



RURAL WOMEN PEACE LINK



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

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INTRODUCTION

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-understood 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.

This report summarises the findings of a research project, which took place between 2022 – 2024 in Uasin Gishu County.

RESEARCH ACTIVITIES

This project explored existing and emergent local civilian protection systems in Kenya's Uasin Gishu County. The research was conducted in three urban hotspot areas of Uasin Gishu (Langas, Turbo, and Burnt Forest), which have been at the centre of heated political contests in recent electioneering periods (2013 and 2017 general elections) and were adversely affected by the 2007-2008 post-election violence. Its findings provide a local and contextual understanding of the dynamics of unarmed civilian protection (UCP) in Uasin Gishu, the role played by civilians/civilian groups in local peace processes and protection systems, and how UCP in Uasin Gishu feeds into county and national security organs.

The research team conducted the following participatory research 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.



RESEARCH FINDINGS

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?

The research found that civilian protection in Langas, Burnt Forest and Turbo is heavily reliant on government-instituted local security structures, such as:

- **The Nyumba Kumi Initiative:**
A community policing model in Kenya that aims to reduce crime and create safer neighbourhoods. It anchors community policing at the household level, bringing together people in clusters based on their location and interests. The Nyumba Kumi Initiative was introduced in 2013 by presidential order in response to rising crime levels.
- **Community Policing Forums:** Gatherings of local community representatives, police, and other stakeholders to identify and solve problems in their area. The forums are a key part of Kenya's community policing strategy, which aims to create a safe and secure environment for all citizens by sharing responsibility between the police and the community.
- **Local Peace Committees and Local Administrative Offices,** headed by local chiefs and village elders.

However, the respondents also revealed a number of community-initiated self-protection strategies namely:

- Self-Protection Groups such as *boda boda* (motorbike riders) groups.
- Siding with the dominant party whenever there is a conflict between two parties.
- Confidential reporting and relaying of information to authorities on security threats.
- Peace and security messaging and awareness creation through churches and *chamas* (local women economic empowerment groups).

- Fleeing to safe and neutral spaces such as churches.

The respondents lauded the *Nyumba Kumi* Community Policing Initiative, Local Administration Offices and Local Peace Committees for their role in reconciliation and local peacebuilding.

The conflicts in the three focus areas normally take the form of boundary disputes, community-police conflicts, politically-instigated conflicts, ethnic conflicts, community-criminal gangs conflicts and domestic conflicts. During violent conflicts, the communities have generally relied on local administrative structures and the above-listed community-initiated self-protection strategies for protection. The *Nyumba Kumi* Community Policing Initiative, Community Policing Forums and Local Peace Committees are mostly used to thwart day-to-day community security threats such as criminal gangs.

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?

The research gathered that Local Peace Committees, Community Policing Forums and Local Self-Defence Groups had been effective in accomplishing the following with regards to UCP:

- Facilitating mediation and reconciliation between conflicting parties to avert violence.
- Advocating for and strengthening awareness of community security.
- Reception, processing and management of security-related information.
- Putting in place early warning and response measures in situations of impending violent conflict.

The respondents identified the below challenges in the day-to-day work of the Local Peace Committees, Community

Policing Forums and Local Self-Defence Groups:

- Conflict of interest and interference from local politicians.
- Lack of sufficient awareness among the 3 structures on disability matters.
- Lack of inclusion and participation of persons with disability in the 3 structures.
- Lack of motivation as a result of not having necessary resources and material support to facilitate their work.

What are the emergent civilian protection strategies and frameworks in Langas/Burnt Forest/Turbo?

None were mentioned.

What role does people's agency play in civilian protection in situations of conflict in Uasin Gishu County?

The research highlighted the critical role of people's agency in UCP, particularly in conflict-prone areas. Community members demonstrated proactive engagement in identifying and mitigating security threats, leveraging both formal and informal networks. The findings emphasized the following:

- **Self-Initiated Responses** - community groups like *boda boda* associations, women's groups, and youth organizations played a significant role in early warning systems, conflict de-escalation, and rapid response.
- **Collaborative Problem-Solving** - community members actively participated in peace dialogues and reconciliation efforts, showcasing their ability to mediate disputes without external intervention.
- **Adaptive Strategies** - people employed creative and context-specific measures, such as using neutral spaces (churches, schools) as safe havens and leveraging local leaders to mediate conflicts.
- **Social Capital** - trust and cooperation within communities facilitated the sharing of information about potential threats, enabling timely responses.

However, the research also noted limitations, such as a lack of institutional support and systemic barriers that hinder the full realization of people's agency in UCP.

What gaps and opportunities exist for strengthening civilian protection strategies and frameworks in Langas/Burnt Forest/Turbo?

The research unearthed the following gaps in the operations of the aforementioned civilian protection structures and strategies in the three focus areas:

- Lack of inclusivity in the membership of Local Peace Committees and Community Policing Forums.
- Limited community participation and engagement in the operations of Local Peace Committees and Community Policing Forums.
- Limited community awareness on the role of Local Peace Committees and Community Policing Forums.
- Insufficient technical capacity among some members of Local Peace Committees and Community Policing Forums.
- Retention of members that have surpassed their term limits.
- Lack of structured coordination among Local Peace Committees, Community Policing Forums and Self-Defence Groups.

The research also identified the following areas and opportunities for strengthening civilian protection strategies and frameworks in Langas, Burnt Forest and Turbo:

- **Membership:** Transparency, inclusivity and integrity to be considered in the selection of members of the structures. Women, youths and persons with disability to be included in the membership of the structures. New members with new energy and perspectives to be appointed.
- **Community Participation:** Community sensitization on the roles and mandates of the structures to be done while community engagement is enhanced.



- **Localization:** Presence and visibility at the grassroots level to be increased.
- **Capacity:** Members of the civilian protection structures to be trained on context-specific unarmed civilian protection strategies to enhance efficiency. Additionally, refresher training on their roles and mandates to be conducted.
- **Incentivization Measures:** The civilian protection structures should be given material and monetary support as a way of motivating and encouraging them in their work.
- **Coordination:** A clear, well-structured coordination mechanism to be set up in order to synergize the civilian protection efforts of Local Peace Committees, Community Policing Forums and Local Self-Defence Groups. The Local Administration Offices to be included in the coordination mechanism. This coordination mechanism to include definition and clarification of roles of the respective civilian protection structures.

What opportunities exist for synergy-building and intersectionality between international, national and local civilian (self-) protection mechanisms?

The research identified several opportunities to enhance collaboration across different levels of civilian protection mechanisms:

- **Policy Alignment:** Harmonizing local civilian protection strategies with national security policies and international frameworks like the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda.
- **Capacity Building:** Providing training for local UCP actors on international best practices, such as conflict-sensitive approaches and nonviolent conflict resolution techniques.
- **Resource Sharing:** Leveraging resources and expertise from international organizations to strengthen local civilian protection structures, including funding and technical support.

- **Integrated Early Warning Systems:** Establishing a unified early warning and response system that connects local communities, national security organs, and international peacekeeping bodies.
- **Multi-Stakeholder Engagement:** Encouraging partnerships between local peace committees, community policing forums, non-governmental organizations, and international agencies to create a comprehensive and inclusive protection framework.
- **Advocacy and Awareness:** Promoting awareness of the importance of UCP at all levels to foster greater recognition and support for local civilian protection initiatives.

By fostering these synergies, the research suggested that civilian protection efforts in Uasin Gishu County could become more effective, sustainable, and resilient in the face of emerging security challenges.



CONTRIBUTION TO KNOWLEDGE

The findings elaborated above contribute significantly to the body of knowledge about nonviolent civilian protection and community self-protection amidst violent conflict in several key ways as explained below:

1. Understanding Localized Civilian Protection Mechanisms

The research highlights the reliance on **local structures** such as the *Nyumba Kumi* Initiative, Local Peace Committees, and community policing forums. This underscores the importance of **context-specific protection systems** that leverage existing social and administrative frameworks. It brings attention to **community-initiated strategies** like the role of *boda boda* groups, churches, and women's groups, which reflect the adaptability and resilience of communities in conflict situations. This localized understanding fills a gap in UCP literature, which often focuses on formal or international mechanisms, by showcasing how grassroots strategies are tailored to specific socio-political contexts.

2. Highlighting the Role of People's Agency

The emphasis on **proactive community involvement** demonstrates how civilians can act as agents of their own protection, rather than passive recipients of aid or intervention. The findings show that **social capital**—trust, networks, and cooperation within communities—plays a critical role in mitigating conflict and enhancing security. This challenges traditional top-down approaches to protection by validating the role of **people-centered and participatory models** in conflict transformation and peacebuilding.

3. Identifying Barriers to Effectiveness

The research reveals challenges such as **political interference**, **lack of inclusivity**, and **resource constraints** faced by civilian protection structures like Local Peace Committees and community policing forums. It also highlights **capacity gaps**, such as insufficient training and the exclusion of marginalized groups, including women, youth, and persons with disabilities. By identifying these barriers, the findings provide actionable insights for improving the **efficacy and inclusivity** of UCP strategies, ensuring they are more sustainable and equitable.

4. Exploring Multi-Level Approaches in Protection Mechanisms

The research examines how **local, national, and international protection systems** intersect, identifying opportunities for synergy and alignment. It points to the potential for **integrated early warning systems** and **policy harmonization** to strengthen overall protection efforts. This bridges the gap between grassroots and institutional approaches, offering a framework for creating **multi-level, collaborative protection strategies** that are responsive to local needs.



5. Documenting Emergent Strategies and Innovations

While no specific emergent strategies were identified in this case, the research sets a foundation for tracking how communities adapt to evolving threats, which is critical in dynamic conflict environments. This focus on emergent strategies adds to the understanding of how communities innovate in response to new challenges, emphasizing the importance of **adaptive and flexible civilian protection frameworks**.

6. Providing a Template for Future Research

The study's methodology and findings offer a replicable model for assessing civilian protection in other conflict-affected regions. It emphasizes the importance of **contextualized inquiries** into civilian protection, which can inform comparative studies and global best practices. This enriches the academic and practical discourse on UCP by providing a **grounded, evidence-based perspective** that others can build upon.



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