



Community-Led Unarmed Civilian Protection: Expanding beyond UN-Led Protection

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Executive Summary

Unarmed civilian protection (UCP) by local communities remains an under-recognized component of the protection of civilians (POC) in contemporary peace operations. While UN peacekeeping operations have increasingly emphasized people-centered approaches and community engagement, these strategies are insufficiently connected to the diverse grassroots protection infrastructures that communities already employ, particularly in contexts where international missions are overstretched or withdrawing. This brief examines how community-led UCP practices contribute to civilian protection in conflict-affected settings and how these efforts can complement and inform institutional POC approaches.

Drawing on evidence from a five-year international research collaboration and over two dozen field projects across eleven countries, this study illustrates how communities use nonviolent, unarmed strategies—including early-warning and early-response systems, protective accompaniment and presence, mediation, and proactive engagement—to reduce violence and prevent displacement. Case studies from South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Cameroon, and Colombia demonstrate the scale, adaptability, and effectiveness of these grassroots protection strategies, including in contexts where UN missions operate in parallel or are transitioning out.

Despite their proven efficacy, community-led UCP mechanisms have at times been inadvertently undermined by peacekeeping operations that prioritize externally driven community liaison structures over existing local structures. A better understanding of how communities assess risk, adapt protection strategies, and build local networks is therefore essential for more integrated and sustainable POC outcomes.

As the UN reconfigures peacekeeping toward lighter footprints, regional partnerships, and transition planning, community-based civilian protection must not be treated as an afterthought. Peace operations should engage community UCP actors as partners in protection, not just beneficiaries. This requires building more equitable partnerships, creating clear coordination mechanisms, and embedding community-led UCP into early planning, implementation, and drawdown. Doing so can help missions leave behind more resilient, locally grounded protection environments.

Introduction

UN peacekeeping operations with a protection of civilians (POC) mandate do not operate in a protection void. Specialized national and international NGOs offer protection from physical harm alongside, and sometimes in collaboration with, UN missions. This is particularly the case for NGOs specializing in unarmed civilian protection (UCP), sometimes also termed unarmed civilian peacekeeping. Moreover, communities themselves often already possess, or develop in response to violence, local protection infrastructures, including community early-warning and early-response systems, protective accompaniment mechanisms, and mediation and negotiation efforts. These strategies help communities not directly benefiting from UN POC mandates to keep themselves safer. They also often continue beyond the end of peacekeeping deployments, which rarely coincide with the end of physical violence—and may, in some cases, precede or even contribute to renewed insecurity.¹

Communities themselves often already possess, or develop in response to violence, local protection infrastructures.

While not all community responses are strictly nonviolent, many communities exclusively use unarmed civilian protection strategies to keep themselves and others safe. Community-led UCP, NGO-facilitated UCP, and UN peacekeeping operations may operate in parallel within the same geographic space, as seen in contexts such as South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). While UCP and UN peacekeeping are carried out by different actors, they share a central measure of effectiveness: saving lives and reducing harm to civilians in contexts of armed conflict.² Yet the possible synergies among these three types of POC actors are neither well-understood nor systematically leveraged.

This policy brief asks how communities using UCP strategies contribute to the protection of civilians

and how peacekeeping operations with POC mandates can more effectively collaborate with such efforts. It addresses these questions by examining how community-led UCP functions in practice across a range of conflict-affected contexts where it has demonstrably improved civilian safety. Focusing on South Sudan, the DRC, Cameroon, and Colombia, this brief demonstrates the scale, adaptability, and effectiveness of grassroots protection strategies. It looks beyond UCP NGOs to include the role of communities themselves in protecting civilians and considers whether and how these community-led efforts can be more meaningfully integrated into institutional POC approaches.

We argue that peacekeeping operations can more effectively implement their POC mandates by supporting and collaborating with existing community-developed UCP mechanisms. They can link

their civilian protection efforts to local networks, create pathways for consulting communities and recognizing them as key protection actors, and ensure that community-owned strategies have access to

appropriate resources. While such collaboration is not without risk and requires deep contextual understanding, it differs substantially from the community engagement structures currently employed by UN missions and international humanitarian actors and warrants serious consideration.³ Recognizing and supporting community-led protection infrastructures can also help peacekeeping operations leave behind more sustainable, locally grounded protection environments.

The brief concludes with specific recommendations on how UN missions can better engage with community-level UCP as an underrecognized but essential element of global POC efforts. The analysis draws on findings from a five-year, multi-country research initiative supporting twenty-six projects across eleven low- and middle-income countries.⁴

1 Berit Bliesemann de Guevara, Rachel Julian, and Nerve Macaspac, “Nonviolent Community Strategies Protect Civilians across the World,” *Creating Safer Space*, 2024, available at <https://creating-safer-space.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Policy-Brief-1-Digital.pdf>.

2 Rachel Julian, “Civilians Creating Safe Space: The Role of Unarmed Civilian Peacekeeping in Protection of Civilians,” *Civil Wars* 26, no. 1 (2024).

3 Berit Bliesemann de Guevara, Rachel Julian, and Nerve Macaspac, “The Missing Piece of PoC: Local Unarmed Civilian Protection,” *Creating Safer Space*, 2024, available at <https://creating-safer-space.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Policy-Brief-3-Digital.pdf>; Nonviolent Peaceforce, “Examining Unarmed Civilian Protection in the UN Context: A Complement and Contribution to PoC,” consultation for member states, May 10–11, 2019, available at https://nonviolentpeaceforce.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/UCP_Retreat_Report_-_10-11_May_2019.pdf.

4 The *Creating Safer Space* research network supported equitable teams involving academics, practitioners, and self-protecting communities to carry out UCP research projects in Africa, Latin America, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia. Network representatives also participated in regional and global gatherings of

What is Community-Led UCP?

Unarmed civilian protection (UCP) refers to an approach, a methodology, and a set of activities through which unarmed civilians protect other civilians or themselves from direct, immediate violence using proactive methods developed from nonviolence theory and practice. A core principle of UCP is the primacy of the local: protection is shaped, led, and sustained by those experiencing violence themselves. The principle of UCP is well-established in both theory and practice.⁵

UCP is often associated with specialized national and international NGOs like Peace Brigades International (PBI) and Nonviolent Peaceforce (NP) that undertake locally and community-led work with and for communities and threatened groups such as human rights or environmental defenders.⁶ However, UCP does not require external support. It is also practiced by communities themselves, often in contexts where they are under threat and lack external support or protection.⁷

Community-led UCP is based on the principle that people living with conflict and violence possess the knowledge, agency, and relationships needed to take action to protect themselves.⁸ These strategies draw on nonviolent forms of leverage, including encouragement, deterrence, and relationship building, that communities can use to make

themselves safer. While UCP may include forms of individual self-protection, community-led approaches focus on the protection of others and collective understandings of safety rooted in mutual aid. Common practices include protective accompaniment, early-warning systems, protective presence, and negotiations with armed actors—locally grounded and often creative strategies that reflect shared responsibility and community care.⁹

While UCP is a distinct field of practice and scholarship grounded in nonviolence, it overlaps conceptually with civilian self-protection (CSP). Both fields challenge assumptions that civilians are passive victims of conflict and instead emphasize agency, adaptability, and the relational dynamics of protection.¹⁰ CSP includes a wide array of survival strategies including evasion, negotiation, and organized resistance and highlights the structural, social, and cognitive factors shaping the behavior of civilians to protect themselves when under threat.¹¹ It encompasses a broad range of responses, including strategies that may involve armed self-defense or alignment with armed actors. UCP, by contrast, is more focused on the nonviolent, relational, and practice-oriented nature of protection, its transformative potential, and its connection to peacebuilding.¹²

Some research on CSP has explored the need to integrate material conditions, local social networks, and individual risk perceptions to fully understand

UCP organizations, including the UCP/A Community of Practice convened by Nonviolent Peaceforce. The Creating Safer Space network has involved 70 organizations, 202 researchers, over 2,100 participants, and more than 10,000 stakeholders to date. For more information, see: <https://creating-safer-space.com/>.

- 5 Liam Mahony and Luis Enrique Eguren, *Unarmed Bodyguards: International Accompaniment for the Protection of Human Rights* (West Hartford, CT: Kumarian Press, 1997); Rachel Julian and Russell Gasser, "Soldiers, Civilians, and Peacekeeping: Evidence and False Assumptions," *International Peacekeeping* 26, no. 1 (2019); 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, no. 2 (2023).
- 6 Julian and Schweitzer, "The Origins and Development of Unarmed Civilian Peacekeeping," *Peace Review: A Journal of Social Justice* 27, no. 1 (2015).
- 7 Bliesemann de Guevara, Julian, and Macaspac, "Nonviolent Community Strategies Protect Civilians across the World."
- 8 Berit Bliesemann de Guevara et al., "Drawing Out Experiential Conflict Knowledge in Myanmar: Arts-Based Methods in Qualitative Research with Conflict-Affected Communities," *Journal of Peacebuilding and Development* 17, no. 1 (2021); Rachel Julian, Berit Bliesemann de Guevara, and Robin Redhead, "From Expert to Experiential Knowledge: Exploring the Inclusion of Local Experiences in Understanding Violence in Conflict," *Peacebuilding* 7, no. 2 (2019); Louise Ridder, "Nonviolent knowledge(s) and unarmed civilian protection," *Journal of International Peacekeeping* 27, no. 1 (2024).
- 9 Beatriz E. Arias López et al., eds., *Creating Safer Space: Unarmed Community Self-Protection and Resistance Amidst Violent Conflict* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, forthcoming).
- 10 Erin Baines and Emily Paddon, "'This Is How We Survived': Civilian Agency and Humanitarian Protection," *Security Dialogue* 43, no. 3 (2012); Felicity Gray, "Protection as Connection: Feminist Relational Theory and Protecting Civilians from Violence in South Sudan," *Journal of Global Ethics* 18, no. 1 (2022); Oliver Kaplan, *Resisting War: How Communities Protect Themselves* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Jana Krause, *Resilient Communities: Nonviolence and Civilian Agency in Communal War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).
- 11 Justin Schon, *War in Syria: Survival Strategies in a Time of Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020); Corinna Jentsch, *Violent Resistance: Militia Formation and Civil War in Mozambique* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022); Aidan Milliff, "Making Sense, Making Choices: How Civilians Choose Survival Strategies during Violence," *American Political Science Review* 118, no. 3 (2024).
- 12 Bliesemann de Guevara, Allouche, and Gray, "Introduction: Enacting Peace amid Violence"; Gray, "Protection as Connection"; Felicity Gray, "Relational R2P? Civilian-Led Prevention and Protection against Atrocity Crimes," *Global Responsibility to Protect* 14 (2022); Rachel Julian, "The Transformative Impact of Unarmed Civilian Peacekeeping," *Global Society* 34, no. 1 (2019); Rachel Julian, *Transforming Protection: The Implications of Unarmed Civilian Protection* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2025).

the protective agency of civilians.¹³ These elements are also embedded in UCP through its core principle of primacy of the local. Bringing these literatures into conversation clarifies the diverse forms protective agency can take and highlights the need for peace operations to engage more systematically with existing civilian infrastructures. This can help broaden the understanding of protection beyond ensuring civilians' survival to include alternative forms of security that also enable communities "to live well, to live with dignity and justice."¹⁴

Why Community-Led UCP Works

The potential and effectiveness of UCP are grounded in a clear theoretical foundation. Although it may appear counterintuitive that nonviolence can protect people from violence, UCP challenges dominant assumptions that security must come through armed force.¹⁵ Instead, it demonstrates that civilians can reduce threats through nonviolent, relational, and preventive strategies. Three primary models help explain how unarmed protection functions in practice:

1. **Deterrence Model:** In the deterrence model, protective presence and accompaniment increase the perceived costs of violence by signaling external attention or scrutiny.¹⁶ Armed actors are less likely to attack when they are being watched. Practices such as monitoring a compound, walking alongside at-risk individuals, or maintaining visibility in tense areas can create space for civilians to carry out everyday or political activities more safely. While deterrence was initially assumed to depend on the identity markers and privileges of outside actors, particularly those with white skin and passports from countries in the Global North, many UCP organizations are now actively working to decolonize these dynamics.¹⁷ Community-focused research has

further shown that deterrence-based protection can also be carried out by local communities or protective actors, with leverage depending on the specific context. However, for communities facing structural discrimination and weak legal protection, deterrence is generally harder to implement and sustain without external support.

2. **Proactive Presence Model:** This model underscores the value of simply being present—consistently, visibly, and locally—in areas at risk. Presence enables information flow, early response, and deterrence. A key distinction between UCP and armed peacekeeping lies in UCP's deep local embeddedness within communities under threat. While peacekeepers are often perceived as outside actors, UCP actors frequently live in the communities they serve and act as first responders. Community members use tools such as community early-warning and early-response systems, shared planning for potential flight (including safe routes and safe houses), rumor control via WhatsApp groups, protective accompaniment, and patrols of unsafe routes or gathering points to provide protective presence. In employing these strategies, both self-protecting communities and community-embedded UCP actors seek to build trust-based relationships with a wide range of actors—armed groups, state officials, police, civil society, and humanitarian agencies—across local, national and regional levels.¹⁸ These relationships enable access, deescalation, and negotiation in protection crises and offer entry points for cooperation, influence, and information sharing.
3. **Relational Model:** The relational model of protection builds on the proactive model's focus on relationship building. Under the relational model, protection is better understood as "an outcome of co-created relationships between different actors" in which "a

13 Austin J. Knüppe, *Surviving the Islamic State: Contention, Cooperation, and Neutrality in Wartime Iraq* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2024); Jana Krause et al., eds., *Civilian Protective Agency in Violent Settings: A Comparative Perspective* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023); Emily Paddon Rhoads and Rebecca Sutton, "The (Self-)Protection of Civilians in South Sudan: Popular and Community Justice Practices," *African Affairs* 119, no. 476 (2020).

14 Sara Koopman, "Alter-Geopolitics: Other Secularities Are Happening," *Geoforum* 42, no. 3 (2011); Nerve V. Macaspac, "Indigenous Geopolitics: Creating Indigenous Spaces of Community Self-Protection and Peace amid Violent Conflict," *Journal of Pacifism and Nonviolence* 1, no. 2 (2023).

15 Molly S. Wallace, *Security Without Weapons: Rethinking Violence, Nonviolent Action, and Civilian Protection* (London: Routledge, 2017).

16 Mahony and Eguren, *Unarmed Bodyguards*.

17 Decolonization Working Group, "Toolbox for a Decolonial Perspective in Unarmed Civilian Protection," UCP/A Community of Practice, 2023, available at <https://creating-safer-space.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/caja-herramientas-ingles-final-2.pdf>.

wider range of entangled actors shape protection outcomes, and conversely... different forms of protection policy and practice shape what relationships are possible.”¹⁹ UN peacekeeping operations build infrastructures that can either undermine or strengthen NGO- and community-led UCP.²⁰ Outcomes have been more positive where UN missions have developed a better understanding of the context, including through collaboration with community-embedded UCP NGOs. For example, in South Sudan and, more recently, the DRC, UN missions have collaborated with UCP NGOs on specific protection tasks (e.g., protection of women from sexual and gender-based violence in South Sudan). However, community-led UCP actors are often excluded from formal engagement channels, with international actors favoring standardized mechanisms such as UN community liaison assistants (CLAs) or community alert networks (CANs).²¹ These mechanisms do not substitute for existing relationships within communities, and meaningful integration of community UCP into formal mission structures remains an area for significant improvement.

Research on the nonviolent strategies communities and civilians use when facing direct violence, particularly in contexts of armed conflict, confirms that unarmed civilians play an active role in protecting others by:²²

- Directly saving lives;
- Preventing displacement;
- Accompanying and protecting human rights defenders;
- Monitoring ceasefire and peace agreements;

- Deescalating violence;
- Organizing early-warning and early-response systems;
- Facilitating negotiation, shuttle diplomacy, and mediation; and
- Monitoring and documenting violence and abuse.

Unarmed civilian protection is already a global practice harnessing nonviolence and using presence, relationship building, and early warning to make people and spaces safer. NGOs such as Nonviolent Peaceforce and Peace Brigades International have worked in this space for over three decades. In 2023, UCP organizations formalized a global community of practice, underscoring the field’s growing momentum.²³

Evidence from documented projects and practitioner networks demonstrates how UCP has evolved over the decades, becoming broader and more inclusive, while increasingly centering the agency of local communities and recognizing their critical role in shaping safer environments.²⁴ Indeed, the diverse UCP strategies that communities use highlight the creativity, adaptability, and cultural specificity of community-led UCP. Local protection often draws on cultural and traditional practices, making it highly attuned to context.²⁵

Despite its effectiveness, community-led UCP remains underrecognized in international protection frameworks.²⁶ Recognizing that communities themselves can alter the behavior of armed actors—by saving lives, deterring violence, and creating civic space—should prompt a reassessment of who qualifies as a protection actor. POC strategies must consider not only uniformed peacekeepers and

18 Ellen Furnari, Randy Janzen, and Rosemary Kabaki, eds., *Unarmed Civilian Protection: A New Paradigm for Protection and Human Security* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2023).

19 Gray, “Protection as Connection”, p. 153; cf. Gray, “Relational R2P?”; Louise Ridden, “Protection through Vulnerability: A Gendered Analysis of Unarmed Civilian Protection,” *Journal of Pacifism and Nonviolence* 3, no. 1 (2025); Louise Ridden, *Nonviolent Encounters: Unarmed Civilian Protection through Bodies, Spaces, and Times* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2026).

20 Gray, “Protection as Connection.”

21 Jennifer M. Welsh, Emily Paddon Rhoads, and Juan Masullo, “Risky Business: Organizational Challenges in International Support for Civilian Self-Protection,” *Perspectives on Politics* (2025).

22 Rachel Julian, Delsy Ronnie, and Rexall Kaalim, “Civilian Ceasefire Monitoring in Mindanao,” *Creating Safer Space*, 2023, available at https://creating-safer-space.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Civilian_Ceasefire_Monitoring_in_Mindanao_Creating_Safer_Space.pdf; Bliesemann de Guevara, Julian, and Macaspac, “Nonviolent Community Strategies Protect Civilians across the World.”

23 UCP/A Community of Practice, “Report of the International Gathering on Unarmed Civilian Protection and Accompaniment 2023,” 2023, available at <https://creating-safer-space.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Geneva-UCPA-Report-English.pdf>.

24 Julian and Gasser, “Soldiers, Civilians, and Peacekeeping”; Julian, *Transforming Protection*; *Creating Safer Space* website, available at <https://creating-safer-space.com>.

25 Arias López et al., eds., *Creating Safer Space*; Bliesemann de Guevara, Julian, and Macaspac, “Nonviolent Community Strategies Protect Civilians across the World”; Julian, Ronnie, and Kaalim, “Civilian Ceasefire Monitoring in Mindanao.”

26 Berit Bliesemann de Guevara et al., “Introduction: Unarmed community self-protection as alternative security and world-making,” in *Creating Safer Space*.

NGO personnel but also civilians in affected communities.²⁷

Recent reductions in peacekeeping operations' resources and personnel present an opportunity to expand prevailing understandings of POC by acknowledging unarmed civilians as legitimate protection actors. Doing so will require rethinking how POC is defined, operationalized, and evaluated and developing better mechanisms for engaging with, supporting, and learning from community-led protection actors.

Understanding Risk and Civilian Agency

Community-led protection strategies emerge from situated, lived experience. Risk is not static, nor is it evenly distributed. Communities continuously assess and respond to intersecting threats—armed violence, displacement, loss of housing or livelihood—through collective, context-specific strategies.

Community-led protection strategies emerge from situated, lived experience.

Findings from the Creating Safer Space research network show that civilians possess a deeply relational and intersectional understanding of vulnerability. They recognize how gender, age, ethnicity, poverty, and displacement interact to shape risk and how the absence of formal protection structures often compels them to act.²⁸ These understandings inform the strategies they adopt, including altering communication methods, adjusting visible markers like clothing or occupation, mapping safe routes, and building community alert networks.²⁹ These are not ad hoc responses but sustained systems of self-protection that often predate, or operate independently from, an international presence. Ignoring or disrupting such

systems may expose communities to greater harm.³⁰

Risk is also organizational. A recent comparative study found that international actors supporting civilian self-protection risk inadvertently increasing the vulnerability of local populations, creating conflicts with their institutional mandates and values, or straining their relationships with host governments.³¹ These risks arise when organizations support community efforts without sufficient contextual understanding or through short-term programming that disrupts local dynamics.

However, organizations that are more deeply embedded in communities are better equipped to manage these risks. Their long-term presence, decentralized structures, and trusted local relationships enable them to navigate tensions, avoid complicity in harmful practices, and build more resilient protection partnerships.³² Despite operating in high-risk environments, organizations like Nonviolent Peaceforce and Peace Brigades International have maintained strong safety records due to their deliberate, community-rooted efforts to mitigate risk.

International actors, particularly peacekeeping operations, thus need to engage with risk from multiple perspectives. They should begin risk assessments with the knowledge communities already hold and the strategies they already use. Supporting UCP is not about transferring risk to civilians but about recognizing and amplifying the ways risk is already being managed. At the same time, missions must remain alert to the risks they themselves introduce, particularly when engaging with community protection and when their local relationships are underdeveloped, their support is temporary, or their coordination is poor. UN

27 Julian, Ronnie, and Kaalim, "Civilian Ceasefire Monitoring in Mindanao"; Julian, *Transforming Protection*; Ridden, "Protection through Vulnerability"; Nonviolent Peaceforce, "Civilian-Centred Approaches to PoC: What Works, Why, and Advancing Acceptance within the International System," summary of POC Week event, New York, May 23, 2024, available at <https://nonviolentpeaceforce.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/Civilian-centred-approaches-2024-event-report-FINAL.pdf>.

28 Beatriz E. Arias López et al., "Intersectionality, Rights Violations, and Self-Protection in the Context of the Urban Armed Conflict in Medellín, 2022–2024," *Creating Safer Space*, 2025, available at <https://creating-safer-space.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/CSS-Working-Paper-2.2-Colombia-2-SP-Digital.pdf>.

29 Gordon Crawford et al., "Exploring Unarmed Civilian Self-Protection in Cameroon's Anglophone Conflict," *Creating Safer Space*, 2024, available at <https://creating-safer-space.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/CSS-Working-Paper-Cameroon-Digital.pdf>.

30 Baines and Paddon, "This Is How We Survived."

31 Welsh, Paddon Rhoads, and Masullo, "Risky Business."

32 Ibid.

missions have taken steps in this direction, including through more structured and effective forms of community engagement and liaison, but these efforts are not immune to the unintended consequences outlined above.³³

Case Studies: UCP in Practice

To examine how community-led unarmed civilian protection (UCP) functions in real-world settings, this section presents four case studies. Together, they reflect the range of environments in which UCP is employed: alongside UN peacekeeping operations (South Sudan), during the drawdown of a UN peacekeeping operation (DRC), in high-risk areas without a peacekeeping presence (Cameroon), and in a context of long-standing engagement with UCP involving dozens of initiatives (Colombia). These examples illustrate both the adaptability and the operational relevance of community-led UCP in diverse conflict contexts.

Community-driven mechanisms illustrate the potential for vertical integration across local, national, and international levels of protection.

response systems, supporting women's and youth protection teams, and providing training on community protection.³⁴

These activities reinforce and complement UN peacekeeping efforts—both military and political—particularly in areas beyond UNMISS's reach. The UN Security Council has recognized NP's "strong contributions on the ground" and called on UNMISS "to explore how it can use civilian protection techniques to enhance its ability to protect civilians" in several resolutions.³⁵

South Sudan also has a robust community protection infrastructure beyond NP and UNMISS.³⁶ A recent study identified three key components of community-led UCP in Rumbek and Juba: (1)

peace committees formed by community actors; (2) protection teams set up by women's and youth groups; and (3) religious and faith-based initiatives.³⁷ Women's protection teams (WPTs) and youth protection teams (YPTs) have

played a particularly important role in UCP in South Sudan. WPTs have engaged women through door-to-door outreach to understand their concerns, strengthen early-warning capacity, intervene in community disputes, and provide protective accompaniment. YPTs have helped prevent violence by organizing sports initiatives, patrolling main roads to ensure the safe passage of goods and food, and working with NGOs to facilitate dialogue initiatives aimed at resolving conflicts.³⁸

The study also found evidence of cooperation between these community-led UCP mechanisms and UNMISS, as well as with local authorities and police. For example, in mediating between farmers and pastoralists over cattle-related tensions, rural peace committees "have drawn on logistical

South Sudan

Nonviolent Peaceforce (NP) has operated in South Sudan since 2010, maintaining a broad presence both in the capital, Juba, and in rural areas, including zones not accessible to the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS). Through sustained community engagement and presence, NP has contributed to building local protection capacity and fostering a culture of UCP within and beyond former UN protection of civilians sites. Its work includes patrolling and providing protective accompaniment, referring survivors of violence to relevant services, supporting community-level peace dialogues, creating early-warning and early-

33 Jenna Russo, *Protecting Peace? How the UN's Protection of Civilians Contributes to Peace Processes* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2025).

34 Nonviolent Peaceforce, "Where We Work: South Sudan," available at <https://nonviolentpeaceforce.org/where-we-work/south-sudan/>.

35 Nonviolent Peaceforce, "Field Notes," March 2017, p. 6, available at https://nonviolentpeaceforce.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/NP_field_notes_Q1_2017_V7.pdf; UN Security Council Resolution 2327 (December 16, 2016), UN Doc. S/RES/2327; UN Security Council Resolution 2406 (March 15, 2018), UN Doc. S/RES/2406; UN Security Council Resolution 2459 (March 15, 2019), UN Doc. S/RES/2459; UN Security Council Resolution 2514 (March 12, 2020), UN Doc. S/RES/2514.

36 Moses M. John, "Unarmed Civilian Protection and Nonviolence with Attention to Sub-Saharan Africa," in Ellen Furnari, Randy Janzen, and Rosemary Kabaki, eds., *Unarmed Civilian Protection: A New Paradigm for Protection and Human Security* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2023).

37 Luke Abbs, Flora Bringi, and Moses M. John, "Spontaneous Unarmed Civilian Protection in Rumbek and Juba, South Sudan," Organisation for Nonviolence and Development, 2024, available at <https://creating-safer-space.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Policy-Brief-South-Sudan-Digital-1.pdf>; Nonviolent Peaceforce, "Field Notes," March 2017.

38 Abbs, Bringi, and John, "Spontaneous Unarmed Civilian Protection in Rumbek and Juba, South Sudan."

support from [UNMISS], which provided helicopters to facilitate travels between delegates from the two communities.”³⁹ In Bentiu’s POC site, WPTs, NP, and UNMISS coordinated patrols in firewood-collection areas to protect women and girls from sexual and gender-based violence, responding to women’s needs as identified by the WPTs while avoiding duplications of protective presence.⁴⁰ Peace committees have also worked with local government authorities and South Sudanese police to document early-warning indicators and investigate incidents.⁴¹

Taken together, these community-driven mechanisms illustrate the potential for vertical integration across local, national, and international levels of protection—an approach that would benefit from more systematic coordination with UN actors.

Integrating unarmed civilian protection into peacekeeping transition planning helps sustain protection efforts as missions draw down, strengthens community ownership, and helps embed safety strategies within local institutions.

Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC)

In the DRC, UCP has emerged as a key element of the transition strategy of the UN peacekeeping operation (MONUSCO). UN Security Council Resolution 2717 (2023) explicitly calls on MONUSCO to “build on the capacities of local communities to support the creation of a protective environment, including strengthening mechanisms for the unarmed protection of civilians.”⁴² Nonviolent Peaceforce has worked to operationalize this mandate by mobilizing and training civil society groups in UCP and supporting the formation of community protection teams, including women’s and youth protection teams.

Integrating UCP into peacekeeping transition planning offers several advantages. It helps sustain protection efforts as missions draw down,

strengthens community ownership, and helps embed safety strategies within local institutions. As MONUSCO withdraws, community involvement becomes central to sustaining POC in the absence of an international military presence. Preexisting information flows, established relationships with government officials, and prior UCP training can facilitate this handover.

However, UCP cannot substitute for broader political and security strategies, especially in areas where armed groups remain active or where the withdrawal of armed peacekeepers leaves a power

vacuum that fuels violence. Protection transitions must therefore combine community empowerment with regional, national, and local frameworks for disarmament, political dialogue, and oversight. Still, the DRC illustrates how UCP can function as a bridge

between international mandates and locally owned protection efforts.

Cameroon

In Cameroon’s Anglophone regions, where there is no formal UN or AU peacekeeping presence and where international NGOs operate under severe restrictions imposed by an authoritarian regime, community-led UCP has become a primary means of civilian protection in the conflict between government forces and separatist fighters. Research conducted through the Creating Safer Space network documents how communities have developed unarmed protective practices in the face of ongoing violence.⁴⁴ These range from reactive or spontaneous strategies—such as fleeing to forested areas, turning off lights inside houses, and hiding from gunfire—to increasingly proactive measures—including sharing information over social media and WhatsApp; early warning via

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Nonviolent Peaceforce, “WPT Meeting with Protection Actors Leads to Resumption of Night Patrols,” November 2019, available at https://nonviolentpeaceforce.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/NPSS_Case_study_BentiuPOC__Nov2019-1.pdf.

⁴¹ Abbs, Bringi, and John, “Spontaneous Unarmed Civilian Protection in Rumbek and Juba, South Sudan”; Nonviolent Peaceforce, “Field Notes,” March 2017.

⁴² UN Security Council Resolution 2717 (December 20, 2023), UN Doc. S/RES/2717.

⁴³ Nonviolent Peaceforce, “Where We Work: Democratic Republic of the Congo,” available at <https://nonviolentpeaceforce.org/where-we-work/democratic-republic-of-the-congo/>.

⁴⁴ Nancy Annan and Gordon Crawford, “Strengthening Unarmed Community Self-Protection in Cameroon’s Anglophone Conflict,” *Creating Safer Space*, 2024, available at <https://creating-safer-space.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Policy-Brief-Cameroon-Digital.pdf>; Crawford et al., “Exploring Unarmed Civilian Self-Protection in Cameroon’s Anglophone Conflict.”

bells, whistles, mobile messaging, and town criers; planning for flight; protective accompaniment through moving in groups; and using the protective power of traditional and religious authorities and sites such as churches and chiefs' palaces.

Communities have also developed preventive measures that they circulate internally, including altering dress to avoid harassment, carrying identification cards and relevant documentation when traveling, and staying indoors during periods of heightened tension. While these strategies demonstrate the ingenuity and responsiveness of local communities, the research also highlights a lack of external support and sustained engagement. Some local NGOs have been able to provide support under the guise of humanitarian assistance, but any wider national and international protection work has been prohibited by the government. In such contexts, the burden of protection falls overwhelmingly on civilians themselves, often without external coordination or institutional reinforcement.

This case highlights both the potential and limits of community-led UCP in the absence of international backing and raises important questions about how international actors could support such efforts in contexts that do not host a UN peace operation.

Colombia

Colombia presents one of the longest-standing and most diverse ecosystems of community-led UCP. For decades, dozens of initiatives—many with no external support—have been launched by conflict-affected communities and civil society groups to protect communities from displacement, armed violence, and different forms of structural oppression. A review conducted within the Creating Safer Space network documented over 150 organizations, initiatives, and communities using UCP in Colombia, including activities led by Afro-

Colombian, Indigenous, religious, and peasant organizations, as well as national NGOs.⁴⁵

This rich civilian protection landscape has provided a fertile ground for research on the functioning and effectiveness of community-led forms of protection. For example, Oliver Kaplan has shown how communities with strong social organization and cohesion have more capacity to engage violent actors proactively and reduce violence against civilians.⁴⁶ Karen Arteaga Garzón and Andrei Gómez-Suárez have drawn attention to the varied ways communities have organized for self-protection, including using football programs to build protective spaces, using spiritual forms of protection, and negotiating a cohabitation manual with armed actors.⁴⁷ Other researchers have drawn attention to the convergence between civilian protection from direct physical harm and nonviolent resistance to structural oppression in many communities.⁴⁸

Colombia also offers instructive examples of collaboration between self-protecting communities and external NGOs in ways that are equitable and locally led.⁴⁹ For example, Peace Brigades International has worked in Colombia since 1994, providing protective accompaniment to human rights defenders and supporting peace zones and peace communities, such as the peace community of San José de Apartadó, which prohibit the presence of armed actors and the use of weapons in their territories.

This wide spectrum of activity reflects the scale and versatility of UCP across geographic, cultural, and political contexts. While Colombia does not host a UN peacekeeping deployment—though it does host a special political mission—its experience offers critical lessons for how to identify, map, and support community-led protection systems. Participatory data collection and local knowledge sharing, such as those piloted through the Creating Safer Space methodology, could inform future UN

45 Laura Jiménez Ospina and Beatriz E. Arias López, "Unarmed Civilian Protection and Community Self-Protection in Colombia: A Literature Review," Creating Safer Space, 2023, available at <https://creating-safer-space.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Creating-Safer-Space-Vol.-1.3-UCP-in-Colombia-English.pdf>.

46 Kaplan, *Resisting War*.

47 Karen Arteaga Garzón and Andrei Gómez-Suárez, "Civilians Protecting Civilians," *Rodeemos el Diálogo*, 2024, available at <https://creating-safer-space.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Policy-Brief-Feb-24-ENG.pdf>.

48 Maia Hallward, Juan Masullo, and Cécile Mouly, "Civil Resistance in Armed Conflict: Leveraging Nonviolent Action to Navigate War, Oppose Violence, and Confront Oppression," *Journal of Peacebuilding and Development* 12, no. 3 (2017).

49 Gretchen Alther, "Colombian Peace Communities: The Role of NGOs in Supporting Resistance to Violence and Oppression," *Development in Practice* 16, nos. 3–4 (2006).

engagement with civilian protection mechanisms already in place.⁵⁰

Implications: Bridging Local and Institutional Protection

Community-led UCP is an underrecognized but essential pillar of the protection of civilians. When peacekeeping operations, specialized NGOs, and local actors collaborate—rather than operate in parallel or at cross-purposes—protection outcomes improve. The UN and its partners have made important strides in recognizing local agency in protection. At the 2024 Protection of Civilians Week, for example, Ambassador Cecilia Adeng of the Permanent Mission of South Sudan emphasized that “local communities [are] the backbone of protection and violence prevention,” noting their ability to “disseminate deconfliction messages, deescalate tensions, shift perceptions and attitudes, educate about coexistence, and find ways to reconcile and move forward.”⁵¹ Supporting such agency, she argued, not only improves immediate safety but helps lay the groundwork for sustainable peace.

A whole-of-system approach is needed to ensure all initiatives complement each other to enhance civilians’ safety without undermining local initiative and capacity.

Whether developed by communities themselves or facilitated by NGOs, UCP strategies are already reducing risks in conflict-affected settings. However, peacekeeping operations still tend to treat these strategies as add-ons or late-stage exit strategies rather than fully integrating them into mission planning from the outset. Particularly as peacekeeping transitions continue, it is critical to acknowledge existing community-led protection mechanisms and strengthen them as core components of a lasting protective environment. This requires developing vertically integrated protection networks, from local to international actors, that take local communities seriously as equitable

partners with protection agency. A whole-of-system approach is needed to ensure all initiatives complement each other to enhance civilians’ safety without undermining local initiative and capacity.

Community-led UCP can also inform institutional risk analysis and ethical planning. Community actors routinely produce context-specific risk assessments based on their own knowledge and experience and continuously adjust their strategies in response to shifting threats, whether through early-warning systems, protection mapping, or social cohesion efforts. As research from *Creating Safer Space* and others has shown, these are not informal coping mechanisms but deliberate, context-specific forms of protection. Supporting them requires more than consultation; it demands a shift in posture, from viewing communities as beneficiaries to recognizing them as protection actors in their own right.

To translate these insights into operational change, UN peacekeeping operations should:

- **Identify and support community-led protection strategies already in place**, asking communities where peacekeepers can amplify and support—rather than displace them.
- **Build mechanisms to integrate community-led UCP into strategic early warning and pre-deployment planning** in the UN Department of Peace Operations to identify, consult, and reinforce local protective capacities from the outset.
- **Establish rapid, agreed response mechanisms** for communities requesting support (e.g., safe presence, secure evacuation routes, or information sharing).
- **Enable communities to engage nonmilitary UN personnel**, including by calling on unarmed peacekeeping personnel when weapons are not appropriate or welcome.

50 Rachel Julian, Nerve Macaspac, and Berit Bliesemann de Guevara, “Researching community-led unarmed civilian protection: The Creating Safer Space model,” in *Creating Safer Space*; Juan Mario Díaz-Arévalo et al., “Participatory Action Research Semillero,” *Creating Safer Space*, 2024, available at <https://creating-safer-space.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Semillero-PAR-Toolkit-EN-Digital.pdf>; Juan Mario Díaz-Arévalo, Adriel José Ruiz Galván, and Natalia Campo Castro, “Buenaventura: Thinking-Feeling Methodologies of Resistance and Re-Existence,” *Creating Safer Space*, 2025, available at <https://creating-safer-space.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/Cartilla-IAP-Vol-2-english-web-version.pdf>; Corporación Jurídica Libertad, “El Proceso Social de Garantías de Antioquia, Colombia: Una Experiencia de Protección Civil No Armada con Comunidades Indígenas y Campesinas del Bajo Cauca Antioqueño,” 2023, available at <https://creating-safer-space.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/CartillaPSG2023-comp.pdf>.

51 Nonviolent Peaceforce, “Civilian-Centred Approaches to PoC: What Works, Why, and Advancing Acceptance within the International System.”

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- **Invite local UCP leaders to meetings on the protection of civilians and security coordination** as equal contributors, not just observers, and understand that UCP leaders may be different from local authorities and include traditionally underrepresented groups such as women and youth.
 - **Include and credit community-generated information** such as reports, videos, and press releases in UN public reporting, reinforcing local legitimacy and trust.

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