Nonviolent Peaceforce

PEACEBUILDING IS POSSIBLE IN EMERGENCY CONTEXTS:

Unarmed Civilian Protection (UCP) as a Peacebuilding Approach



Women's Protection Team members celebrating, South Sudan, 2023 ©NP

Introduction

Peacebuilding is often assumed to begin after violence ends. Yet many of the drivers of conflict- such as distrust, fractured institutions, and exclusion - are most visible and most urgent during moments of emergency or crisis. During these times, peacebuilding actors are constrained in their engagement, yet peace and protection work is essential to both de-escalate and, ideally avoid a full descent into open conflict. **Unarmed Civilian Protection (UCP)** is a form of peacebuilding which bridges this gap: it allows local actors to begin or sustain peacebuilding efforts in the midst of insecurity, through protective presence, relationship-building, and inclusive engagement.

Globally, civilians are facing rising levels of violence and direct threats to their lives. According to the United Nations, civilian deaths in armed conflicts surged by **72% between 2022 and 2023**, with the proportion of women and children among the casualties doubling and tripling, respectively. **The OECD's States of Fragility 2025** echoes this identifying 61 contexts with high or extreme fragility, home to 2.1 billion people - 25% of the world's population yet comprising 72% of global extreme poverty (projected to rise to 92% by 2040). Although armed conflict is highly concentrated - 24 of these contexts were in conflict and 8 in war in 2023, and 47 of 59 global state based conflicts occurred within these contexts - resources for prevention remain critically low. **Overseas Development Assistance (ODA)** for peace activities in these fragile areas is at its second lowest level since 2004, while humanitarian aid reached record highs, constituting 50% of ODA in extreme fragility settings.

As global emergency contexts multiply and multilateral entities face mounting challenges to respond effectively, the policy and funding community needs to better connect peacebuilding, humanitarian, and protection work. Tools like UCP can help de-escalate situations and lay foundations for broader peace interventions.

UCP as a Form of Peacebuilding in Times of Crisis and Beyond

Peacebuilding is often assumed to begin after violence ends. Yet many of the drivers of conflict - such as distrust, fractured institutions, and exclusion - are most visible and most urgent during moments of crisis. Delaying external support to peacebuilding until stability emerges is not only shortsighted, it limits the tools available to de-escalate violence and support affected communities.

UCP offers a model for bridging this gap: it allows local actors to begin peacebuilding efforts even in the midst of insecurity, through protective presence, relationship-building, and inclusive engagement. Grounded in nonviolence and local leadership, **UCP uses protective presence, relationship-building**, and inclusive engagement to prevent violence and reduce threats in real time. Rather than wait for stability to emerge, UCP creates it - **working with communities to reduce violence, build trust, and support nonviolent solutions.**

UCP is a nonviolent, community-led approach to protection that prioritizes presence, accompaniment, and trust-building. It centers local agency to prevent violence and reduce threats in real time. UCP actors do not rely on armed force but instead **leverage relationships, visibility, and collective action to increase safety.**

UCP practitioners work alongside communities to reduce violence, build trust, and create space for dialogue - even as tensions remain high. In doing so, they reinforce protective norms and begin addressing root causes of conflict. This is especially important in contexts where state institutions are absent or mistrusted, and where intercommunal violence may erupt suddenly and cyclically.

Both UCP and peacebuilding are grounded in shared principles: a commitment to nonviolence, the prioritization of **local ownership** and leadership, and a strong emphasis on conflict sensitivity and the principle of "do no harm." Central to both is the recognition that durable peace and effective protection cannot be externally imposed but must be built from within communities. Trust and **relationships** form the foundation of this work - UCP, in particular, **invests deeply in community trust,** which strengthens the legitimacy and long-term impact of peacebuilding. Importantly, UCP also represents a paradigm shift in how we understand protection: it challenges the assumption that safety requires armed force and instead centers relational security, community presence, and local agency as the basis for lasting protection.

UCP is often perceived as a short-term or niche intervention, while peacebuilding is seen as a **slow and structural process.** But this binary overlooks the ways in which UCP delivers immediate results - enhancing civilian safety, enabling participation, and creating the space needed for sustainable peacebuilding to take root. At the same time, UCP is not merely reactive or temporary. It represents a shift in how protection is understood and practiced: grounded in relationships, trust, and local leadership, particularly from marginalized groups such as women and youth.



International Women's Day Celebration, South Sudan, 2023 ©NP

Together, these approaches are mutually reinforcing. **Early warning** and unarmed protection build the security and cohesion required for local peacebuilding to flourish. UCP often lays the groundwork for sustainable peacebuilding by ensuring that communities are safe enough to participate in longer-term processes of reconciliation, political transition, and social healing, and in some cases, support the ability of groups to engage in these spaces. **When grounded in trust** and relationships - and led by **marginalized groups like women** - UCP transforms immediate protective presence into lasting structural impact, enhancing community-led peacebuilding and redefining local norms around safety, gender, and equity. By embedding protection in local relationships and institutions, UCP practitioners support communities not only to survive crises, but to use them as openings for reimagining safety, equity, and coexistence and building long-term sustainable peace.

What Does this Mean in Practice?

UCP exemplifies how peacebuilding can take place amid crisis. As a community-led approach to protection, UCP interrupts immediate and emerging violence while simultaneously strengthening the foundations for long-term peace and safety. Grounded in relationships and local legitimacy, it reinforces social cohesion, re-establishes protective norms, and builds the trust necessary for broader peacebuilding efforts to emerge.

In practice this can look like:

- In active conflict zones, UCP teams can stabilize communities by deterring attacks, accompanying at-risk individuals, and reducing fear. This creates the breathing space for peacebuilders to convene dialogue or support local institutions (see Example 1).
- In fragile post-conflict settings, traditional peacebuilding activities such as community dialogue processes fostering social cohesion and reconciliation can help institutionalize the norms and structures that UCP relies on - such as mutual trust, nonviolent conflict resolution, shared responsibility for protection, as well as community alert systems, early warning mechanisms, and inclusive governance platforms (see Example 2).
- In non-crisis or latent conflict environments, UCP is increasingly being used to reinforce social cohesion, protect civic actors, and reduce the risk of violence through community-led deterrence and protective presence (see Example 3).

1 Community Hubs in Ukraine: Trauma-Informed Peacebuilding Amid Conflict

Since the full-scale Russian invasion in 2022, Ukraine has faced not only widespread displacement and destruction but also the breakdown of community trust in areas of occupation and de-occupation. Social cohesion has been severely strained, particularly between Russian-speaking populations from the East and Ukrainian-speaking populations from the West. Suspicions of collaboration with occupying forces - often based on rumor or minimal evidence - have deepened rifts between neighbors.

In this context, traditional peacebuilding timelines and post-conflict reconciliation models cannot wait until the context has stabilized. There is a need to address the underlying trauma, social divisions and lack of trust, as well as provide material aid and protection to communities. The establishment of volunteer hubs in conflict-affected areas in Ukraine illustrate how UCP mechanisms can create breathing space for peacebuilding as well as meet protection needs - even in the midst of active war.

NP, together with civil society actors began establishing volunteer hubs in key cities like Kherson and Kramatorsk. Originally conceived as logistical coordination spaces, these hubs evolved into neutral safe zones that provides a safe space for trauma support, psycho-social services, and space for community dialogues, as well as offering protective accompaniment and risk mitigation. NP provided protective equipment, first aid and psychological training, and stipends for frontline volunteers. These actions allow for spaces to ‘breathe’ and enabled frontline actors to safely continue their work.



Safety & Security Training, Ukraine , 2023 ©NP

As stability increased within the hubs, they became sites for deeper transformation:

- **Fostering Community Trust:** Serving as safe, depoliticized spaces where displaced persons, residents, and volunteers could come together to share experiences and rebuild fractured relationships.
- **Peer Welfare Programming:** Hosting structured psychosocial sessions for residents and frontline volunteers exposed to trauma, grief, and burnout NP staff have been trained in providing psycho-social care using techniques and protocols designed to be used by non-specialized personnel, to prevent burn out and the onset of PTSD.
- **Facilitating Community Dialogue:** Including between formerly occupied and non-occupied populations, allowing for acknowledgment of tensions and shared experiences.
- **Countering Harmful Practices:** In Kherson, volunteers had created “blacklists” of neighborhoods suspected of collaborating with occupying forces. Through inclusive dialogue at the hubs, these punitive practices were dismantled, shifting aid distribution toward restorative approaches.
- **Addressing Linguistic and Cultural Divides:** Russian-speaking displaced communities, often facing discrimination in the west, found, in the hubs, spaces for cross-cultural interaction and reducing stigma.
- **Strengthening Local Institutions:** By bringing together volunteers, civil society actors, and local authorities, the hubs enhanced coordination and governance at the local level. This leads to resource sharing and increased cooperation between local organisations.
- **Improved security and safety for volunteers operating in Front Line areas:** Local CSOs are sharing security information and updates in real time to prevent harm.
- **Promoting Healing as a Conflict Response:** Trauma builds during conflict, not just after it. Recognizing that physical protection needs to be connected with psychological well-being, UCP teams embedded trauma-informed care and healing practices into everyday protection and humanitarian work - rejecting the notion that peacebuilding must wait for the end of war.

What began as immediate protection work evolved into a community-based peacebuilding infrastructure. These hubs enabled communities to begin healing, reconnecting, and rebuilding in the midst of ongoing conflict. They demonstrate that peacebuilding does not need to wait for conflict to end. In fact, delaying these efforts only risks entrenching divisions and trauma. While formal peace processes may overlook or postpone engagement in conflict zones, CSOs are already leading the way - addressing trauma, reconnecting communities, and laying the foundations for recovery and coexistence.

2 Early Warning and Early Response in Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao

In the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM), the Early Warning and Early Response (EWER) system illustrates how unarmed civilian protection (UCP) mechanisms can evolve across the trajectory of a conflict - from active armed hostilities to post-conflict political transitions.

Initially developed as part of civilian-led ceasefire monitoring during the armed conflict between the Government of the Philippines and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), EWER teams emerged to fill critical protection gaps left by formal security actors. With support from NP, community-based monitors - many of them women and youth - were trained to identify and report ceasefire violations, de-escalate local tensions, and provide protective presence for displaced populations. Embedded in the International Monitoring Team (IMT) as the Civilian Protection Component (CPC), these teams brought legitimacy, trust, and contextual insight to ceasefire monitoring, earning credibility with both state and non-state actors.



Early Warning Early Response (EWER) Monitors, Philippines 2024 ©NP

As BARMM entered a post-agreement phase and transitioned toward normalisation, the EWER system adapted to new risks. In preparation for the 2025 national and parliamentary elections, EWER monitors expanded their role to include election-related violence (ERV) monitoring. Drawing on their trusted presence and deep community relationships, they tracked over 85 verified ERV incidents across the region - ranging from armed clashes and political intimidation to disinformation and displacement. This information fed into multi-stakeholder coordination platforms enabling joint risk analysis and rapid response by civil society and government agencies.

What began as a ceasefire accountability tool evolved into an institutionalized civic mechanism for violence prevention and democratic participation. EWER monitors now engage in civic education, digital risk monitoring, and dialogue facilitation, while maintaining their original role in early warning and de-escalation. Their legitimacy stems not from coercive power, but from nonpartisan presence, continuity of engagement, and embeddedness in local communities.

This evolution underscores a central tenet of UCP: that the civilian-centered nature of community-rooted protection mechanisms predisposes them to endure and transform across phases of conflict, shifting from immediate harm mitigation to long-term peacebuilding. In BARMM, EWER teams have not only adapted to changing threats but have also become a key pillar of inclusive peace infrastructure - bridging ceasefire implementation, political transition, and community resilience

3 Building Peace from Within: Preventing Age Set Violence through Youth Protection Teams

In the Greater Pibor Administrative Area (GPAA) of South Sudan, traditional Murle age sets - generational peer groups such as Kurenen, Lango, and Botonya - have historically served protective and social roles within the community. However, decades of armed conflict and widespread access to small arms transformed these structures into sources of deadly intra-communal violence. Once-regulated contests between age sets devolved into escalating gunfights, often triggered by minor disputes and fueled by rivalries, economic pressures, and the erosion of traditional leadership.

In response, **NP launched a multi-year initiative** to prevent age set violence and rebuild intergenerational trust. A cornerstone of this approach was the creation of Youth Protection Teams (YPTs) in Pibor, Gumuruk, and Lekuangole counties. These teams were composed of 30 youth leaders from multiple age sets - including previously hostile groups - trained in nonviolence, early warning systems, mediation, and community safety.

Initially seen as unlikely collaborators, the YPTs built credibility through a combination of NP-facilitated training, mentorship, and inclusive dialogue. They played a central role in identifying conflict risks, mediating tensions, and supporting the establishment of weapon-free zones. A turning point came during the July 2024 peace conference, organized by NP and the YPTs, where youth representatives and local authorities jointly agreed on new bylaws governing gun use in Pibor town and launched youth-led patrols to enforce community safety.

Beyond direct violence prevention, the YPTs became agents of social transformation. They facilitated community dialogues across generational divides, responded to early warning signals, and accompanied civilians through high-risk areas during moments of tension. In collaboration with Women Protection Teams, they also supported protective accompaniment, public awareness campaigns, and joint patrols to prevent revenge attacks and protect vulnerable groups - especially women and children.

Crucially, the YPTs helped reframe the role of youth in Pibor: from instigators of violence to leaders of peace. Their cross-age set structure modeled reconciliation in action, helping reweave fractured community ties. This experience illustrates how UCP, because it is grounded in community structures and cultural understanding, can enable peacebuilding from within - even in settings marked by deep-rooted, identity-based violence.



Youth Protection Team members, South Sudan, 2025 ©NP

As trust and community capacity deepen, UCP evolves from reactive protection into proactive peacebuilding. Over time, accompaniment gives way to advocacy, and safety gives way to transformation - reshaping social norms, local governance, and collective resilience.

Challenges and Opportunities

Despite the clear synergies between UCP and peacebuilding, practical integration at the policy level and funding space practice remains limited. One major challenge is the siloed nature of policy frameworks and funding streams: UCP is often funded as a humanitarian protection intervention, while peacebuilding typically falls under development or political portfolios. This segmentation can constrain flexibility and limit joint planning or multi-phase approaches.

Additionally, there is a persistent perception that UCP is reactive and short-term, rather than strategic or transformative. While often categorized as a short-term protection measure, UCP is increasingly demonstrating its value as a foundation for long-term change. Its ability to reduce immediate threats is only one dimension; equally important is how it fosters inclusive leadership, rebuilds social cohesion, and redefines protection through relationship-based approaches. By embedding safety within community structures, **UCP offers a durable, strategic model of protection** that challenges conventional, externally driven responses.

Yet, these challenges also present opportunities. With the growing needs and funding cuts, more actors/donors are rethinking their approaches. This is a great opportunity to properly invest in prevention and locally-led action, which is what UCP and peacebuilding are about. Field experience also shows that communities, when empowered and supported, naturally combine protection and peacebuilding approaches. Investing in these efforts- especially those led by women, youth, and marginalized groups - can enhance both immediate safety and long-term resilience.

UCP and Peacebuilding: How to take this forward

UCP is not separate from peacebuilding - it is peacebuilding and protection in action. It enables communities to navigate crisis with dignity and agency, while advancing structural transformation over time. At field level, communities are engaging in peacebuilding in crisis contexts through UCP tools and approaches. The distinction between humanitarian, protection and peacebuilding approaches are irrelevant - the focus is on what will work to protect people and prevent growing violence and conflict. It is vital that policymakers, implementers, donors, communities, and other actors across the humanitarian, development and peacebuilding sectors recognize this. The piece meal approach to humanitarian, protection and peacebuilding engagement is not helpful and results in a series of different actors engaging over an elongated time period. There is a need to collapse the siloes in the policy community. The lesson is clear - peacebuilding does not have to wait. It can begin now, grounded in relationships, led by communities, and protected through presence.

These key messages can be read as a set of recommendations for advancing this recognition.

1. Peacebuilding Can and Must Begin During Crisis

- Peacebuilding is often delayed until after conflict ends, but many root causes - such as exclusion, distrust, and fractured institutions - are most acute during crises.
- UCP offers a means to begin peacebuilding in real-time, not after violence has subsided.

2. UCP is a Peacebuilding Practice

- UCP is not just a protection tool; it is peacebuilding in action. It nurtures trust, reduces fear, and creates space for dialogue, inclusion, and transformation.
- UCP lays the groundwork for long-term peace by strengthening community resilience and local leadership.

3. UCP Is Not Short-Term or Niche

- UCP provides immediate protection, but its impacts are also structural: rebuilding social cohesion, reshaping norms, and redefining the role of youth, women, and local leaders in protection and peace.

4. Integration Is Both Possible and Necessary

- Field experience shows communities naturally blend protection and peacebuilding. Supporting these efforts enhances both safety and structural change.

5. A Call to Action

- Peacebuilding cannot wait for stability. UCP allows communities to act now.
- Donors, policymakers, and practitioners must look beyond the siloes in the humanitarian, peacebuilding and protection space, and see UCP as a legitimate and vital peacebuilding and protection tool across this nexus.



NP staff and members of the Women Peace Team in Hardan, Sinjar, Iraq, 2025 ©NP