

***Strengthening Protection of Civilians through Community-led Approaches***  
***Opening remarks***

*Felicity Gray*

Your Excellencies, distinguished guests, dear colleagues and friends. Good morning. I am so grateful for the opportunity today to together consider and spotlight the important work of civilians around the world in protecting themselves, their families, their neighbours from violence.

As the many testimonies we have heard this week highlight, civilians around the world are enduring intense violence and suffering. Whether direct injury or death, torture, sexual violence, the loss of loved ones, or the compounding effects of attacks on critical infrastructure, the challenges that civilians face are urgent and critical.

In the face of these harms, there is much that needs to be done to protect civilians. Front of mind are often key mechanisms like state policies and actions for the safety of civilian populations, the enactment of international humanitarian law, or the work of UN peacekeeping missions.

Traditionally, the Protection of Civilians is often understood as something that is codified in a law or a mandate, provided to civilians by states or third-party organisations like the UN. Particularly in terms of direct protection of civilians, conventional definitions in emergency conflict settings assign the direct protection of civilians from violence to actors such as armed peacekeepers, the police or military, and more holistic general protection tasks such as mediation and dialogue, legal protection, or peacebuilding to humanitarians.

This 'official story' that frames protection in international policy forums unfortunately overlooks the ways that civilians protect themselves and one another. When we re-centre civilians in how we understand protection, we re-orient where agency and power is found. We start to disrupt some of the power asymmetries that often characterise protection initiatives, where 'protection actors' are separate to communities and wield power-over, rather than power-with. A different picture of protection of civilians begins to emerge, enabling us to reconsider institutional constraints and conventional boundaries.

The examples of civilians working to protect themselves and their communities span a range of violent conflict settings, geographies, and phases of conflict. As you will hear today, women in South Sudan are organising within internal displacement camps using unarmed and nonviolent tactics to

prevent and interrupt sexual and gender-based violence and intercommunal violence. Last year, as NP's Director in Ukraine, one of the first protection actions I witnessed was local women's networks across the country mobilising in a protective chain to evacuate women and children from frontline areas in the East. As international institutions and organisations scrambled, local organisations worked to fill the emerging and urgent protection gap. They continue to do so, meeting the needs of their communities in the hardest hit areas, at major risk to themselves, often unassisted by international or third-party actors. The same thing is now happening across places like Sudan and Myanmar, with civilian-led groups working to negotiate local ceasefires and to protect one another amid ongoing violence. Here in New York City, communities are mobilising using unarmed civilian protection methods to protect themselves against hate crimes and gun violence. The examples of community-based protection by and for civilians are many, and we all need to be paying attention.

Today is an opportunity to listen and to discuss; to hear from communities themselves, and those working to support their efforts. To orient our priorities to ensure our policies and our practices strengthen, rather than undermine or disrupt, the work that is already and always happening by communities themselves. I hope this session will shed light on the strengths and limits of these approaches in different contexts. When it comes to risk, what are we asking of communities, and what does ethical partnership for protection look like? From prevention to peacekeeping to transition, how can different actors collaborate to create safer spaces for civilians? The UN can play a pivotal role exploring these questions by promoting the principles and practices of civilian-led, unarmed approaches through its operational work.

To meet growing and urgent protection needs around the world means understanding what different actors can offer. There are no perfect tools or panaceas in protection. But when we start with community-based approaches, and when we can be clear-eyed about current power disparities that shape our protection policies and systems, we have an opportunity to recraft the protection of civilians ways that centre the experiences and agency of those most affected by, and most often first responders to, violent conflict – communities themselves.

To do that, it is my pleasure to hand the stage to Hanna Mahmoud Pachol, a women's community protection leader in Juba IDP camp, and my colleague Sunday Stephen, who will be translating her contribution. Hannan and Sunday, over to you.