

Strengthening Protection of Civilians through Community-led Approaches

Community engagement with armed actors: strengthening protection, prevention and response

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Good morning, afternoon, evening. It's an honour to be here today and be part of such an important discussion.

We've heard examples from colleagues of their experiences in Ukraine, Sudan and South Sudan of how civilians seek to proactively protect themselves in conflict and develop strategies for self-protection, including through engaging with armed actors for example to negotiate safe passage; or mediate efforts to reduce or respond to threats of violence – and we know civilians can and do seek to protect themselves from situations of violence and conflict globally. We need to acknowledge that when civilians seek to protect themselves, they often do so significantly before any internationally supported processes –and will continue to do so long after international actors depart

However, unarmed civilian self-protection strategies are often unsupported, ignored or disrupted by international actors – missing critical opportunities for more aligned and targeted approaches to strengthen the protection of civilians.

Where there is some recognition of civilian self-protection strategies often there are obstacles to a wider shift to supporting such approaches. This includes the persistence of top-down, internationally devised approaches – from mandated PoC actors, member states – to peacebuilding, humanitarian and protection actors – which too often ignore or overlook the agency of civilians in their efforts to protect themselves as well as local dynamics; while at times there are tensions between international principles and frameworks that international actors base interventions on with local customary norms, traditions and religious values that are often more important to civilian communities, but can be perceived not to align with international frameworks.

But evidence shows that some of the most profound progress in protecting civilians can take place at the local level – including through dialogue, mediation and negotiation - and where external actors work with and build on unarmed civilians approaches to self-protection.

Civilians are often best placed to devise strategies to protect themselves, their families and communities due to their lived experience of conflict, their proximity to armed actors and understanding of conflict dynamics. But we also recognise that civilian self-protection strategies alone rarely provide the level of protection communities need

There are opportunities to enhance the effectiveness of these strategies when external actors base their activities on an adequate understanding of the complex, dynamic relationships between communities and armed actors; in order to inform how external actors support, engage or step back in order to maximise the potential for such interactions to reduce civilian harm.

Importantly, it requires listening to communities. Too often, international actors can think they have the solutions, which are often not based on what communities want, need or ask of us.

If international responses to conflict are wrong, they will fuel conflict, increase the threats civilians face, and undermine their ability to effectively protect themselves. As an international community, we must acknowledge that our presence automatically affects conflict dynamics. It is critical for international actors to take proactive steps not to disrupt or undermine civilian self-protection strategies or put civilians at greater risk.

This requires constant dialogue with members of communities, and a clear understanding of local conflict dynamics and changes in conflict dynamics at all stages of international actors' presence – and exit – from situations of conflict

It requires localised analysis of the most effective approaches to reduce or mitigate violence - recognising that the use of force or violence often fuels, rather than prevents violence; while locally grounded dialogue, mediation and negotiation can have powerful outcomes

Finally, we should acknowledge that no one actor or set of actors can strengthen the protection of civilians alone. Complementary efforts and mutually reinforcing approaches across actors from a range of expertise are critical to reducing the risks that civilians face in conflict.

Opportunities for greater synergies between political, peace, humanitarian and protection actors in relation to community self-protection can and should be explored – noting that different sets of actors are often working towards the same ends, albeit under different framings, using different means and approaches; while obstacles to greater complementarity should be more proactively addressed.

Critically, the needs of communities, and their agency in shaping their engagement with armed actors, must be central to decisions about if, how, and when international actors support engagement.

Thank you for the opportunity to be part of such an important discussion.