

Atrocity Prevention and Unarmed Civilian Protection

Introduction

Despite recognition of the responsibility to protect civilian populations from the threat of atrocity crimes – genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity, and ethnic cleansing – too many continue to suffer the consequences of these egregious harms. Historically, our understanding of what can be done to address atrocity crimes has been narrowly reduced to international intervention and the use of force, thus undermining the important role of civilians themselves as protection actors. As the [late Edward Luck, former UN Special Adviser for R2P](#), observed, our conventional understandings have “left no room for agency by those threatened by potential atrocity crimes. Vulnerable populations were treated as objects, not actors. Their fate was to wait for governments and intergovernmental institutions to act on their behalf.”

There remains an urgent need to invest in atrocity prevention. There must be a focus on tools that recognize and utilise local agency, and that are grounded and effective in local realities. The [American Bar Association](#) asserts that there is an urgent need for “further innovations in atrocity prevention research, tools, and implementation mechanisms”. Unarmed civilian protection (UCP) - a methodology and set of practices for the direct physical protection of civilians by trained, unarmed civilians before, during, and after violent conflict - is one such avenue of innovation. By drawing together prevention, direct protection, and peacebuilding, UCP offers an important contribution to the atrocity prevention toolkit.

Unarmed Civilian Protection as a tool for preventing atrocity crimes

UCP has an important role to play in preventing atrocity crimes, both in directly responding to threats of atrocity crimes and supporting those most at risk with practices to protect themselves and their communities. Local communities have been doing this work, in the form of self-protection, [long before the terminology of ‘UCP’ or ‘local peacebuilding’ existed](#). UCP is a framework through which this work can be supported, and first and foremost relies on context specificity and local leadership.



NP meeting with community members, Myanmar, 2019
Photo: Nonviolent Peaceforce

Those at risk of atrocity crimes are agents of protection themselves and have a role to play in identifying their own needs and leading impactful responses. UCP is designed to be civilian-led and to affirm the power of civilians to lead efforts to address the risks to safety and security they face. Using their deep knowledge of local context and local relationships, civilians work to strengthen early warning/early response (EWER) mechanisms to prevent violence, and develop strategies for direct protection, de-escalation, and mediation when faced with violent threats. Centering those most impacted and investing in existing protective capacities has several potential benefits, including sharper contextual understanding and the potential to be more efficient in responding to on-the-ground realities and needs. The atrocity prevention toolkit has to account for and reflect the experiences of those most affected by, and most often first responders to, atrocity crimes – communities themselves.

What does this look like in practice? UCP teams, and local communities with whom they work alongside, have demonstrated the effectiveness of UCP in the face of atrocity crime risks. UCP teams have worked across a number of settings to prevent and de-escalate violence in high atrocity risk settings. [In South Sudan](#), where rape and other forms of sexual and gender-based violence have been widespread through the course of the civil war, [communities have mobilised](#) to protect those most at risk of being targeted using protective accompaniment, protective presence, and mediation with authorities. Other examples include mediation related to [cattle raiding](#) and intercommunal violence which are [associated with atrocity crime risk](#).

Unarmed civilian protection has also been used in situations of direct protection from atrocity crimes. When prevention (always the preferred primary strategy) has failed, interventions by both international, local, and mixed teams have demonstrated that this can be an effective means of responding to and de-escalating atrocity crimes. In Ukraine, community-based groups have been instrumental to evacuating civilians from areas under the threat of atrocity crimes. [These locally coordinated efforts, often including volunteer collectives](#), respond in conflict-affected sites that most other actors cannot access, and with a speed and agility that most other actors cannot match.

In [South Sudan](#), Myanmar, and [Mindanao](#) (the Philippines), teams have directly intervened in the midst of active targeting to accompany and protect civilians. As reflected by a staff member in the Philippines in the wake of the Marawi siege in which civilians were fleeing the city to avoid crossfire: “We accompanied a family of Muslims along with non-Muslims until they arrived safely



*NP Protection Officer at briefing ahead of evacuations on the Peace Corridor, Marawi, Philippines 2017
Photo: Nonviolent Peaceforce*

in the nearby Iligan City. We cannot explain our feelings when we saw the non-Muslims yelling at the same time raising their hands, saying “WE ARE ALIVE! WE ARE ALIVE!».”

Community-based unarmed civilian protection mechanisms often operate with vastly inadequate resources and those leading efforts frequently live in precarious personal situations of displacement and poverty. Despite these conditions, a [growing body of evidence demonstrates the impact of the work of community-based UCP mechanisms](#). This highlights the need for more legitimacy and resourcing for these efforts to be sustained and scaled up.

Urgent actions:

The need is urgent to address the outlined concerns related to atrocity crimes and the protection of civilians. To that end, we call for:

1. Recognition of the importance of nonviolent self-protection strategies in the pursuit of atrocity prevention and protection, as demonstrated through Unarmed Civilian Protection, in international policy frameworks and among operational entities involved in peacekeeping, peacebuilding, and humanitarian efforts;
2. Integration of unarmed, civilian-led approaches in international policy and within operational entities involved in peacekeeping, peacebuilding, and humanitarian efforts;
3. Investment in flexible, innovative, and quickly responsive financing structures that enable Unarmed Civilian Protection organisations, particularly those operating at a local level, to prevent and respond to atrocity risks quickly and effectively;
4. Scaling up investment in violence prevention and peacebuilding, including through Unarmed Civilian Protection mechanisms – the best way to stop mass atrocities is to prevent and interrupt violent conflict before it escalates and establish conducive environments in which to build peace.



Women Protection Team in South Sudan plans for the future, 2020
Photo: Nonviolent Peaceforce