


Responding to Crisis Multiplied: Climate, Conflict, and Unarmed Civilian Protection

Introduction

Climate change, conflict, and the protection of civilians are intimately connected. The way that the climate crisis erodes our physical environment quickly cascades into an erosion of human security, stressing relationships, economic and social safety nets, and development. Across the world, communities are struggling with the ways that these challenges exacerbate one another – climate threats compounding conflict, conflict impeding responses to climate, and amidst it all, civilians struggling with an onslaught of threats to their safety, wellbeing, and livelihoods.

“It is the worst thing that happened in my lifetime,” reflects Daniel Deng, of the floods that have ravaged South Sudan this year. With homes underwater, fields of sorghum and other crops swept away, the UN has directly linked the [increasing severity of flooding to climate change](#). As the floods prompt mass displacement, and destroy livelihoods, they further exacerbate social and political conflicts, already eroded as a result of the civil war.

These interconnections between crises of climate and violence can be seen across the world, including in the contexts Nonviolent Peaceforce works. In farming communities in Mindanao, climate-related crop losses spur food insecurity, and increased risk of sexual and gender-based violence to women and girls [as they move beyond their home areas to find employment](#). In the face of rising temperatures and desertification, survivors of Islamic State violence in northern Iraq are struggling to access water or develop livelihoods. Myanmar, uniquely vulnerable to the threat of climate change and [facing increasing flooding, cyclones and drought](#), has seen food prices spike in the face of extreme weather events, displacing communities en masse and [intensifying ethnic conflicts](#). Of the twenty-five states recognised as most vulnerable and least ready to face the impacts of climate change, [over 60 % are simultaneously experiencing violent conflict](#). The brunt of impact is felt by communities on the ground, who struggle to survive and protect themselves and their neighbours from these multifaceted, compounding threats.



*A dried up river bed in the al-Huwaiza Marshes south of Baghdad in September 2021.
Photo: Asaad Niazi/AFP/Getty Images*

Unarmed Civilian Protection as a tool for conflict and climate response

Amid these compounding crises, it is essential that civilian protection responses recognise and are responsive to the interconnected nature of climate and conflict threats, and centre local civilian leadership. This sensitivity must also include moving away from militarised, violent responses, which often exacerbate the very problems they seek to address and create carbon emissions at massive scale ([see here and here](#)). We need alternative pathways that are premised on the interconnections between people, security, and planet.

Unarmed Civilian Protection is one such pathway already being implemented in communities facing these interconnected threats. Contingent on nonviolence, civilian agency, and sensitivity to local needs and context, the methodology offers the flexibility and understanding of complexity required to respond to the challenges of compounded climate and conflict crises. Led by trained, unarmed civilians themselves, Unarmed Civilian Protection works to prevent and reduce violence, and strengthen local peace infrastructures. It seeks to protect and prevent violence in the immediate term, in a way that accounts for the long-term consequences of these responses – the same logic that is necessary to ensure a safe climate future. An Unarmed Civilian Protection lens is rooted in interconnection, relationships, and being responsive to local need – essential preconditions for protecting civilians amid the challenges of complex crises.

This work is already happening, led by communities currently facing the multiplied threats of climate and conflict crisis. In South Sudan, Women's Protection Teams trained in Unarmed Civilian Protection have been crucial to flood responses, directly advocating for the needs of vulnerable individuals in their communities and successfully advocating to Government [authorities for safe pathways to relocation](#). In Myanmar, during heavy monsoon seasons, existing relationships and peace infrastructures developed through Unarmed Civilian Protection enable Nonviolent Peaceforce staff and local communities to work quickly and decisively to adapt protection approaches and negotiate access to impacted communities. In Iraq, displaced communities are using Unarmed Civilian Protection practices to ameliorate community tensions caused by food insecurity and desertification. The flexibility with which Unarmed Civilian Protection teams move in conflict-affected spaces due to their relationships with all parties to a conflict also enables access to hard-to-reach areas in the midst of climate and conflict crisis.



NP staff provide protection during general food distribution in the 2021 flood season, Ganyiel, South Sudan
Photo: Nonviolent Peaceforce

In addition, Unarmed Civilian Protection practices have long been used to protect those who are seeking to protect the planet. Environmental defenders currently face unprecedented violent threats, with 227 individuals murdered as a result of defending land, natural resources, and the planet in 2020 – [the deadliest year on record](#). As the climate crisis worsens and communities mobilize against threats to their land and livelihoods, the protection needs of frontline communities and activists are escalating rapidly. Amid accelerating violence, one of the key protective approaches being implemented is Unarmed Civilian Protection, particularly methods of protective accompaniment and protective presence. Around the world civilians are using these methods to protect one another. In the words of Indigenous Guatemalan defender Omar Jeronimo, [UCP in Guatemala “saves lives”](#).

In the face of the impending threat of climate chaos and widespread violence against civilians, it is essential that Unarmed Civilian Protection is more widely available and accessible. Approaches to protection that fail to account for the deep interconnections between climate change and conflict crises are likely to be ineffective – or worse, likely to do harm to those they intend to assist.

Urgent actions:

The need to address the concerns outlined linked to conflict, climate, and the protection of civilians is urgent. To that end, we call for:

1. Civilian-led, nonviolent mechanisms to be at the forefront of protection responses in the face of climate and conflict crises;
2. Integrating the protection of civilians in responses to climate change, and prioritisation of the Do No Harm principle;
3. Greater financing of civilian protection mechanisms, such as Unarmed Civilian Protection, that prioritise integrated responses to the compounded threats of climate change and violent conflict;
4. Recognize the negative impact of militarised protection in accelerating climate change and exacerbating violent threats to civilians; and
5. Integrating environmentally ethical and climate change mitigating practices into protection of civilians policy, practice and programming, including in government, non-government, United Nations and other multilateral initiatives.



*Flooding in Aburoc, South Sudan
Photo: Nonviolent Peaceforce*