Civilian peacekeeping: Lessons from Civilian-Led Ceasefire Monitoring in the Philippines

Nonviolent Peaceforce[1]

Introduction

In the absence of a UN peacekeeping mission, civilians in Mindanao, southern Philippines, built one of the most structured and effective civilian-led protection systems in a conflict zone. Their experience offers perhaps one of the clearest evidence base that unarmed civilians can lead on core elements traditionally mandated to international peace operations, namely monitoring ceasefires, deterring violence, and directly protecting communities from the threat of violence.

This short issue paper argues that the Mindanao case offers a compelling rationale for recalibrating global peacekeeping mandates. Civilian-led protection is not a niche supplement to military peacekeeping – it is a core strategy, especially in complex, protracted, or hybrid conflicts where armed presence may be limited, mistrusted, or politically constrained. Yet despite mounting evidence, local civilian capacities remain systematically undervalued and under-supported in the architecture of UN peace operations. The lessons from Mindanao call for a rethinking of what protection looks like, who can lead it, and how international actors can best support it.

Civilian-led Protection in Practice: The Mindanao Model

The conflict in Mindanao between the government of the Philippines and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) spanned decades, displacing hundreds of thousands of civilians and leaving entire communities vulnerable to repeated cycles of violence. Prior to 2009, ceasefire monitoring mechanisms were primarily military-to-military arrangements, relying on joint field monitoring by GPH and MILF representatives. These structures lacked the trust of civilian populations and were ineffective at preventing abuses or anticipating localized escalations. Their failure became starkly evident during the 2008 resurgence of hostilities, which triggered mass displacement and underscored the absence of mechanisms focused on civilian safety. In response, civil society actors, most notably the Bantay Ceasefire, a grassroots network founded in 2002, pioneered a model of civilian-led monitoring rooted in local presence, relationships, and accountability. Recognising the limits of armed-only frameworks, the government of the Philippines and MILF formally created the Civilian Protection Component (CPC) in 2009 as part of the International Monitoring Team (IMT), a multi-

[1] This paper draws on internal learning from project evaluations, impact assessments, and independent research commissioned by Nonviolent Peaceforce, reflecting on its 2009 experience supporting civilian-led ceasefire monitoring in the Philippines. For more on this topic and additional case studies, see: Rachel Julian (2024) Civilians Creating Safe Space: The Role of Unarmed Civilian Peacekeeping in Protection of Civilians, Civil Wars, 26:1, 187-212; Schweitzer, C. (Ed.). (2010). Civilian peacekeeping: a barely tapped resource. Belm: SozioPubl. https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-332229; Jana Krause, Erin Kamler, Ceasefires and Civilian Protection Monitoring in Myanmar, *Global Studies Quarterly*, Volume 2, Issue 1, January 2022, ksac005, https://academic.oup.com/isagsq/article/2/1/ksac005/6524934.

layered body overseeing ceasefire compliance. The IMT included international military observers, police, and humanitarian representatives. The CPC specifically comprised local NGOs.[2]

Civilian peacekeepers carried out a range of operational tasks that directly contributed to ceasefire compliance, protection, and broader peace process legitimacy:

- Monitoring, Verification, and Reporting: Local monitors conducted daily patrols in high-risk areas, documented potential and actual ceasefire violations, and submitted reports that fed into IMT decision-making. In one case, a local monitor in a marketplace in Maguindanao intercepted military plans to conduct a raid in a densely populated area suspected of harboring insurgents. Drawing on a longstanding personal relationship with local commanders, the monitor persuaded them to delay action, coordinated with community leaders to evacuate civilians, and then reported the incident to the IMT, which initiated formal mediation. What this incident demonstrates is that de-escalation depends on trust, rapid information flow, and credibility, one that is enhanced precisely when monitors are unarmed and seen as part of the community fabric.
- Community-led early warning and early response (EWER): With NP support, over 80 barangays (the smallest administrative unit in the Philippines, similar to a village or ward) established EWER systems tailored to their specific risk profiles. These local systems addressed everything from political violence and clan feuds (rido) to climate-related displacement. Because they were community-owned/led and context-specific, many continued to operate even after external funding ended which is strong evidence of sustainability of local initiative.
- Protection by presence and accompaniment: Civilian field teams provided protective presence in communities facing threats, including at-risk individuals such as displaced persons attempting to return home. Their visible, nonpartisan presence deterred violence and reassured civilians. Importantly, they could access hard-to-reach areas where military actors or international agencies were distrusted or denied entry, closing a major operational gap.
- Training and capacity-building: At the request of local communities, NP trained hundreds of civilians, including women, youth, local leaders and members of both the MILF and the national army in civilian protection strategies, ceasefire mechanisms, international humanitarian law, and how to document and report violations. This training not only increased local capabilities but also created a shared understanding across conflict-affected communities about what protection meant and how it could and should function in their own context.
- Referral and humanitarian coordination: Civilian monitors frequently identified internally displaced persons in remote areas and responded quickly. They truly became essential to humanitarian assessments and referrals, often in areas where humanitarians could not

[2] Nonviolent Peaceforce, at that time, became the only international NGO formally invited into this structure. It was tasked with ensuring that civilian protection became an explicit part of the ceasefire monitoring mandate. NP's role in the CPC was not improvised. By 2009, the organisation had already spent several years in Mindanao, building local trust, training civil society partners, and supporting community-led protection. Its model of unarmed civilian protection (UCP) provided the foundation for a credible, embedded civilian presence in conflict-affected areas.

operate safely. They helped identify the most vulnerable, connect them to services, and, when necessary, mobilise creative community-based solutions in the absence of formal aid. In one instance, civilian monitors negotiated with church leaders in a rural barangay to shelter displaced families who had fled overnight from renewed fighting, families who would have faced direct violence had they been forced to sleep outside.

These activities were not peripheral – they were central to how protection functioned on the ground. They filled the operational gaps left by military actors and formal institutional agencies and provided real-time, vital intelligence, trust-building (leveraging that for relationship-based problem solving), and de-escalation capacity.

The Mindanao model also carries important implications for international actors. A first one is that local protection capacity ideally would not be built reactively. NP's success was predicated on its long-term investment in relationships, training, and contextual understanding – foundations that international interventions often overlook. Second, support rather than supplant local actors. NP played a supporting role, helping scale and structure protection mechanisms that already had roots in the community. International presence worked best when it amplified, rather than replaced local agency. Third and last, flexibility. The CPC-IMT model worked because it recognised the importance of inclusivity in terms of range of actors and flexibility in terms of models and structures – thereby linking top-down and bottom-up peace efforts in ways that made the overall process more responsive, grounded, legitimate and ultimately, sustainable.

Civilian-Led, Mission-Supported: Lessons for Future Peace Operations

The Mindanao case offers several evidence-based insights for rethinking peacekeeping and the protection of civilians:

- Civilian-led mechanisms enhance ceasefire compliance. Civilian monitors functioned as real-time alert systems. Their reports helped trigger preemptive interventions by military and civilian actors, preventing escalation and strengthening the legitimacy of the ceasefire process.
- Relationships and legitimacy are core protection assets. Civilian protection actors derived their deterrence not from force, but from legitimacy, neutrality, and long-standing relationships with communities and armed actors alike. These relational assets enabled informal yet effective problem-solving during high-risk moments. They also increased the situational awareness of the broader peace mediation efforts, as their granular understanding of local dynamics allowed for timely responses that larger, more bureaucratic operations struggle to achieve.
- Civilian peacekeeping is sustainable. Local monitors and EWER networks often continued their work beyond the lifecycle of external funding. This longevity stemmed from community ownership, contextual relevance, and the embedding of knowledge and networks in local institutions.
- Protection is broader than armed security. Civilians in the Philippines, reflecting on their experiences in the IMT, defined security as the freedom to farm, return home, resolve disputes peacefully, and live without fear. Civilian-led actors addressed these multidimensional needs in ways military forces could not. Such an expanded approach to POC, grounded in local priorities, built long-term resilience and trust.

As the UN Peacekeeping Ministerial in Berlin considers future directions for peace operations, civilian-led ceasefire monitoring offers a tested, effective, and replicable model. It proves that civilians can not only participate or be consulted in protection efforts – they can lead them. Their work connects the (horizontal) grassroots legitimacy of community engagement with the (more vertical) institutional authority of formal peace processes.

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