communities. Also, working group members highlighted a concern that their risk assessments cannot always be trusted because there may be personal interest of military peacekeepers to claim that they work in a high-risk environment because they then get better paid. UCP/A may complement Blue Helmets or be used instead of them.

The pros and cons of using the terminology of UCP/A was also discussed. On the one hand, local actors may be not familiar with the term but rather prefer to refer to “monitoring” which is a recognized activity in peace processes. On the other hand, introducing the term UCP/A may help to increase awareness of this common set of practices. It was suggested to trace the history of how “monitoring” became accepted in peace processes and see how this could inform UCP/A’s acceptance in peace processes.

Two examples

In [Mindanao \(Philippines\)](#), UCP/A has become part of an official peace process between the government and a large rebel organization, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). As Delsy Ronnie from Nonviolent Peaceforce (NP) explained, NP has been working in Mindanao for almost two decades, being present in 42 municipalities. Their work includes supporting peace agendas, safety and security, and protection and prevention. Local communities have consistently reported feeling safer and having fewer violent incidents where NP operates. NP has been able to help monitor peace agreements, interrupt violent incidents, and prevent spread of rumors. Increasingly, NP is recognized as one of the most reliable, widely trusted organizations by all parties for keeping any group of people safe. Local communities, state, and nonstate actors have all seen NP’s ability to protect and prevent violence.

In Colombia, due to the complexities and overlapping cycles of violence and peace related agreements, it is a challenge to identify what is conflict, what is peace, and what is civil society. Conflict has been ongoing for many decades. It is particularly fueled by unequal access to land. Violence is also a common tool used to influence politics.



Jesús Alfonso Florez Lopez described the history of the conflicts since the 1950s. In 1957, a peace agreement was signed agreeing on alternating periods of rule by the political parties of the conservatives and liberals. However, violence continued. In the 1980s and 1990s, more civilians were killed despite several new peace treaties. Finally in 2016, a peace treaty was signed with the largest guerrilla group, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) which spelled out solutions to root problems. There was a referendum, people voted NO but the government passed it nevertheless. But the treaty did not bring real peace nor an end to the violence. Since the 2016 treaty was signed, more than 1,500 human rights defenders have been killed. There have been more than 430 massacres, and 385 FARC peace signatories have been murdered – testifying to the continued urgent need for UCP/A and community self-protection in Colombia despite the 2016 agreement.

In 2022, for the first time in decades, Colombia elected a left-leaning government, which has formulated a new plan called “Total Peace”. This plan is focused on talks with all of the many remaining armed groups in the country, including guerrillas, paramilitaries, and drug cartels, but unsurprisingly the challenges to achieving a total peace are immense, indicating that UCP/A in the peace process will continue to be essential. (cs)

Policy Round Table: Advocating for UCP/A

For the final event of the Gathering, participants bussed to the World Council of Churches' Ecumenical Centre to introduce UCP/A to the UN and broader INGO communities in Geneva. The Round Table was co-hosted by the Permanent Missions to the United Nations of Costa Rica, the Netherlands, the Philippines and Sierra Leone as well as Nonviolent Peaceforce.

Ambassador Lars Tummer of the Netherlands set the tone of the meeting by saying, "The heart of the work, protection of civilians, is growing faster than donors can keep up with so we have to rely on civilian solutions to the problems. People's solutions should be front and center." And, for the next hour, people's solutions were, indeed, at the front and center of the Round Table.



Elizabeth Akon Mading, a leader of a Women's Peace Team in South Sudan told how they brought together armed youth and soldiers who were fighting each other to talk and eat together and to not continue revenge killing. "We want our youth to live in peace with water, food and to sleep well."

K. Bain from Brooklyn, New York in the USA described how colonialization in the US is rampant and the byproduct of that many times is violence. Justice starts with seeing the human being first. Human Rights + Human Development = Human Justice.

Enrique Chimonja Coy shared how the Fellowship of Reconciliation has been providing solidarity and accompanying local communities who are doing self-protection for over 20 years. "We protect all life including biodiversity and restoring that which has been destroyed by the extractivist model".

And NP's Tanya Walmsley described how UCP works in Ukraine, a place where the threats come from the sky, they can't talk with one of the sides and the front runs for 800 km. After spending a long time listening to local people who have been doing protection and humanitarian work since day one of the invasion, NP learned that their best contribution would be to increase the safety and security of local volunteers on the front lines. This includes a lending system for personal protective equipment, stipends for fuel, safety and first aid training and serving as a liaison to donors so local groups can directly access funds.

Dr. Rachel Julian of Leeds Beckett University in the UK, Dr. Monique Williams of CURE Violence International and Dr. Berit Bliesemann de Guevara of Creating Safer Spaces and Aberystwyth University, Wales, [presented evidence from a variety of quantitative and qualitative studies from Myanmar to Honduras showing that UCP/A prevents and reduces imminent and direct violence](#). Dr. Williams shared a collection of independent studies showing that after CURE Violence's interventions shootings and killings were reduced from 30-70%. These successes are occurring in a wide variety of contexts. "These are not anecdotes, this is a trend," concluded Dr. Bliesemann de Guevara.

In reflecting on their experience with NP in Mindanao, Ambassador Kristine Leilani R. Salle of the Philippines, said: "Our experience shows that civilian led nonviolent approaches can contribute to saving lives and empowering people in communities to build a just and lasting peace for themselves even under the most difficult of circumstances."

Costa Rican Ambassador Shara Duncan-Villalobos summed up the event by noting that her country had been a disarmed democracy for 74 years so they know for a fact that it is possible to address conflict in a nonviolent way. "Costa Rica believes firmly that unarmed approaches for the protections of civilians and prevention of violence should be a first resort," she asserted.

Her main take aways from the Round Table included:

- People need to be in the driver's seat and have ownership of the actions taken. That translates into sustainable peace.
- Religious leaders, community leaders and everyday people all have important roles to play.
- UCP/A is not a substitute for traditional protection but a great compliment. At the same time, arms don't bring peace.
- As a woman of color, she noted the importance of the participation of women, indigenous people, Afro communities and peasants and how they can play a great role in changing the norm from violence to peaceful communities.

As a way forward Ambassador Duncan-Villalobos recommended:

- Individual states and multi-laterals need to invest in UCP/A.
- UCP/A needs to be recognized and affirmed in public policy.
- Funding needs to be directed to local organizations as a strategic use of resources.
- There is a need for mental health accompaniment of people who work on this issue.

"Empowered communities are to lead the dialogue and change the paradigm," she concluded. "Working as a collective there are synergies that can work very well. What a great legacy you have built. I thank you for believing that a better way of doing things is possible." (md)

Next Steps for the Community of Practice

The morning of the final day of the Gathering, the participants broke into small groups and brainstormed important next steps for the UCP/A community of practice (CoP). Many good ideas emerged, but the participants prioritized the list choosing five themes. Participants then chose which of the themes he/she/they wanted to explore and formed small groups. The groups were asked to come up with a concrete plan for moving their topic forward.

The small group focused on “**Training**” discussed researching, collecting and sharing existing online training, creating guidelines for a core UCP/A curriculum, and creating a database to store shared training materials. This group scheduled a Zoom meeting for January 2024 to begin their work.

The “**Internal communications**” group created a list of possible next steps such as promoting and expanding the Unarmed Civilian Protection and Accompaniment Global E-Group listserv, building a UCP/A Community of Practice website, offering video conference meetings to discuss new ideas, shared challenges, planned actions etc., creating Signal or What’s App groups for informal exchanges by themes or region, creating an alert infrastructure in case support is needed from others, exploring information sharing through podcasts, newsletters, etc., and updating the Selkirk directory of peace organizations.

The group on “**Sharing resources**” recommended using the [ConnexUs](#) site as a place to upload documents and other resources and to visit regularly to find what others are doing, using, and needing. They also envisioned that organizations with access to policymakers and donors could advocate for smaller, more flexible grants. Additionally, they highlighted the need to educate policymakers about the difference between local consultation and being locally-led.

The group on “**Exchanges**” between organizations had several ideas. One is to create a database with information on the needs of organizations that would like to send people on an exchange, and those that are receptive to receiving visitors. Part of this would also be the need to note if either type of organization has resources to pay for an exchange. Another idea is to organize regional meetings and exchanges. In particular, the existing accompaniment network in Latin America has not met recently, and this group would like to help revive those connections.

The last group, “**Formalizing the UCP/A community of practice**”, focused on creating a structure or process to continue to support and coordinate the community of practice overall. It was clear from the discussion that there were different ideas as to the value of different models for doing so. Some models are more formal, with membership and representation of different groups. Other models are quite loose, mostly focused on supporting and maintaining communications within the

community of practice, more along the lines of the group focused on internal community communication. Ultimately the group decided to conduct an online survey of community members (those who had attended the Gathering and those who had initially registered but were unable to attend for some reason), to gauge their preferences. This survey was completed late November, 2023 and 27 of 29 respondents supported implementing some kind of structure. There was also interest in a relatively small steering or coordinating group, made up of representatives from interested organizations. Several people thought that if funding could be found, a part-time paid coordinator would be beneficial.

Building a Community of Practice

From the feedback received at the end of the Gathering and from the comments on the above-mentioned survey, it is clear that working together in community brings many benefits. Participants recognized that there are many differences amongst the organizations represented in the Community of Practice. Individuals and groups have distinct visions and use different methods. Also, the community is composed of many types of participants. There are practitioners in international organizations and in local, community-based organizations. There are also different types of researchers, donors/funders, NGO partners and policy makers. What knits the community together is reflected in the common statement (see below pp 31). It outlines shared commitments to protecting civilians nonviolently, using or researching direct protection strategies and methods, the primacy of local people, and standing for human dignity and anti-oppression.

These shared commitments and perspectives provide a basis for working together as a community. In the post conference survey, people noted supporting each other in their work, coordinating efforts, sharing training and other materials, providing access for each other to policy makers, and advocating for increased use and resources for UCP, as reasons for having a community.

These shared commitments and perspectives provide a basis for working together as a community. In the above-mentioned survey, people listed the following reasons for having a community:

- supporting each other in their work,
- coordinating efforts,
- sharing training and other materials,
- providing access for each other to policymakers, and
- advocating for increased use of and resources for UCP/A.

We are always stronger when actively nurturing webs of relationship and care. This is the fundamental basis for UCP/A work itself and surely the basis for a connected community of practice. (ef)

UNARMED CIVILIAN PROTECTION AND ACCOMPANIMENT

Community of Practice COMMON STATEMENT*

**Preventing and Confronting Violence
against Civilians:**

A Nonviolent Approach



As the world confronts violence against civilians, and the many forms of oppression, humiliation, destruction of property, injury, and death that it spurs, we – leading organisations, academics, individuals, and collectives in the practice of unarmed civilian protection and accompaniment across a range of contexts – are committed to meeting the challenges of violent conflict, protecting people in ways that do not further embed reliance on violent means, and centering civilians themselves in their own protection.

We are united by a collective vision of civilian protection that is not contingent on the use of violent force and that takes seriously nonviolent action as a pathway to protection by, for, and of civilians. Too often, conventional practices of protection perpetuate further violence. Systems such as policing and peacekeeping are often contingent on the use of arms and violent force and carry with them risks of harm to the civilians they seek to protect. As unarmed civilian protection actors, our relationships to these systems are many and varied. At the same time, this collective vision for protection unites us. We come together to make this statement as a community of practice.

Unarmed civilian protection and accompaniment are practiced all over the world. Whether accompanying human rights defenders in the shadow of threats to their lives; supporting community self-protection efforts against occupying forces; providing protective presence and shuttle diplomacy in war; building trust and de-escalating violence in neighbourhood situations; or strengthening community-led responses to racial violence; unarmed civilian protection and accompaniment are a demonstrated, effective approach to preventing and interrupting violence. As a community of practice, we work to protect civic space for civilian actors to exercise their agency and work toward nonviolent protection and conflict transformation. The contextual diversity that we represent highlights how unarmed civilian protection and accompaniment can play a role in all different kinds of violent contexts and acts, and across the span of the conflict cycle. Ongoing qualitative and quantitative research continues to refine and affirm the efficacy of the approach, and the positive impact that it has in the protection of civilians.

The ways we practice unarmed civilian protection and accompaniment are diverse, interconnected and complementary. We are united by these common commitments: to recognizing and prioritizing the leadership of civilians, those most impacted by violence, in their own protection; the power of nonviolent action to confront violence; and an understanding of violence as a manifestation of interlocking and systemic oppressions. We see these commitments as essential to facing current and future challenges – not only of violent conflict, but the climate crisis and other global phenomena that shape and will continue to shape our work.

Shifting away from overreliance on violent strategies to protect civilians requires transformational change and the expansion of the practice of unarmed civilian protection. This change requires commitments not only from within this community, but beyond.

As a community of practice, we are committed to:

- 1. Nonviolence:** Our work is grounded in the ethics and values of nonviolence. We believe that nonviolence is the powerful moral force of social change. In practice nonviolence is the physically, spiritually, mentally, and emotionally active work of courageous people recognizing the humanity and dignity in all. It encompasses transformational work in the personal, relational, structural, and cultural dimensions.
- 2. Direct protection:** We prioritise practical responses to immediate threats of violence. Even as we work to interrupt systemic violence, we foster an environment in which communities can re-invent practical responses to direct physical violence.
- 3. Primacy of local actors:** We centre and uplift the leadership and power of those directly affected by violent conflict and affirm their agency to self-determine their own futures and approaches to safety. The only sustainable way to address violence is through peace infrastructures that are grounded in and led by communities themselves.
- 4. Anti-oppression:** We embrace diversity, strive for inclusivity, and fiercely work to protect the dignity of all, particularly those experiencing the violence of interlocking oppressions. Protection must include the leadership of those most impacted, including women and youth.

As a community of practice, we invite ongoing collaboration and support from others working in this space. Specifically, we call on:

1. Legislators, policymakers and other decision makers to recognise and affirm the value of unarmed civilian protection and accompaniment as sustainable and effective approaches to the protection of civilians and prevention of violence.
2. Multilateral and individual state institutions and other donors to invest in and support unarmed civilian protection and accompaniment initiatives by directing dedicated funding to these approaches and to ongoing research on their efficacy.

Together, these commitments underpin our exploration of good practices in unarmed civilian protection and accompaniment. The collective, global analysis that we have come together to undertake is an important resource – not only for organisations, but for communities and individuals who are undertaking unarmed civilian protection as a practice in their daily lives.

*This statement represents a collective statement as an Unarmed Civilian Protection/ Accompaniment Community of Practice and does not imply that any one organization or individual has specifically endorsed all of its contents.



Participants

Participants – including staff of the Gathering - identified as being members of the following organizations:

- Aluna Acompañamiento Psicosocial
- Anishinaabek Caucus
- City University of New York
- Community Capacity Development
- Community Peacemaker Teams
- Creating Safer Space
- Cure Violence Global
- DC Peace Team
- Durham University
- Fellowship of Reconciliation Peace Presence
- Research Institute on Nonviolent Resolution of Conflicts
- Institute for Peace Work and Nonviolent Conflict Transformation
Leeds Beckett University
- Lutheran World Federation
- Meta Peace Team
- Ninguno
- Nonviolent Peaceforce
- Norwegian Refugee Council – NORCAP
- NOVACT Institute for Nonviolence
- Overseas Development Institute
- Operazione Colomba - Association
“Comunità Papa Giovanni XXIII”
- Organization for Nonviolence and Development (ONAD)
- Oxfam
- Peace Brigades International
- Quaker Peace Network Burundi
- Region Five Development Commission
- Selkirk College
- Servicio Internacional para la Paz (SIPAZ)
- Sheffield University
- SweFOR (Fellowship of Reconciliation, Sweden)
- Universidad Autonoma de Occidente
- Universidad de Antioquia
- Women Organizations Network (Kayin), WON-Kayin

Gender: 57% identified as female, 42% as male, 1% as diverse.

Participants came from 31 countries:

Argentina, Australia (2 x), Brazil (2 x), Burundi, Cameroon, Canada (2 x), Colombia (7 x), France, Germany (5 x), Greece, Guatemala, India, Indonesia (3 x), Iraq, Ireland, Italy (3 x), Kenya, Lebanon, Lithuania, México, Myanmar (2 x), Netherlands, Nigeria, Norway, Philippines, South Sudan (4 x), Sweden, Switzerland (3 x), Syria, United Kingdom (5 x), United States (26 x)

