



Research Network

Creating Safer Space

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



Arts and
Humanities
Research Council



GCRF
Global Challenges
Research Fund



1872 PRIFYSGOL
ABERYSTWYTH
UNIVERSITY

Contents

4-5 Introduction

6-7 Our Network

8-9 Our Research Projects

10-11 Our Research Findings

12-13 The Creating Safer Space Model

14-15 Our Achievements

CROSS-REGIONAL INSIGHTS

16-17

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

18-19

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

20-21

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

AFRICA

22-23

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

24-25

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

26-27

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

28-29

Nonviolent Activism Against Police Brutality in Kenya

30-31

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

32-33

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

LATIN AMERICA

34-35

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

36-37

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

38-39

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

40-41

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

42-43

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

44-45

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

46-47

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

MIDDLE EAST

48-49

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

SOUTHEAST ASIA

50-51

Introducing Unarmed Civilian Protection in Thai Society: Opportunities and Challenges

52-53

UCP in southern Thailand: Developing Civilian Protection Guidelines for violence-prone Communities

54-55

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

56-57

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

58-59

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

60-61

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

EVALUATING UCP

62-63

Participatory Evaluation Projects



Above: Still from La Fiesta theatre production, Medellín, Colombia (see p. 46-47 for project details). Photograph by Laura Diosa Vera and Sofia García 'Ponchis'.

Cover Image: Illustration by Sebastián Bucheli for the project 'Understanding Community-level Spontaneous Unarmed Civilian Protection' (see p. 16-17 for project details).



Art That Protects Mural, painted by local participants under the direction of Maestro Carlos Tobón, plastic artist, Medellín, Colombia (see p. 46-47 for project details).

Let's plant and nurture many more community-led protection trees around the world and connect them into a forest of unarmed civilian protection!

(Participant's call for action at Creating Safer Space final conference for Africa and the Middle East, Nairobi, 2024)



Introduction

Professor Berit Bliesemann de Guevara, Aberystwyth University

Principal Investigator of the Creating Safer Space network

THE NEED FOR THE PROTECTION OF CIVILIANS from armed violence is growing globally, but international protection capacity is not. Every year there are new record highs of people forcibly displaced, with current numbers of 122.6 million and counting¹ - almost double the figure of 2019 when we applied for funding for this network - and a majority of war-time casualties in many conflicts are among civilians. The alarming rise in numbers of civilians affected by violence suggests that current international protection approaches are insufficient to meet global protection needs.

Yet, communities are not mere victims waiting for strangers to save them. *Creating Safer Space* research projects have gathered ample evidence which shows that, across the world, communities themselves are engaged in locally-led protection, based on proactive nonviolent strategies responding to many different forms of armed violence. Our evidence demonstrates how civilians across the world protect themselves and others from violence using unarmed, community-centred methods.

These protection efforts are led and carried out by women and men, old and young, recognised authorities and marginalised groups. Local communities harness the experiences and knowledge they have by virtue of living amidst violence; they know what works in their context, why, and who is doing the protection work. As such, community-led forms of unarmed civilian protection (UCP)² are found in different violent contexts, from urban violence to outright war, where communities develop context-specific responses and early warning mechanisms that make people safer.



These community-led protection efforts, together with the work of the growing community of practice that currently comprises 61 organisations providing unarmed civilian protection and accompaniment in 24 areas of the world,³ are inviting us to fundamentally shift the way we think and talk about security. The *Creating Safer Space* network has been helping to develop and spread these incredible stories and effective approaches through research projects and knowledge sharing events, from the community-level to the international policy arena.

This brochure is an invitation to explore the power of nonviolence amidst armed conflict and to be inspired by the creativity, solidarity and hope for social transformation that speak from its pages.

¹ "Figures at a Glance", *UNHCR The UN Refugee Agency*, 9 October 2024, <https://www.unhcr.org/uk/about-unhcr/who-we-are/figures-at-a-glance> (accessed 2 January 2025).

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

³ "About", *UCP/A Community of Practice*, <https://www.ucpcommunityofpractice.org/about-1> (accessed 2 January 2025).

Our Research Projects

26

Research Projects



Research in 11 countries



Engaging over 8000 people so far through their dissemination activities



Conducted by 202 researchers



Working with about 2100 research participants directly



Led by organisations around the world



15 projects led by organisations in the Global South

11 projects led by organisations in the Global North

Provided over

£960,000

in grants



We have provided research grants to organisations around the world, to enable them to study unarmed civilian protection and community self-protection in different contexts.



Our Research Findings

The *Creating Safer Space* projects are giving us a wealth of context-specific insights into the power, practices, limits and future of communities' unarmed protection strategies to keep themselves and others safe in the midst of armed violence, the most important of which are summarised in this brochure.

What wider conclusions can we draw across contexts, countries and continents?

Following on from collective brainstorming and discussions at our regional conferences in Nairobi, Bangkok and Medellín in 2024, three overarching research findings stand out:

1 Communities across the world have developed strategies to keep themselves and others safe without using arms. While communities are likely to use other terminology than 'unarmed civilian protection' (UCP) to talk about their experiences or do not think about them as protection at all, protective practices are ubiquitous and effective in the everyday lives of people living amidst violence in all our research contexts. Strategies communities engage with include the full range of unarmed civilian protection methods, from protective presence and accompaniment to early warning, early response and negotiations with armed actors and public authorities. This evidence confirms other research into civilian agency amidst armed conflict.¹

Importantly, our research findings widen the common understanding of who can act as a protector. *Creating Safer Space* finds that women and youth, among many other groups, are often powerful protective agents who turn their supposed vulnerability into their 'superpower'.² While sometimes there is collaboration between external UCP practitioners and communities, the origins of most community practices are 'spontaneous' in the sense that communities have devised them by necessity and without outside support or training, based on principles of community care, mutual aid and solidarity.

2 Community-level protection practices are deeply embedded in their respective sociocultural contexts. Our findings show how sociocultural embeddedness determines how protection practices work in each specific local context and what their limits are – that is, they unpack the oft-cited context-



Early Warning Mechanism. Photograph by a local community member. Juba, Central Equatoria state, South Sudan (see p. 26-27 for project details).

specificity of unarmed civilian protection. Such sociocultural factors include, for example, vernacular signs and symbols used for community early warning, early response, or the special role that traditional, religious, and other culturally embedded forms of authority play in keeping people safe. In many indigenous communities, protection includes care for



Protection of a Palestinian farmer. Photo by Operazione Colomba (see pp. 62-63 for project details).

humans, non-humans (e.g. nature) and the spiritual world.

Three further cross-cutting findings must be highlighted. First, community protection infrastructures often build on much older forms and concepts of collectivity, solidarity and mutual help, such as the African *ubuntu* (I am because we are), the Colombian *minga* or the Bedouin *faza'a*. Second, for many communities protection includes their relations to the land, making caring for and remaining in their territories a central strategy and aim. And third, there is a specific

protective power to art collectives and practices, when these are based in and work with communities.

3 For communities, unarmed protection, nonviolent resistance and wider struggles for social transformation go together. In the lived experiences of many communities in conflict areas, especially those where armed violence has been entrenched over years or decades, community-level protection is inseparable from wider forms of nonviolent resistance against forms of oppression and structural violence such as forced displacement, settler colonialism, resource exploitation, patriarchy, authoritarian rule and dictatorship, which underpin the physical violence.

In other words, our cross-cutting findings show how protective practices create safer space for wider struggles for social justice, human rights, equality, diversity, land rights, environmental protection, democracy, autonomy, and much more, and how those struggles address the violent threats. They thereby highlight that, far from a practice that cements the status quo or stifles change, community-level unarmed civilian protection contributes to conditions for communities to push for conflict resolution and social transformation.

Publication by MasterPeace Cali
(see p. 44-45 for project details).



¹ For an overview of this literature, see Berit Bliesemann de Guevara, Jeremy Allouche and Felicity Gray, 'Introduction: Enacting Peace Amid Violence: Nonviolent Civilian Agency in Violent Conflict', *Journal of Pacifism and Nonviolence*, 1(2), 2023, pp. 161-180.

² See also Louise Ridden, 'Protection through Vulnerability: A Gendered Analysis of Unarmed Civilian Protection', *Journal of Pacifism and Nonviolence*, Forthcoming.

The Creating Safer Space Model

Our network also set out to explore the most suitable ways of research with and for (rather than on) self-protecting communities and UCP practitioners. Based on our experiences, we have formulated the Creating Safer Space Model, which consists of four elements which should be present in any study, engagement or evaluation of community-level UCP.

1

Internal or equitable teams:

Those conducting the research, evaluation or engagement activity should be, or work in close collaboration and equitable partnership with, people internal to the community, region or country whose protection efforts are being addressed. Safeguarding principles should lead all collaboration.

2

Participation:

A core principle of any research, evaluation or engagement activity should be that it is conducted *with and for* (not *on* or *without*) communities. This means that activities should have meaningful input from communities, partners or stakeholders to reflect the diversity of voices, the specific context, and the intersectional experiences of community-level UCP.

3

Creativity and openness:

Research, evaluation or engagement activities should employ methods that amplify different voices and enable context-specific meanings of core concepts such as 'protection', 'peace' or 'land' to emerge. Participatory and creative or arts-based methods, used in addition to more standard social-scientific methods, have proven particularly useful to achieve this.

4

Reflexivity:

To ensure the above principles are adhered to throughout a project, it is good practice to engage in regular reviews of activity design and implementation, based on feedback from team members and participants. This includes working with communities to explore the most suited forms of interaction and communication.

Research participants in Colombia carry out a mapping exercise. Photo by MasterPeace Cali (see p. 62-63 for project details).

Our Achievements

■ Academic Publications

We have published our research in the *Routledge Handbook of Peacebuilding, Civil Wars, Journal of Pacifism and Nonviolence*, and more, with many further articles forthcoming. An edited book (in preparation) will draw together insights from our research projects around the world.

■ Working Paper Series

We have launched the world's first Working Paper Series on unarmed civilian protection and community self-protection.

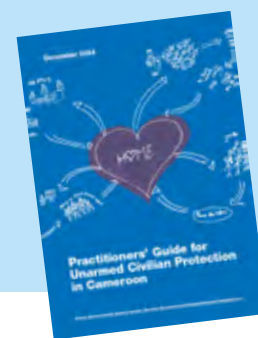


■ UCP Knowledge Database

Our knowledge database contains over 700 resources and counting, including academic publications, working papers and NGO documents.

■ Brochures

We have published a wide range of brochures, including a step-by-step guide to participatory action research, a poetry booklet, and various brochures sharing research findings around the world in an accessible manner.



■ Exhibition

Our travelling exhibition has been on show in Kenya, Thailand, the UK, the USA, Colombia, Brazil and Belgium, and it is available online in the form of a navigable 360° virtual tour.

■ Films

We have produced films about unarmed civilian protection and community self-protection around the world. These were shown as part of the WOW Film Festival, and many are available for view on our website.



Still from *Pervivir: The Nasa indigenous people of Colombia in the midst of violence*, produced by the Ritualising Protection project (see p. 34-35 for project details).

■ Toolbox for a Decolonial Perspective

We have supported the publication of a toolbox to help decolonization processes among Unarmed Civilian Protection practitioners.

■ Training Courses

We have provided a wide range of online training courses for researchers and practitioners around the world, in order to increase understanding of UCP and to build research capacity. Recordings are available for free use.



Our exhibition on show at the Delegates' Entrance of the United Nations Headquarters, New York, April 2024. Photo: Ramón Campos.

■ Policy Engagement and Policy Briefs

We have engaged with policy-makers to share the policy implications of our research, including by co-organising events for policymakers at the United Nations in New York and the European Union in Brussels. Our policy briefs are available on our website.



■ UCP Academy

Together with our partner organisation Nonviolent Peaceforce and the UCP/A Community of Practice, we are creating the world's first UCP Academy. The UCP Academy is an education platform dedicated to providing integrative and accessible education and training opportunities to individuals and organisations globally, to support the effective implementation of Unarmed Civilian Protection strategies in diverse conflict dynamics.

Find out more: www.creating-safer-space.com



Final Creating Safer Space Conference for Africa and the Middle East, Strathmore University, Kenya, January 2024

■ Events

We have hosted major conferences in Colombia, Kenya and Bangkok in addition to a wide range of online events. Subscribe to our [newsletter](#) to hear about future events.



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)
- Dr Moses John, Organisation for Nonviolence and Development, South Sudan (co-investigator)
- Flora Bringi Francis, Organisation for Nonviolence and Development, South Sudan (co-investigator)



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 explored the emergence of spontaneous UCP by local actors and documented and analysed 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 were 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 the emergence of UCP activities.

The Research

The project design adopted 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 took place between June 2023 and February 2024. In-country Co-Is were instrumental in identifying local participants and actors as well as initial examples of spontaneous UCP to explore in greater depth. UK-based University of Winchester researchers visited the fieldwork sites to support the in-country Co-Is in 2-3-week periods of intensive data collection. Data collection comprised mainly of semi-structured interviews with individuals/ organisational representatives who have witnessed and/or taken part in UCP activities. One or more focus groups were carried out in each location/ region in each country. 30 or more semistructured interviews were carried out in each of the 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 could be derived.

The Findings

Fieldwork in Colombia 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.



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

In the case of Myanmar, data from internally displaced people (IDPs) from Central Myanmar and Chin state, and local civilians in Kachin, identified three broad types of UCP activities: the use of inside informants and networks to warn civilians being targeted by military and militia because of their political connections and affiliations, or suspicion of involvement in anti-military activities; kinship networks to support those targeted by violence to secure new identity documents and travel onwards to safer spaces; and the involvement of religious leaders, groups, and institutions as ‘first responders’, providing safe housing in places of worship and material and spiritual support.

In South Sudan, research in Rumbek and Juba identified the emergence of informal peace committees to gather and share information and provide early warning about tensions, cattle movements, and cattle-raiding. Protection teams of predominantly women and youth in rural regions provide early warning, facilitate dialogue, carry out advocacy concerning gender-based violence (GBV) and child protection, and provide education on domestic abuse. Common across all three contexts, traditional and faith-based leaders play an important role in advocacy and education projects, facilitate dialogue to interrupt cycles of violence, and have provided safe havens for people at risk.

Policy briefs with further information about each of the above case studies is available on our project page on the Creating Safer Space website.



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)
- Prof 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 was 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 used 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 to safety” of women. Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria. Photo courtesy of Aliyu Salisu Barau.

The Research

The research used 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 policymakers, 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.

The Findings

Overall, the case studies found that gendered violence is embedded in social relations creating ‘ruptured fabrics’ within territories and enables exploitation of territory, labour, and identity. The focus of UCP on strengthening relationships and communication has an important role to play in healing these ‘ruptured fabrics’, with UCP actors having strong cognizance of power and gender relations in context and their own role within it.

Furthermore, women experienced a continuum



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

of violence at different scales. In every case, women related the violence they experienced to structural violence. The deep inequality was considered a form of systemic oppression linked to the production of environmental degradation and capitalist accumulation. Power (physical, discursive etc) is used over and about women, devaluing their status and roles, enabling violence to be ‘justified’, which is linked to broader patriarchal, colonial, and racialised structures particularly around the creation of property. As such, UCP approaches and actors may only have the capacity or ethical background to address specific forms of violence but will need to recognise the interconnections between different forms of violence, including intimate partner, intra-household, and structural violence.

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 identified how artists and allied activists understand protection and vulnerability based on lived experiences.

The Research

This interdisciplinary research project connected South Sudan and Colombia. It compared 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 focused on protection infrastructures that are rarely featured in literature on unarmed civilian protection. Art commissions, an exhibition, blogs, policy briefs and an illustrated catalogue are making the research accessible within and outside academia.

The Findings

1. We have come to understand some of the vulnerabilities in relation to how artists stay safe. We found that for artists working within the creative, cultural and educational sectors there is a real economic constraint to safety since it is costly to pay for cyber-protection, mobility, and legal fees for defending their rights to freedom of expression. Working with collectives illustrated that there is a need to be in social proximity to others as a way of ensuring a legitimate protection infrastructure, often already built into existing collective formats, such as unions of weavers/sewers, performers, theatre makers. Here we push the conceptualisation of 'self-protection' into a more indexical frame and argue that social dynamics of violence are always linked, therefore making the self-as-individual an impossible equation.

2. Protection infrastructure as interlinked between (1) fortification and (2) creative process: Within this framework we conceive of the notion that curation is a mode of protection, meaning that people in creative spaces collect certain materials and narratives to self-style their presence as a way of staying safe. These processes of selection, contextual evaluation, and public interface – when done in collective formats – create a kind of fortress to protect the physical and mental wellbeing of the artist. Such a finding is important considering that in both Colombia and South Sudan nearly all our collaborating partners and research participants did not see safety as an absence of violence; rather, it is a way to withstand the ongoing violence that has been persistent in these contexts.

3. The value of creative methodologies: Using arts-based research methodologies to show how issues of safety and vulnerability can be investigated within and outside of artist and allied activist communities, using methods such as art commissions and curation, helped to further protection aims amidst violent conflict because it offered both direct confrontation with the issues and an alternative approach to dealing with issues of violence.

One thing that we found from this research is related to the long-term and cyclical forms of bodily violence that are connected to historical legacies of epistemic violence. Such forms can be traced through symbolic and material lineages that go beyond narrative-based oral histories. Conversely, we also found (which is not unique to this project) the affirming potential of spontaneous connection that can lead to healing and reconciliation to avert future violent events.

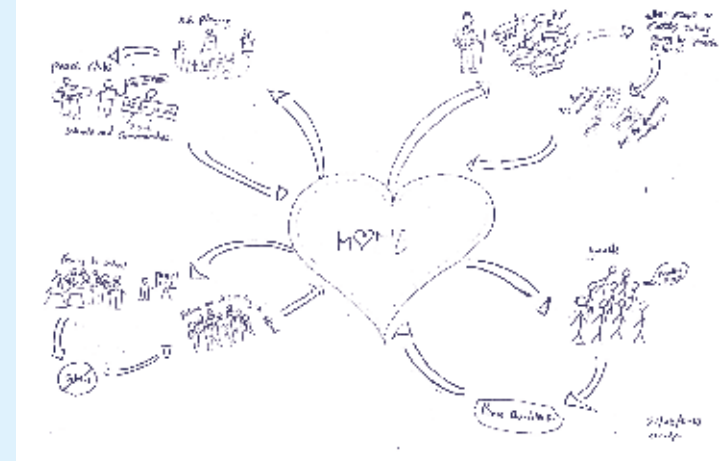
Exploring unarmed civilian self-protection in Cameroon's Anglophone conflict

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 eighth 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

The Research

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 used their own strategies, employing a blend of homegrown



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 civilians 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)
- Pwakim Jacob Choji, Youth Initiative Against Violence and Human Rights Abuse, Jos, Nigeria (co-investigator)
- Allamin Foundation for Peace & Development (ALLOPAD), Nigeria (project partner)



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 conflict. Since then, the city has witnessed intermittent large-scale violence, and nearly 4,000 people were killed between 2001 and 2010, thereby creating the need for various local peacebuilding 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 have resulted in the loss of lives on both sides, with the civilians trapped in between.

The Research

This research project involved a short learning video from three urban communities filmed in Jos about the collective impact model for civilian protection launched in 2017 in the area of community security. Prominently, the research had policy influencing ambitions through its partner ALLOPAD, in Borno state, to promote grassroots advocacy, capacity building, and knowledge dissemination around civilian protection 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 has been threefold. First, it has encouraged inter-regional learning of the collective impact model in civilian protection. Second, it has built 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 civilian protection in Maiduguri, Borno state. Third,



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



Civil society and government actors participated in the research in Borno state.

it has developed 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

The Jos-based model of intergenerational collaboration through multi-stakeholder driven collective impact has had the following lessons to offer for the practice of civilian protection.

The project findings point to the diversity of local capacities that exist for civilian protection that is inclusive and collaborative in nature. In our presentation of the learning video and discussions with governmental and non-governmental stakeholders (n=23) in Maiduguri we found similarities with the Jos model, although these were less deliberate in including a youth-focused, intergenerational and collective impact design.

One of the areas of success in Bala Kaze and Angwan Damisa was collaboration between security agencies (police) and the community leaders. This collaboration included reporting on violent and crime-related incidents. The Breaking the Borders (BtB) Ambassadors who were trained unarmed defenders of the community would arrest miscreants and hand them over to the police for further action.

The BtB included members of different age groups and their ability to use unarmed methods of civilian policing presented an improvement on localised jungle justice methods. In both communities unemployment were cited as a trigger for localised fights at the stream dividing the two villages. This area of cooperation between formal security agencies/police and the civilians had mixed results in the Tudun Wada community. Some level of complicity between criminals and the police was observed; miscreants were often released without repercussions

when the local community leaders attempted to hand them over for selling narcotics or for any other localised crime-related issues.

This variation in the success of the collective impact model suggests that cooperation with the formal security agencies and their willingness to work with local communities is a significant factor in defining the success of civilian protection methods in the area of community security provision.

Finally, the success of civilian protection methods in arresting conflict escalation and maintaining inter-community peace in Angwan Damisa and Bala Kaze does offer important lessons around when unarmed civilian initiatives can become sustainable, locally led, and locally maintained networks for security and protection. They suggest that state agencies need to become willing collaborators and supporters of these initiatives. Local arrangements need to include different age groups and genders.

Following the video screening at the Maiduguri workshop, the five communities whose members took part (communities of Gangamari, Kawar Maila, Limanti, State Low Cost and Old Maiduguri (n=150, 45 F, 105 M), were encouraged to launch an informal civilian protection network and a WhatsApp group to report on civilian protection-related developments.

The sustainability and effectiveness of these networks are likely to be variable and could benefit from the adoption of a more deliberate organisation structure grounded in collective impact-type design. The communities in Maiduguri would benefit from adopting intergenerational collaboration and not just dialogue, as we found that the collective and inclusive decision-making model that was adopted in the case of the Jos network was more effective than one that is consultative or based on elders directing younger members of these networks on proposed routes of action.

[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 investigated 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 was 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 undertook physical visits to villages with prior approval from state level and from local Chiefs to record videos and photos of cultural practices, accompanied by discussions and questions. The research engaged 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 was thus needed on how UCP in practice can address these cultures of self-protection, and what the implications for greater cultural engagement in protecting civilians are.

The overarching research question of this project was: 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 was 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 encompassed a variety of data collection tools: group discussions, interviews, demonstrations of cultural practices and signs in practice, drumming, song and prayers. Diria and Haji 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 and 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 returned 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 underdevelopment.

[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 back to the colonial period, and the practice is still ongoing today. Successive governments have used it as a tool for violence over citizens and political adversaries. Our research was conducted in Nairobi and Kisumu, because these areas have experienced significant police brutality from the colonial period until the present. This brutality, as a tool for violating the rights of citizens, is normally experienced by the youth and by people living in the informal settlement areas of the two counties, due to their economic vulnerabilities.

Our research aimed to analyse the diverse artistic strategies that have been used by youth and civil society organizations (CSOs) in addressing police brutality in Kenya. Some of the strategies analysed were the use of murals, graffiti, songs, poems, plays, and cartoons, which have been 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, artists, victims and



survivors of police brutality, CSO members, Police Officers and Judiciary Staff.

- b) Focus group discussions (FGDs): 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 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) Some respondents had experienced all of the above

Role of artists 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 Kenyan artists to help raise awareness of cases of police brutality, and to promote change by addressing incidences of police misconduct.

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 to address police brutality:

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

It is important to note that 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 the Kisumu Social Justice Centre, 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 experiences different types of conflicts including sexual and gender-based violence; intercommunal resource-based violence; 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, the protection of civilians from physical harm in conflict situations has heavily relied on national security forces (police and military). 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 such as self-protection groups, the *Nyumba Kumi* Initiative, and local early warning early response teams. While a lot of work and studies have been done on nonviolent conflict transformation, there

are not many significant research endeavours into the practice of UCP and the role civilians play in their own protection, particularly focusing on Uasin Gishu County.

This research project sought to address this gap by positioning UCP in local, county, and national peace and security processes. The outputs of this research are important in understanding and appreciating civilians' agency in local peace and security systems, more so when considered against the backdrop of the cyclical threats of electoral violence and the resource-based conflicts in Kenya.

The Research

The research was guided by the below research questions:

1. What are the existing civilian protection strategies and frameworks in Langas/ Burnt Forest/ Turbo and the larger Uasin Gishu County, and to what extent have they been harnessed in the past?
2. To what extent are local peace committees, community policing forums, and local self-defence groups effective in promoting civilian protection? What factors influence their success or failure?

3. What are the emergent civilian protection strategies and frameworks in Langas/ Burnt Forest/ Turbo?
4. What role does people's agency play in civilian protection in situations of conflict in Uasin Gishu County?
5. What gaps and opportunities exist for strengthening civilian protection strategies and frameworks in Langas/ Burnt Forest/ Turbo?
6. What opportunities exist for synergy-building and intersectionality between international, national, and local (self-protection) civilian protection mechanisms?

The research team conducted the following activities:

- 3 People-First Impact Method (PFIM) Exercises in Langas (Kapseret Sub-County), Turbo (Turbo Sub-County), and Burnt Forest (Kesses Sub-County) that engaged 363 community members. The 3 exercises supported 24 separate community conversations (each made up of 15 members) involving the following community groups: Women, Youths, Self-Help Groups, Village Elders, *Boda Boda* (motorbike) Riders, Religious Leaders, Community Health Promoters, Community Policing Forum, Reformed Brewers of Illicit Liquor, *Nyumba Kumi* Representatives, and Persons with Disability.

- 3 Community Scorecard Exercises in the three target areas that have engaged 111 community members and local security actors. Each scorecard exercise consisted of 4 separate community engagement activities.

The Findings

Existing UCP Strategies: The research examined existing UCP strategies in Langas, Burnt Forest, and Turbo, highlighting a reliance on government-led structures like the *Nyumba Kumi* Initiative, Local Peace Committees, and Community Policing Forums. Community-initiated strategies also play a critical role, including self-protection groups (e.g., *boda boda* associations), confidential reporting, peace messaging through churches and women's groups, and seeking refuge in neutral spaces like churches and police stations. These approaches address security threats, including ethnic, political, and domestic conflicts.

Effectiveness of UCP Structures: Local Peace Committees and Community Policing Forums have effectively mediated disputes, strengthened security awareness, and implemented early warning systems. However, their efforts face challenges such as political interference, limited inclusivity, lack of resources, and insufficient awareness of disability matters. The research emphasized gaps in community engagement, technical capacity, and coordination among UCP structures.

Role of People's Agency in UCP: The research highlighted people's agency in UCP, with community groups demonstrating proactive engagement in conflict mitigation, leveraging social capital for information sharing, and employing adaptive strategies like using neutral spaces as safe havens.

Opportunities for Improvement of UCP Frameworks: Opportunities for strengthening UCP strategies include enhancing inclusivity by involving women, youth, and persons with disabilities, increasing grassroots presence, and providing training on context-specific strategies. Incentives like material and financial support and structured coordination mechanisms are also recommended.

Synergy-Building: To enhance UCP, the study suggested aligning local strategies with national and international frameworks, building capacity through training, integrating early warning systems, and fostering multi-stakeholder collaboration. These measures can create more effective, inclusive, and sustainable UCP frameworks.

Contribution to Knowledge: The findings contribute to understanding grassroots civilian protection mechanisms, emphasizing the importance of community agency, addressing systemic barriers, and exploring intersections between local and institutional protection systems. This research provides a foundation for future studies on UCP in conflict-prone regions of Kenya.

[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

While Unarmed Civilian Protection (UCP) approaches have proven to be effective in managing conflicts and protecting civilians trapped in conflicts, their application remains low in Kenya. This can be partly attributed to the low awareness and understanding of what UCP entails. Even in circumstances where UCP has been applied, those engaging with these methods are often not aware that they are using UCP approaches, and the unconscious application of the methods may affect the effectiveness of their interventions. The aim of this project was therefore to address low awareness and low uptake of UCP in managing conflicts in Uasin Gishu and Nairobi counties of Kenya. Drawing on research findings and good practices around UCP in the management of conflict by state and non-state actors, the project increased the understanding, visibility, preference for, and advocacy of UCP. The project



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

responded to perennial conflicts in two counties. In Uasin Gishu County in the North Rift Valley the main causes of conflict are political tensions, cattle rustling, and contestation over natural resources such as water and pasture. In Nairobi, the main causes of conflict are struggles over scarce resources and job opportunities among young people and ethnic groups living in the Kibera, Mathare, and Kariobangi informal settlements as well as widespread discrimination based on ethnic origin and nepotism.



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



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

The Activities

To address the above problems, the following activities were implemented:

(i) The project produced radio programmes to create awareness of, advocate for, and educate communities on the approaches and benefits of UCP. These were aimed at communities, state actors, development partners, and civil society organisations (CSOs). The radio shows were 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.

(ii) The project conducted two training workshops, each two days long, to build the capacity of selected media practitioners working in the two counties, Uasin Gishu and Nairobi. The workshops enabled the media practitioners to learn about UCP and about how to use the acquired knowledge to promote UCP as an approach to conflict management. The selected journalists had all reported on conflict before. These journalists were then invited to disseminate the findings of the two Creating Safer Space projects in Kenya, which are led by Rural Women Peace Link (RWPL) and Peace Tree Network (PTN).

(iii) The project documented and showcased 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 knowledge of the media practitioners from Nairobi and Uasin Gishu who participated in the training sessions on UCP increased from an average of 56.5 % before the training to 87.5% after the training. The results indicate that the trainings had an immediate positive impact on the media practitioners' understanding of UCP and their role in conflict management. This is further evidenced by the fact that several of the journalists subsequently published stories on UCP.

Over three million people in communities in Uasin Gishu and Nairobi counties, and the country at large, were empowered with information on why and how to use UCP in preventing and managing conflicts in their communities. This was achieved by working with media practitioners who report for media channels that have a wider reach. It is instructive to note that one of the unintended results was that many people who were empowered by this information live beyond the two target counties.

Another result was the publication of a magazine, [UCP in Action](#), with stories that speak to the impact of UCP in managing conflicts in Uasin Gishu and Nairobi counties.

During the implementation of this project, some issues emerged that are relevant to future programming and interventions around UCP, not only in Uasin Gishu and Nairobi counties, but in Kenya more broadly, and in the wider East Africa region. Some of these issues include:

(i) There is a lack of a deeper understanding of UCP among media practitioners, which might in turn affect efforts to sustain the current attention and adoption of UCP as an area of interest for journalism practice in Kenya.

(ii) Some UCP approaches are being used in conflict prevention and management in Nairobi and Uasin Gishu counties, but in a very unconscious manner. Communities are not aware that they are using UCP methods to manage conflicts in their villages. As a result, there is no structured approach or deeper appreciation of what they are doing.

(iii) UCP is a new concept in Kenya, yet it is very relevant in areas that experience episodes of violent conflict. There is need to mainstream UCP as one of the approaches to conflict prevention and management in Kenya.

[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)
- Lehidí Carolina Baltam Salazar, Colombia (researcher)
- Nicolás Braguinsky Cascini (filmmaker)
- Pippa Cooper (researcher)
- Resguardo Indígenas de Huellas Caloto, Colombia (project partner)



This project sought 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 strategies to support them.

The project sought 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 social, 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. 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.

[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)
- Manuel Müller, 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 Afrodescendent 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.

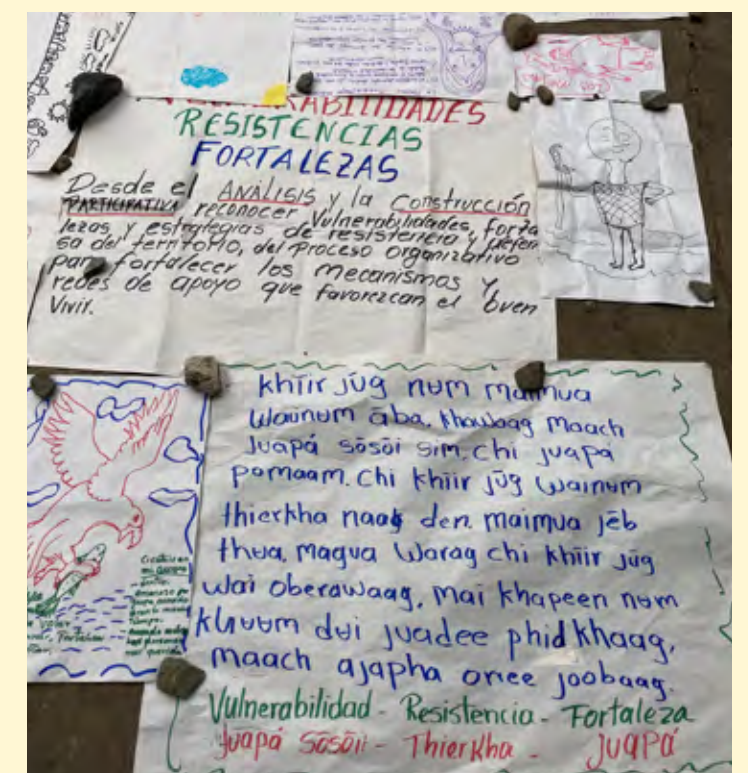
The specific aims of this research project were to:

1. Map vulnerability to physical harm of Afrodescendent and indigenous communities in Buenaventura, Colombia.
2. Examine how community members experience this vulnerability while navigating their specific geographical contexts.
3. Explore ways in which 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 Afrodescendent community of La Esperanza; 2) the Afrodescendent women's collective AINI of the Naya River; 3) the indigenous community Santa Rosa de Guayacán; 4) the Afrodescendent community of the Puente Nayero humanitarian space; 5) the LGBTQIA2S+ and Afrodescendent 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 how people 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

At 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 travelling 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.

For our Aim 3 discussions, we heard about how collective strategies like the Puente Nayero humanitarian space in urban Buenaventura and the Humanitarian Shelter of the Wounaan Phobor community provided the safest conditions for residents that they saw available. While residents did not say that they ever felt completely safe, the social cohesion and political organising of these spaces were their most effective protection. These spaces are both supported through internal organising by residents but also by partnerships with external organisations like CONPAZCOL, and through national and international advocacy that bring visibility and international accompaniment to the initiatives.

[Find Out More](#)



Conflicts over Water, Violations, and Forms of Self-Protection: Multi-case study in Eastern Antioquia, Colombia

The Researchers

- Beatriz Elena Arias López, University of Antioquia (principal investigator, phase 1 and 2)
- Hernán Darío Pineda Gómez, University of Antioquia (phase 1 and 2)
- Mateo Valderrama, Peasant Association of Antioquia (phase 1 and 2)
- Juan David Arias, University of Antioquia (phase 1 and 2)
- Jesica Restrepo, University of Antioquia (phase 1 and 2)
- Dennise Roca Servat, University of Antioquia (phase 1 and 2)
- Vanessa Vasco Vargas, Corporación Jurídica Libertad (phase 1)



The Problem

Water is a structuring axis of hydro-social relations and of the conflicts that arise over its control and use in many parts of the world. Therefore, the project aimed to explore the conflicts related to concession processes for hydroelectric power 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 analysed associated problems such as mass tourism, real-estate pressure, and mining – elements that add threats through the privatisation of water. These projects have been implemented strategically, and in some cases insidiously, without recognising the damage that looms over the communities or social actors involved. These forms of intervention, promoted by public policy, project an image of the countryside as an empty space

or one that is adaptable to new uses. This intensifies the degree of vulnerability of rural populations, since it does not recognise their pre-existence territorial dynamics. The aim, then, was to delve deeper into these combined threats, to explore the scope of self-protection in the face of conflicts from growing water privatisation, as well as to advance in the reflections on just transitions in a context of debates about energy alternatives and the revision of polluting, undemocratic development models.

The Research

The research was designed as a multi-case study. To produce data, we first reviewed and systematised existing documents and other information related to problems, violations, actors, and relationships around the three rivers/ communities under study. We also went on territorial walking tours with local actors along the rivers, accompanied by photo-voice and social mapping exercises, discussion groups, individual interviews, and community engagement workshops using photo-embroidery. These activities involved people from rural communities in the selected hydro-social territories and members of social organisations.

The Findings

Our research found that protection can involve the preservation of, permanence in, and care for the world people inhabit, recognising the emotional and affective links people have to their territories. Self-protection in terms of care considers not only the physical dimension of safety, but also its symbolic and emotional dimensions as well as the ties established with the territory in which people live. The concept of solastalgia allowed us to understand the sense of loss of place people feel when threatened by the potential transformations of hydro-social territories

due to different forms of water privatisation.

The self-protection strategies employed by civilian actors of peasant communities and their organisations include negotiations with state officials and entities; advocacy regarding municipal planning and land use planning; alliances with platforms and collectives that advocate for care for the land and for the commons; legal actions; education on the implications of extractivist economies and hydro-energy projects; artistic mobilisations; creation of videos and podcasts; visibilisation of problems through digital networks; territorial walking tours; experiential exchanges; dialogues between peasant and expert knowledges; and community organisation and self-management.

The deployment of these self-protection mechanisms not only arises from the risks and threats

related to hydroelectric power concessions, but also from the undesired and imminent change of the territory in which communities 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. People understand water as a crucial common good in 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 additional conflicts linked to mass tourism, real-estate pressure, mining concessions, the privatisation of water management, and deforestation. These conflicts have different intensities, involve multiple local and foreign actors, and differ from region to region. As the risks and threats arising from them operate in different ways, so too community self-protection mechanisms are different, adapting to the specific contexts.



Life, history, and peasant heritage
Location: Argelia, Antioquia
Photo by: Mateo Valderrama
Embroidered by: Verónica Sánchez
Date: February 2024



Protecting the peasant identity
Location: San Francisco, Antioquia
Photo by: Harvey Tamayo
Embroidered by: Jaime Gómez
Date: April 2024



Phase 1
[Find Out More](#)

Phase 2
[Find Out More](#)

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

The Researchers

- Juan Mario Díaz, University of Sheffield, UK (co-principal investigator)
- Jesús Alfonso Flórez López, Universidad Autónoma de Occidente, Colombia (co-principal investigator)
- Simon Rushton, University of Sheffield, UK (co-investigator)
- Natalia Campo, Universidad Autónoma de Occidente, Colombia (co-investigator)
- Adrián Alzate, Universidad Autónoma de Occidente, Colombia (co-investigator)
- Osmel Alexis Hoyos, Lerma (local investigator)
- Claudia Vannesa Rebolledo, Caldoño (local investigator)
- María Isabel Quintero, Buenaventura (local investigator)
- Corporación Memoria y Paz (CORMEPAZ), Buenaventura (project partner)
- Central Cooperativa Indígena del Cauca (CENCOIC), Caldoño (project partner)
- Escuela Agroambiental El Arraigo – Comunidad del Lerma (project partner)
- Pastoral Social Popayán (project partner)



The Problem

With a focus on building skills that enhance community capacities for UCP, the project sought to: i) document and analyse experiences, initiatives, and infrastructures of UCP in the three sites in which we worked; ii) identify and disseminate lessons for effective UCP at a regional, national, and international level; and iii) strengthen community capacity for research, self-analysis, project collaboration, and policy engagement.

The project developed at a time of increasing insecurity for many communities in the region, and particularly in the three sites in which we worked. Local officials and members of the indigenous guard were killed in Caldoño; extreme social control was established in Lerma by the guerrilla group that controls the region; and Buenaventura's *comunas*, despite a ceasefire between the two main criminal gangs, continued to be divided into "invisible frontiers" under the control of these illegal groups. These circumstances highlighted the relevance of UCP in these contexts but also limited our ability to develop fieldwork as extensively as we had initially planned, which was compensated for by online monitoring and training.

The key findings of our project include:

- The key roles played by women and young people in the study communities in prompting initiatives to increase community security;
- The ability of communities to navigate and adapt to hybrid political orders, where social life is organised in parallel to the centralised state;
- The centrality of the concept of *Juntanza* (togetherness) to community-level UCP initiatives;
- Community-level conceptualisations of (in)security;
- The possibilities of participatory video as a method for researching UCP.

The Research

In methodological terms, the project facilitated findings particularly in relation to the use of Participatory Video (PV): i) PV contributed to the retrieval of historical memory through the community's own narratives and discourses, in contexts of insecurity that limit people's participation. ii) PV, as a collective artistic creation, contributed to the reconstruction of the social fabric of the community, for instance, changing indigenous authorities' perception of young people in Caldoño; generating inter-generational exchange of knowledge and experiences in Buenaventura; and awakening people's memories in Lerma. iii) PV facilitated a search for audiovisual autonomy, which reflected alternative aesthetic views and understandings in the communities, contributing to a regional dialogue of knowledge which, in turn, challenges hierarchies through the collective creation process.

This experience led us to organise the 1st International Festival of Participatory Video and Community-based Cinema at the Universidad Autónoma de Occidente (UAO) in the city of Cali, Colombia, in November 2023. The festival received 178 applications from 25 countries and delivered an academic agenda including: i) a forum where the project's local researchers shared lessons learned during the project; ii) a series of in-person workshops on graphic stories through which community members reflected on challenges and experience of UCP strategies; and iii) a seminar on art-based strategies for UCP addressed to UAO researchers and students.



The Findings

Through our research we looked at specific protection strategies and mechanisms but also identified two crucial elements around which other community-based strategies of care and protection are linked: the concept of *Juntanza* and the active defence of the territory.

One of the effects of the armed conflict in Colombia has been social fragmentation. *Juntanza*, which also refers to the indigenous concept of *Minga*, represents peoples' determination to stay, think, and act together to protect themselves from the conflict and multiple related threats. In this way, it is also a form of resistance. *Juntanza* is at the core of a wide range of practical strategies and activities such as:

- Negotiation, mediation and even, sometimes, challenging legal and illegal actors;
- Preventing the recruitment by armed actors of children and young people;
- Organisation of cultural and art-based activities that allow them to maintain and nurture community links without raising concerns among armed actors;
- Community-based humanitarian action (including denunciation and intervention in the face of humanitarian crises and human rights violations);
- The creation of spaces for participation in public discussions on collective problems;
- Discussing and making issues visible, while promoting "safe" ways of being together, through *comadreas* (gatherings of old women) and *mingas de pensamiento* (community-based thinking, discussion, and deliberation);

The second aspect is the defence of the territory. For the communities we worked with, territory is not simply "land". Territory represents the connection between natural and human life, as well as the complexity of socio-economic and power conditions that affect life. In Buenaventura, this has been encapsulated in the motto: "Territory is life, and life is not possible without the territory".

This way, the two dimensions of *Juntanza* became clear. On the one hand, it seeks to repair the social fabric damaged by the violences of the armed conflict and, on the other, defend people's right to live in peace and with dignity in their territory.

[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 conflicts that persist in the Bajo Cauca subregion of Antioquia (Colombia) have 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 internal community processes of self-protection and dialogue with the authorities responsible for guaranteeing safe conditions for the work of human rights defenders.

This research project systematized the experience of the PSG with the Senú indigenous people and peasant communities of the municipalities of Cáceres, El Bagre and Tarazá, as a mechanism for the unarmed protection of civil society that is contributing to the prevention of risks emanating from violent actions in the territory. The project identified factors that have influenced the success or failure of the strategies



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

implemented by the PSG and the local communities, and has contributed to the production and dissemination of knowledge about collective unarmed protection mechanisms.

The Research

The main research methodology consisted in the systematization of experiences, using an open, qualitative approach. Activities to this end 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 involved. Furthermore, various meetings were held to foster the exchange of experiences between organizations and communities, which in turn has deepened reflections on self-protection mechanisms through the 'circles of words' method.

Other activities cross-cutting these methods involved the collective creation of multimedia outputs, which were used as materials for pedagogical and collective memory purposes. The team also carried out interviews with state agents to reflect on advocacy processes and presented the research to state entities and social organisations belonging to the Social Process of Guarantees.

The Findings

- Since their establishment, the three civil society organisations ASOCBAC, ASOVIAMCLA and AHEREMIGUA 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.
- The experience of establishing Humanitarian Shelters in Bagre and Tarazá, as a self-protection mechanism, has served as a territorial commitment;



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

it sends messages to armed actors about respect for civilian property, and this mechanism has started to be recognized as a contribution to the creation of peace and care.

- The peasant and indigenous organizations that are part of the PSG, as well as the Humanitarian and Peace Roundtable of Antioquia and 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.
- Having participatively built gender, ethnic and territorial protocols has allowed organizations to have a permanent consultation route that is suited to the territorial reality and deepening conflict in their communities.
- 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.

[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 has intensified. The long history of forced displacement continues; 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 moved into poverty belts and segregated neighbourhoods in cities, and have been re-victimized by the multiple forms of violence, inherited from the armed conflict, that are prevalent in these cities.

Our project explored the development of unarmed civilian protection capacities among a group of women displaced by the armed conflict, who now reside in contexts characterized by social and urban segregation in the city of Cali and who use methods of popular communication and legal empowerment. The project addressed the following questions: What happens when social groups or actors adopt methods of popular communication and build their own narratives of peaceful self-protection through civil mechanisms? How does popular communication contribute to the restoration of community ties and the development of civilian self-protection capacities? What is the relevance of community ties, which promote community advocacy, in local and community practices that address violence through unarmed civilian self-protection? And how does unarmed civilian self-protection of victims of the armed conflict, who live 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 used a community-based action research approach, establishing mechanisms of collaboration and reciprocity with the women who participated in the research in order to co-create knowledge with them. The project was implemented in four stages. The first stage involved the collection of data and information on the community under study 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 involved intervention-creation strategies in communication to develop a transmedia product; here, women were sources of information (testimonials), creators of content, and facilitators of the process. The fourth stage was focused on the analysis of the results of the dissemination of the knowledge produced by the research; and on the drafting of the final report. This last stage aimed to analyse how the research was received and understand 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 civilian self-protection** promoted by the Llano Verde Peace Seedbed (*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 civilian 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 civilian self-protection in the case of the Llano Verde Peace Seedbed implies recognizing that **this is possible only by the construction of an identity linked to the territory as a neighbourhood of victims of the conflict**, through exercises of culture and popular communication focused on a collective memory.
- The women who participated in the Peace Seedbed resignified both the narratives about the violent past as well as the categories created to explain and characterise their relationship with, but also their peaceful resistance to, the new violence to which they and their families are exposed. These resignifications can be understood as tools with a political meaning that do not necessarily seek direct confrontation or struggle for power, but rather try to achieve quick wins regarding aspects of security and civilian protection. We can see here the strength and importance of using a language that, in its struggle for the transformation and pacification of its territory, does not only anchor the present to a past marked by a national history of conflict, but also to the existence of a Political Constitution in a State of Law.

[Find Out More](#)



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

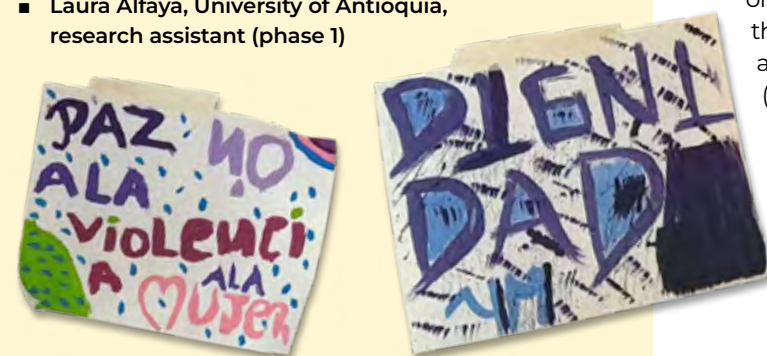
The Researchers

- Beatriz Elena Arias López, University of Antioquia (principal investigator, phase 1 and 2)
- Adriana Diosa, Harlequin and the Jugglers (phase 1 and 2)
- Giovanni Pérez, Harlequin and the Jugglers (phase 1 and 2)
- Sandra Benítez Diosa, Harlequin and the Jugglers (phase 1 and 2)
- Katherine Urrea Velásquez, Robledo Venga Parchemos (phase 1)
- Danny Rocío Salamanca Serrano, Harlequin and the Jugglers (phase 1)
- Christian Hurtado, University of Antioquia, research assistant (phase 1)
- Laura Alfaya, University of Antioquia, research assistant (phase 1)



The Problem

The project was situated in the context of the urban conflict in Medellín, Colombia, which is characterized by invisible borders between areas under the control of different armed gangs, the co-optation of urban space by paramilitary groups, and political violence against those who have been accused of collaborating with or being part of leftist (armed) groups. The conflict is also characterised by different levels of rights violations, where especially women, children and youth suffer sexual violence, forced recruitment into armed groups, and socialisation into a model of masculinity based on militarism. The research sought to understand how grassroots arts and cultural organizations in Medellín, especially those addressing the range of rights violations faced by young people and women, create safer space through their activities (project phase 1), and how they use collaborative networking strategies to protect communities from the urban conflict and its consequences (project phase 2). We sought to identify the type of networks that the organizations have formed, how they exchange and work together, and what



collaborative strategies they have developed to enhance the self-protective effect of artistic and cultural initiatives.

The Research

The research was designed as a multiple case study complemented with artistic research methodologies. We selected c.20 artistic-cultural organizations that represent different phases of the fifty-year trajectory of artistic and cultural groups in the city. We used document analysis to systematize the information produced by the organizations, interviews with key actors, participant observation of the organizations' cultural activities, ethnographic walking tours in their areas of influence, group discussions, and a participatory workshop to re-construct the self-protection networks among organizations.

The Findings

The first project phase documented the place of artistic and cultural initiatives developed by community-based organisations in the city of Medellín in the landscape of nonviolent self-protection. Issues such as legitimacy, permanence in the territory, and the commitment to socially engaged art appeared as key elements to understanding the self-protective character of these initiatives. In our investigation we found, firstly, that violations are not produced on the basis of isolated categories such as gender or age, but by a combination and superimposition of different social factors with consequences for the sources and strategies of self-protection; and secondly, that the network of relationships and alliances between artistic and cultural organisations is a key strategy that allows them to generate sustainability and "armour" in the face of violations.

The second project phase explored these networks and connections, through which artistic and cultural



organizations in Medellín emerge and maintain themselves. They are strategic elements that help the organizations to sustain themselves and their presence in the city's neighbourhoods. A central learning is that it is necessary for an organization to

have a sustained territorial presence over time to be seen as a legitimate social actor within a community. Art and culture are very powerful and useful tools to reconstruct the social fabric that has been damaged by conflict-related violence, as they allow us to name the unnameable and make the invisible visible.

Our findings contribute to a broadening of the concept of community self-protection as a combination of protection and security with practices of care and bonding. In this perspective, protection can be considered as part of the universe of practices of care and at the same time a guarantee of security. Indeed, the forms of care expressed through art place at their centre sensitive mobilizations that contribute to the establishment of new meanings, categories, and models for the understanding of reality. In the face of conflicts and forces that seek to destroy everyday life in Medellín's neighbourhoods, artistic and cultural initiatives strengthen mutual aid and solidarity as favoured forms of relationships. In this way, the sense of self-protection that emerges from the artistic initiatives is linked to the establishment of safe spaces and a critical stance towards the armed actors in the territory.

Finally, from an intersectional perspective we have been able to identify the differential risks and violations faced by these populations and to understand how self-protection also operates differently depending on age, sex/gender, ethnicity, socio-economic status and worldview/cosmology. This intersectional reading allows us to complexify the view of self-protection in terms of care, understanding that violence operates differently depending on the systems of oppression in which it is embedded.



Phase 1
[Find Out More](#)

Phase 2
[Find Out More](#)

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 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 protect 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 will face no legal sanctions for their acts of violence, and they serve as a 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. This research project examines the different forms of community self-protection measures and the role of others in creating safer space for the Palestinians, as well as the challenges faced by the local community and external actors in providing 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, accompanied shepherds and farmers, and witnessed the UCP activities by Palestinian, Israeli, and international organisations.

We produced a short film that documented the community-led civilian protection and resistance activities, and the support of external actors. The film was made by the local Palestinian activist and director Mahmoud Makhamreh, and was supported by the local researcher Sameha Hureini. It is titled "[Civil protection in Masafer Yatta: Palestine](#)", and is freely available on YouTube.



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 means 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, *faza'a* (traditional collective effort), significance of personal and family honour and avoidance of shame. Community-based protection methods in response to threats from the outside, especially settlers, include: recognition of strength in numbers, importance of look-outs, coordination, mutual support and local knowledge. Our conclusion is that all these actions by locals will not end the occupation; it will enhance local resilience to stay on the land and frustrate the Israeli occupation, but it will not guarantee that they will not be expelled from their land.

There is a symbiotic relationship between local Palestinians and international companions. The companions 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, and 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 companions 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 companions as evidence that they were not alone in their struggle.

[Find Out More](#)

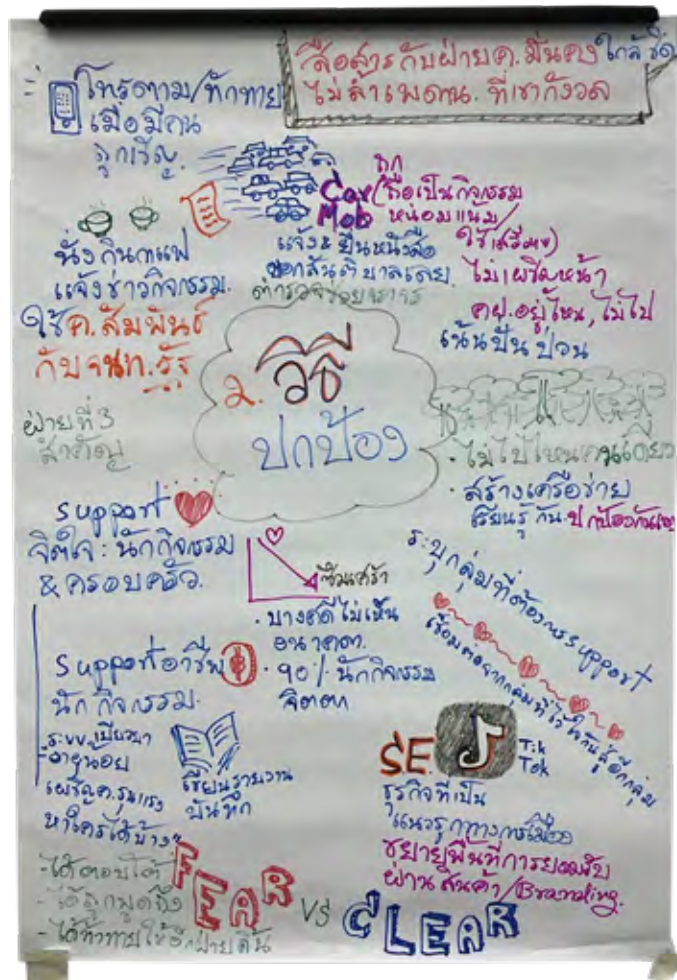


A boy watching the Israeli army. Photo by B'tselem.

Introducing Unarmed Civilian Protection in Thai Society: Opportunities and Challenges

The Researchers

- Chantana Wungeao, Peace and Conflict Studies Center, Chulalongkorn University, Thailand (principal investigator)
- Mark Tamthai, Strategic Nonviolence Working Group, Thailand (co-investigator)
- Chaowat Moonpakdee (research assistant)
- Nonviolent Peaceforce Philippines (project partner)



The Problem

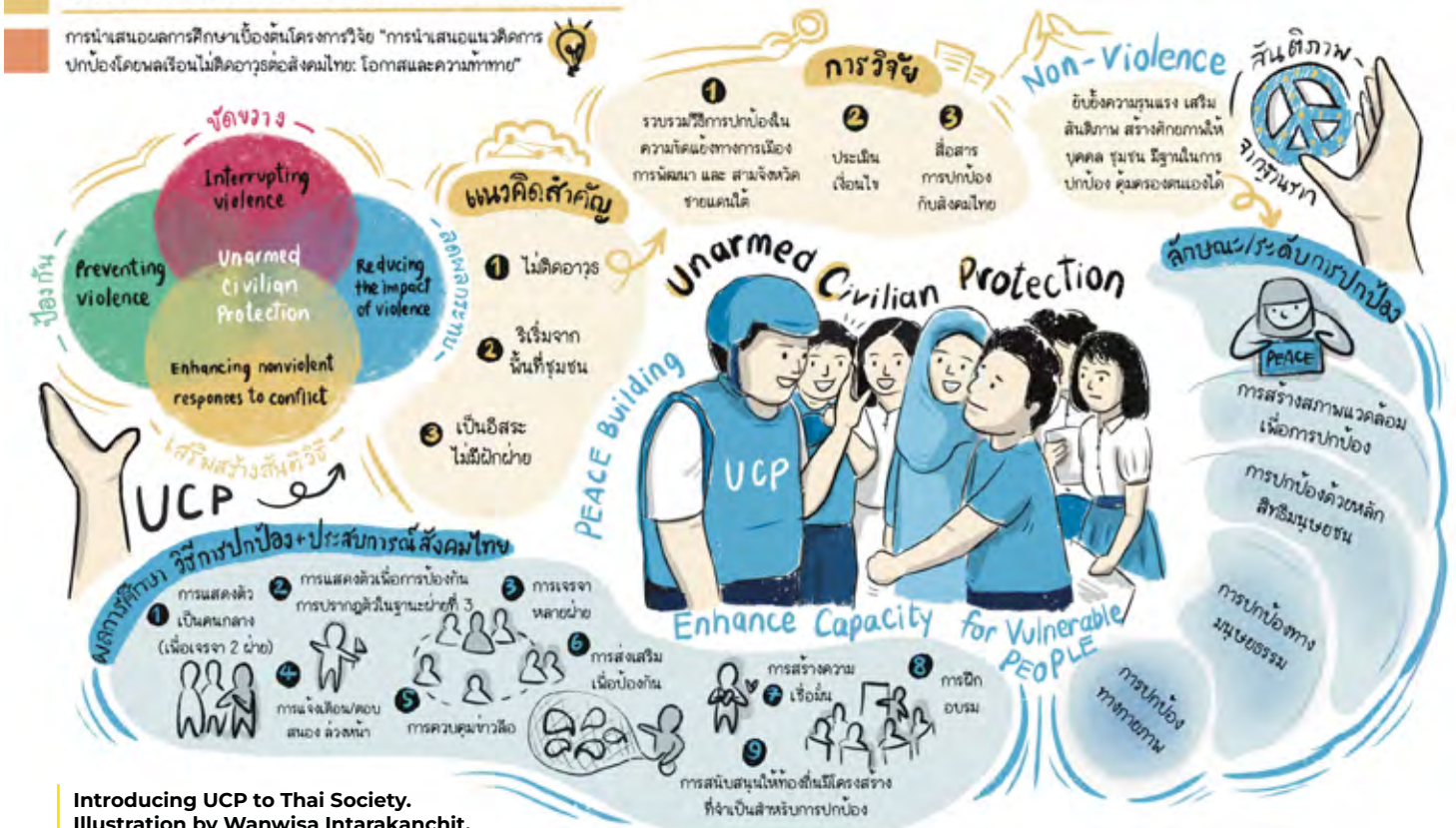
Thailand is a country that is presently experiencing different kinds of violence, from the low-intensity conflict in the Deep South, to violence surrounding political protests, and to environmentally based conflicts with tribal ethnic groups. The state's application of emergency law, martial law, national security law, and the persistent impunity in the security sector, have resulted in a 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

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,

การปกป้องโดยพลเรือนไม่ติดอาวุธ และสถานภาพของสันติวิธีในสังคมไทย

การนำเสนอผลการศึกษาเบื้องต้นโครงการวิจัย "การนำเสนอแนวคิดการปกป้องโดยพลเรือนไม่ติดอาวุธต่อสังคมไทย: โอกาสและความท้าทาย"



Introducing UCP to Thai Society. Illustration by Wanwisa Intarakanchit.

included members from witness volunteer groups, the Buddhist nonviolence network, human rights 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 Findings

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.



UCP in Southern Thailand: Developing civilian protection guidelines for violence-prone communities

The Researchers

- Mrs Fareeda Panjor, Institute for Peace Studies (IPS), Prince of Songkla University (principal investigator)
- 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 between the separatist insurgent group Barisan Revolusi Nasional and the Thai state has led to ongoing violence in the three southern border provinces and four districts in Songkhla province. Between 2004 and August 2023, this conflict resulted in 7,520 deaths and 13,968 injuries.

In response, the government has enforced special laws, including the Martial Law Act, the Public Administration in Emergency Situations Act, and the

Internal Security Act. However, these measures have not significantly improved the situation. Instead, local communities have adapted by developing informal practices, some of which resemble aspects of unarmed civilian protection.

This project aimed to address the following questions:

1. How can communities in Thailand's southern provinces develop their own unarmed civilian protection programmes?
2. What practical techniques of unarmed civilian protection from around the world can be adapted to guide community practices in the region?
3. What existing unarmed civilian protection strategies can enhance security for communities in the southern border provinces?

The Research

This study employed participatory action research in Thailand's southern border provinces, engaging a total of 69 participants from three communities:

1. Talo-Nang-Aman Community, Bangpo Subdistrict, Mueang District, Narathiwat Province
2. Sakoh Community, Tha Sap Subdistrict, Mueang District, Yala Province



3. Piyamumang Community, Piyamumang Subdistrict, Yaring District, Pattani Province

Participants included individuals involved in community protection efforts, youth groups, women's groups, community leaders, and religious leaders. The research process began in February 2023 with discussions on violence prevention. This was followed by practical training workshops and knowledge-sharing sessions on Unarmed Civilian Protection (UCP) between August and September 2023.

Additionally, in-depth interviews were conducted from June to August 2023, and focus group discussions took place in February 2024. The project also facilitated consultations and knowledge exchanges with international experts.

The Findings

Research across the three communities revealed that while overall violence has declined, local security concerns persist. Key issues include:

- Ongoing violent incidents
- The presence of armed security personnel
- Military patrols near Tadika (Islamic schools)
- Community lockdowns and house searches
- Frequent security checkpoint stops
- Restrictions on nighttime movement
- Drug-related violence
- Targeted attacks on village heads and local leaders



Most villagers reported uncertainty about detecting warning signs before violence occurs. Even Village Development and Self-Defense Volunteers (VDVs), who play a role in local security, often fail to recognize early indicators. Some villagers noted an increase in patrols before house-surrounding operations, but overall, there was a lack of structured early warning systems. Community members largely view safety as the responsibility of leaders, particularly VDs and village heads, especially at night when security forces are frequent targets. While VDs and community leaders receive training, some research participants suggested that villagers should also be trained in self-protection and how to report unusual activities.

For self-protection, villagers primarily share security information through LINE messaging groups. However, many remain uncertain about how to respond to potential threats. Security measures are often reactive, implemented only after an incident has already occurred. Moreover, the community lacks clear protocols for handling violent situations. Typically, authorities are informed only after an explosion or attack, leading to the subsequent arrival of police and military personnel for inspection.

For most villagers, the home is considered the safest place. If the home is not secure, people gather in larger community spaces such as mosques. However, some believe that no place is truly safe, as mosques and Tadika schools have also been subjected to security operations.

The study also examined community-based conflict resolution approaches. Village leaders, including headmen, religious figures, and sub-district chiefs, typically mediate disputes. Community justice centers serve as neutral spaces where both Buddhists and Muslims feel comfortable discussing conflicts and seeking resolution.

Based on these findings, the project has developed broad guidelines and recommendations to enhance community security in Thailand's southern border provinces, based on unarmed civilian protection principles and strategies.

[Find Out More](#)

Scholars at Risk: Understanding vulnerability and violence faced by Myanmar refugee scholars in Northern Thailand

The Researchers

- Dr Chayan Vaddhanaputi, Regional Center for Social Sciences and Sustainable Development (RCSD), Chiangmai University, Thailand (co-principal investigator)
- Nang Seng Raw, 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 neighbouring 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 with local scholars to explore protection mechanisms and resilience in these exile communities.

The Research

The study used a co-production approach involving Myanmar scholars at risk who engaged in self-reflection and case studies to understand civilian protection within conflict-affected contexts. This participatory method helped scholars deepen their insights into protection strategies and connect their localised experiences in Chiang Mai and Mae Sot, Thailand, with broader civilian protection discourses. The research focused on vulnerabilities faced by these scholars and the protective strategies they adopted, highlighting community resilience amidst adversity.

Developing Objectives

The first co-production workshop, held in Mae Sot in September 2023, helped refine the research objectives. Originally focused on how Unarmed Civilian Protection (UCP) principles could support community resilience post-coup, the workshop led to three core objectives: 1) enhancing knowledge on current protection practices

and vulnerabilities, 2) fostering co-production of knowledge to build trust, and 3) empowering evidence-based decision-making for protection strategies. These objectives were shaped by the scholars' insights into the limitations and relevance of UCP principles in their specific contexts.

The Research Team

Led by a principal investigator and two co-investigators, the team consisted of ten co-researchers with relevant expertise and first-hand experience of displacement due to the Myanmar coup. Many co-researchers were affiliated with Thai universities, particularly in Chiang Mai or Mae Sot. The team received training on research methodologies and contextual analysis, equipping them with the skills needed to critically assess and document protection practices.

Key Methods

The study utilized self-reflection and case studies as primary methods. Through self-reflection, co-researchers critically analysed their life experiences, exploring themes of adversity, vulnerability, and resilience. Case studies complemented this by examining specific protection mechanisms among Myanmar exiles in Thailand, allowing researchers to observe and document localised practices. Guidance and support were provided to co-researchers throughout the self-reflection and case study process.

Co-Producing Analytical Insights

The second co-production workshop, held in January 2024, focused on integrating self-reflection and case studies to create a comprehensive understanding of protection mechanisms. Co-researchers used personal insights to deepen their analysis of case studies, examining both vulnerabilities and community resilience. The workshop identified the unique socio-cultural and historical factors influencing protection practices in Mae Sot and Chiang Mai.

The Findings

The key findings of this study highlight the crucial role of proactive agency, interconnected networks of trust, and mutual aid in fostering resilience and empowerment within communities facing adversity.

Proactive Agency and Empowerment: The cultivation of proactive agency among community members emerged as a central tenet of resilience-building efforts. By fostering knowledge transfer and horizontal interactions, individuals were able to harness their collective expertise to address common challenges and seize opportunities for growth and development.



Communal Activities of Myanmar Refugees in Maesot, Thailand (case studies included in the research article).

Networks of Trust and Reciprocity: Interconnected networks of trust and reciprocity played a crucial role in linking institutionalized structures with more loosely formed community networks. Digital and physical platforms facilitated the exchange of information, resources, and support, while mediation emerged as pivotal in sharing risks and spreading influence within and across these networks.

Mutual Aid and Volunteerism: The ethos of mutual aid and volunteerism emerged as a cornerstone of community resilience, transcending the narrow confines of NGO-isation of aid. Through grassroots initiatives rooted in solidarity and reciprocity, individuals mobilised community resources to address collective needs and empower themselves to confront adversity collectively.

Collective Action for Healing and Restoration: Collective action emerged not only as a means of effecting tangible change but also as a powerful tool for healing and restoration. By confronting shared experiences and reclaiming agency over their lives, communities found solace in solidarity and restored a collective sense of esteem, inspiring hope for the future.

The study highlights the transformative power of these interconnected elements in enabling communities to confront and overcome socio-political challenges. By fostering a renewed sense of the new commons and inspiring hope, these initiatives help displaced communities reimagine shared spaces and values based on principles of social justice and mutual aid, envisioning a more inclusive and equitable future. The research emphasizes the need for comprehensive, community-driven support systems to enhance protection, resilience, and empowerment amidst ongoing adversity.

[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, London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE)
- Tony Neil, London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE)



The Problem

The emergence of the concept of unarmed civilian protection (UCP) in recent years has generated an interest in documenting different case studies of civilian self-protection strategies. This research project focused on Myanmar. Decades after its independence, the country's population still lives under constant threats of violence in the context of both state-sponsored conflict and inter-communal conflict. This project offers a glimpse into the nation's experience by investigating the experiences of people in Rakhine state.

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 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 in the region. Different ethnic communities are exposed to violence in different ways.

Against this background, this project sought to understand the Rakhine people's precarious journey of living in contexts of violence with different powerful actors. The project focused on three key areas of



research: 1) civilian engagement with/disengagement from authorities, either military or ethnic armed groups; 2) civilian strategies for protection from violence; and 3) networks or infrastructures offering civilian protection.

The Research

To investigate our three key focus areas, the project used 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. In this period,

we managed to collect 106 semi-structured interview responses and 101 arts-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.

Planned outputs include a community booklet of civilian protection strategies to be shared amongst our participants, and three themed research articles, namely on: 1) civilian interaction with armed groups; 2) ceasefire and violent state-building in Rakhine; and 3) the methodological usages of artworks to discern civilian self-protection stories.



The Findings

We tentatively offer the following observations:

- 1. On civilians' understanding of conflict dynamics in Rakhine state:** Depending on their ethnic identity, our participants understand armed conflict differently. Our ethnic Rakhine 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 perceive 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 the 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.

[Find Out More](#)

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

The Researchers

- **Nang Seng Raw**, Nonviolent Peaceforce, Myanmar (Principal Investigator)
- **Arfiansyah**, International Centre for Aceh and Indian Ocean Studies (ICAIOS), Indonesia
- **Mang Pi**, Nonviolent Peaceforce, Myanmar



The Problem

This research studied the changing UCP strategies and practices in Myanmar during and after the military coup of 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 project studied community strategies and adaptations in providing (self-)protection in this context. It reflected on lessons learned for UCP strategy and practice during and after the coup and under the military Junta.

The qualitative research project was conducted in Kachin and Northern Shan states of Myanmar as case studies where armed conflict escalated in the same way as in other areas of Myanmar. Additional supporting data was collected in Yangon through focus group discussions (FGDs) and nonstructured interviews. Our research contributes to both knowledge and practice. In terms of knowledge, it has enriched 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 have influenced the activities of Nonviolent Peaceforce and its engagements with relevant stakeholders.

The Research

The data collection process followed standard qualitative methods, including in-depth interviews, FGDs, and a comprehensive literature review. Fieldwork preparations began in June 2023, with close coordination established between partners in Kachin and Northern Shan. Two research assistants were recruited, one for each region, ensuring effective support for on-the-ground activities. Data collection spanned across Kachin, Northern Shan, and Yangon from July 2023 to June 2024, encompassing 17 in-depth interviews (12 conducted face-to-face and 5 virtually) and 4 FGDs, of which two were held in person and two conducted virtually for data validation.

Face-to-face interviews took place between July and August 2023 in Myitkyina and Waingmaw in Kachin State, as well as in Lashio and Namtu in Northern Shan State. However, as the conflict situation intensified in these areas, the remaining interviews transitioned to a virtual format, allowing the research team to continue gathering data while adapting to the evolving conditions on the ground. Participants in the study included a diverse group of internally displaced persons (IDPs), community members, and representatives from local civil society organisations (CSOs) involved in humanitarian assistance, development, community building, and civilian protection.



Focus Group Discussion in Kachin State



Focus Group Discussion in Northern Shan State

Semi-structured interviews, conducted in both Burmese and local languages, allowed participants to discuss their experiences openly, with questions specifically designed to explore emerging threats to civilians following the 2021 coup and the strategies used by communities and CSOs to protect civilians. Data validation efforts were thorough, including two virtual focus group discussions in January and early February 2024 to validate initial findings. A hybrid data validation meeting held in June 2024 further strengthened this process, bringing together local partners, international NGOs, and CSOs. This meeting provided an opportunity for feedback from diverse stakeholders, ensuring that the data accurately reflected local perspectives and enhancing the credibility of the findings.

The Findings

This study discovered that diffusing protection norms in conflict-prone countries like Myanmar is more effective from the bottom up rather than through top-down approaches. The diffusion of protection norms and practices in Kachin and Northern Shan started in 2010, when local CSOs took the initiative to participate in a potential peace talk between Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs) and the Tatmadaw, reaching a Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) in 2015. External actors such as Nonviolent Peaceforce introduced Unarmed Civilian Protection (UCP) concepts and methodologies, including an early warning system, nonpartisanship, and proactive engagement with all key stakeholders, including armed groups. These methods have allowed local actors to tailor these norms and strategies to meet

specific challenges and merge them with traditional protection practices.

Proactive engagement and accompaniment are crucial for empowering locals to handle conflicts, enhancing their capacity to respond, and finding solutions alongside their communities. This approach not only spreads norms but also acts as a protection mechanism, enabling trained civilians to negotiate with armed groups to prevent violence, as evidenced by a success story from Kachin post-coup, where a villager successfully mediated between opposing forces to protect their community.

Post-coup, the integration of digital security with early warning systems has evolved into the Digital Early Warning Early Response (DEWER) system. This system has become a cornerstone of civilian protection in Kachin and Northern Shan, managed by CSOs to collect, verify, and disseminate information. It also serves as a coordination tool for delivering aid and managing economic transactions within communities. Furthermore, DEWER extends to IDP camps, where designated individuals monitor and control entry to enhance security and preparedness against threats.

The research highlights proactive engagement and DEWER as essential elements for effective norm diffusion. To adopt and develop protection norms, continuous and respectful collaboration is important to address challenges and threats and enhance civilian safety and resilience.

[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), Indonesia**



The Problem

Violent conflict has been ongoing in Papua, Indonesia, since the 1960s. Our research studied the vulnerability of the Papuan people to physical harm, local actors' initiatives to protect civilians, and their mechanisms to share those initiatives with other civilian actors. It investigated enabling and disabling actors and mechanisms for protection. Finally, it sought to understand the presence and working mechanisms of non-Papuan organisations in Papua.

The aim of the project was to support and strengthen the capacity of local organisations to promote and build civilian protection mechanisms, in order to promote community-based conflict and peace management.

The Research

The research engaged more than 80 participants in three provinces in Papua and two in Java. Research methods included key informant interviews, focus group discussions, and an arts-based research method involving hand drawing. The project also provided two different training sessions organised in two provinces in Papua: a training session on Unarmed Civilian Protection (UCP) and a session that combined UCP training with training in internally displaced persons (IDP) profiling. Two trainees have implemented the skills they acquired in the field. They are now confidently and actively engaging with violent actors in conflict areas of Papua in order to protect civilians and IDPs from violence.

Project PI Delsy Ronnie also disseminated the research to middle-ranked military officers from the Indonesian Army, Navy, and Air Force, and trained 20 of them in International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights

Law with a specific focus on human security aspects in military operations. These activities were facilitated by the National Human Rights Commission of Indonesia. The officers recommended that project organisations NPP and ICAIOS be invited to bring their expertise to Papua, in order to reduce physical violence. This recommendation will still need to be authorised at a higher military level, but it shows that the project has influenced the officers' perspectives about violence and the importance of civilian protection in the armed conflict in Papua.

The project has produced an academic journal article and a policy brief, and has disseminated the research through online media (14 podcasts involving researchers, activists, humanitarian actors, a UNICEF member working in Papua, religious figures, university students, and IDPs) and through offline seminars in Aceh and Papua. Further activities are planned.

The Findings

This project has found that those living in the three studied provinces of Papua are very vulnerable to physical, cultural, social, and structural violence. The community is deeply polarised into indigenous communities and transmigrant communities that are composed of internal migrants who have been arriving from Indonesia 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. Indigenous Papuans consider themselves 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 from violence and harm to civilians. Church organisations are the most significant of these, as they focus on their religious and humanitarian missions. However, the more priests engage in protection, the more they are subject to violence by armed actors, as they are suspected of being part of either the insurgency group or the military forces.

As armed conflict has been 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 who drew the image of the heart and the hand is a local activist. She described how her anger always boiled over when 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 and realised that it was more important to protect the community from harm than to simply protest against the violent acts. During an interview about her drawing she said, "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 symbolises her anger. The second line in green symbolises a new emotional state, calmness, which had been destructed and blanketed by red (anger). She chose green as her new intended emotion, which she would like to restore. Green, according to her, symbolises happiness and joy. The third line in yellow symbolises the spirit that she likes to embrace. Her left hand does not clench anymore, instead it is opening. She said the clenched hand symbolises 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 symbolises 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 (co-investigator)**

This project investigated the impacts of actions carried out by grassroots organisations in violent and socio-segregated urban contexts in the city of Cali, Colombia, on these territories and on the perceptions and realities of the diverse populations that settle there. Specifically, it focused on how actions and perceptions of security and protection relate to notions of identity and territory among these populations. The project piloted the participatory evaluation and learning methodology, using talking maps, autobiographical

writing, and individual and collective testimonies. It found that the methodology represents an innovative and effective approach to understanding and addressing safety and security challenges in violent and socio-segregated urban contexts. Its emphasis on active community participation, its focus on horizontality and co-creation of knowledge, as well as its ability to capture a variety of perspectives makes it a valuable tool to promote community empowerment and social transformation in challenging environments.

[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 aimed 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 support by accompanying them through UCP. This project evaluated how this partnership has influenced safety and wellbeing, drawing upon interviews with nearly 30 people in four villages in the South Hebron Hills. The project found that OC's presence has been helpful in mitigating violence and providing emotional support. Several interviewees recalled



that during the COVID pandemic, when volunteers were unable to be present, settler violence dramatically increased. Volunteers' ability to capture incidents on camera played a critical role in deterring violence. The escalation of violence after 7 October 2023 introduced new complexities. Increased restrictions on international

volunteers, combined with growing settler violence, have heightened the need for outside support, even as that presence has become more challenging. Despite the risks, the Palestinian community continues to express a need for OC's assistance, seeing it as helpful in protecting them from further harm.

South Hebron Hills, Palestine.
Photo by
Operazione Colomba.

[Find Out More](#)

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)**

Using a participatory action research design, this pilot project engages with organisations 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 organisations attempting to protect migrants increasingly exposed not only to violence by militarised

border security on the US side of the border, but also by both police and gangs as they wait in Mexican communities. The UCP/A initiatives aim to protect migrants through accompaniment, humanitarian relief, and documentation aimed at advocacy. The pilot evaluation assesses the impacts, successes and challenges of the UCP efforts through participant observation and guided conversations with UCP/A organisers, delegation participants, and migrant leaders.

[Find Out More](#)



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

Prepared by:

Creating Safer Space

Department of International Politics

Aberystwyth University

Penglais, Aberystwyth SY23 3FE, Wales, UK

Version 2, March 2025

www.creating-safer-space.com

creating-safer-space@aber.ac.uk

