

Localising Protection? Community-based strategies and leadership in the protection of civilians

Introduction

When violent conflict emerges, it is most often communities themselves who are the first responders to protection needs on the ground. Despite this, protection and humanitarian action are often envisioned as things that are provided externally – and the allocation of resources for these efforts reflects this assumption. In [Ukraine](#), for example, the vast majority of resources dedicated for the humanitarian response are held and implemented by international institutions – despite the vast [majority of frontline action for those most in need being carried out by local organisations, volunteers, and communities](#).

This imbalance has continued despite stated commitments to ‘[localisation](#)’ - prioritising recognition, funding, and support of local and national responders. A commitment to 25 % of humanitarian funding being directed to local actors by 2020 was included as part of the [Grand Bargain](#), an agreement between some of the largest donors and humanitarian organisations. [USAID followed up on this commitment](#) in November 2021, pledging to direct a quarter of its funding directly to local partners by Fiscal Year (FY) 2025, and create space for local actors to exercise leadership over priority setting, activity design, implementation, and defining and measuring results in at least half of USAID programs by 2030. Realising these goals is proving a challenge: in 2020, [just 0.5 %](#) of tracked humanitarian funding went directly to local and national NGOs. Beyond financial commitments, real changes that shift power over strategy, design, and implementation of aid programming to local communities and civil society have not materialised. Superficial engagement with local actors often leaves power imbalances that stem from structural racism, ableism, and other forms of oppression unacknowledged.

Unarmed Civilian Protection as a tool for localisation

As a field of practice, Unarmed Civilian Protection (UCP) offers a pathway to more seriously



NP training with community members, Myanmar, 2016
Photo: Nonviolent Peaceforce

engaging with local communities as leaders in their own protection and action. This is less about localisation or ‘trickle-down’ of protection, but rather recognising the protection capacities and skillsets that are already in place and being enacted by communities themselves – with or without international humanitarian actors. UCP refers to the direct physical protection of civilians by unarmed, trained civilians – many of whom are themselves members of communities under threat. Without the use of force, this kind of protection work is contingent on relationships and is ineffective without these connections and centring local context. Safety is not something that is provided by an external actor, but a collective endeavour that centres the work communities are already and always doing to keep themselves safe.

In this sense, UCP offers a unique lens for prioritising the local work of communities and identifying how international funders (including donor states and sub-granting humanitarian organisations) can better understand, strengthen, and fund this work.

“The reason we formed ourselves as Women’s Protection Teams is because we have seen the protection gap in our community when we arrived at the POC in early 2014. So we formed community-based protection teams which are community driven initiatives, for the sake of sustainable peace in the POC [Protection of Civilians camp]”

Mary, a Women’s Protection Team leader in Bentiu, Unity State, South Sudan

UCP and localisation in action

What the localisation of protection looks like in practice depends on the conflict context and the needs and leadership of civilians themselves. For example:

- In South Sudan, NP trains and works alongside over 83 community-based protection teams, including Women’s Protection Teams, Youth Protection Teams, and Gender Champions Teams, made up of ~2,500 members of communities who implement their own protection initiatives. The teams [work in their communities to protect](#) directly through patrols and accompaniments, prevention of and support for survivors of violence including [SGBV](#), inter-personal and inter-community conflict mediation, and early warning planning for potential outbreaks of violence.
- In Ukraine, NP works with local organisations working on the frontlines so they can do their work more safely. Often, local frontline responders – including essential groups like Ukrainian Red Cross – do not have access to the physical security resources (such as Personal Protective Equipment like flak jackets or helmets) or technical safety support for missions. [NP works with local groups to provide these supports so they can continue their lifesaving work.](#)
- Between 2013 to 2018, teams in [Myanmar](#) trained and worked alongside more than 700 community members from 8 different states in ceasefire monitoring and unarmed civilian protection and supported them in establishing their own networks. These networks continue to work on community safety today, working to protect their communities despite a highly restrictive humanitarian access environment.

Recommendations for localising protection

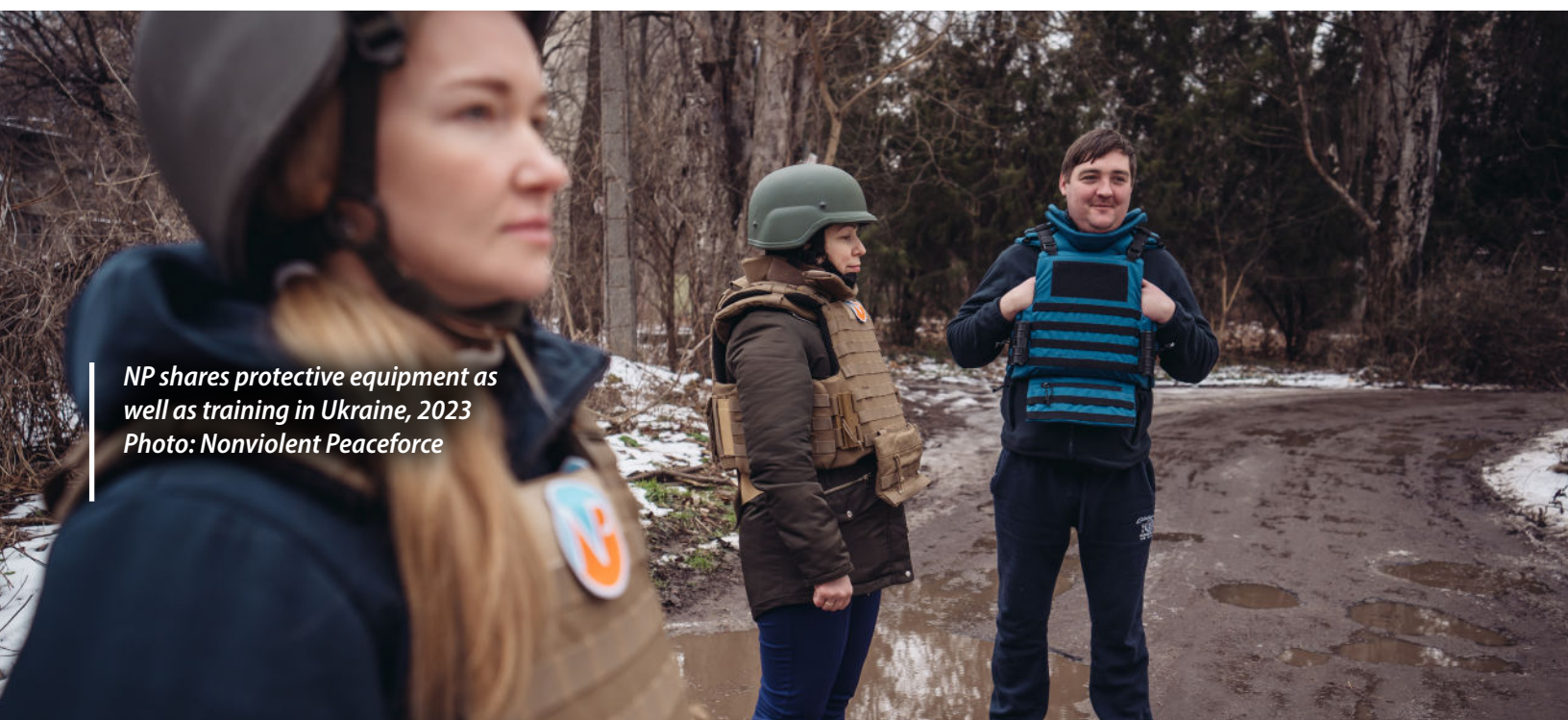
Through the Grand Bargain and [other initiatives](#), stakeholders in the humanitarian sector – local and national civil society, donors, international organisations, policymakers – have recognised the need to localise funding, strategy, and implementation of emergency responses. The practical steps to get there have remained more challenging. Using approaches that embed inclusion and participation of local actors in their structure and operation from the outset, such as UCP, prioritises local actors from the outset. A much deeper question than funding local actors at much higher rates and improving organisational frameworks alone (though these are critical and discussed at length by Charter for Change [here](#)), what actions can be taken by humanitarian organisations and donors to operationalise meaningful localisation of protection?

1. Prioritise relationships

Without genuine relationships with local communities and stakeholders, programming fails and there is restricted scope for the expertise of communities themselves to inform protection strategy and action. Relationships with those impacted by violence should be the starting point for any potential protection intervention and shape design from the outset. Without this community consent, protection interventions are much more likely to be undermined or fail – [as recent protests against UN peacekeeping missions demonstrate](#). Despite slow progress in the broader humanitarian bureaucracy, this kind of relational work can occur immediately, without waiting for changes to funding mechanisms or reporting structures in the larger system.

2. Create spaces for local leadership and action

Local leadership and action should be central tenets of any intervention. This goes beyond local ‘participation’ or ‘engagement’ to local leadership and action, where communities and civil society have opportunities to design, lead, implement and evaluate protection interventions themselves. Local partner organisations need to be involved in the design of projects, so they are able to



*NP shares protective equipment as well as training in Ukraine, 2023
Photo: Nonviolent Peaceforce*

articulate their needs and goals from the outset, and have the resources they need to accomplish quality programming. Different communities will want and need different levels of support for this work at different times, and close relationships enable full and frank discussion about what effective support for locally-driven initiatives looks like in different contexts.

3. Get serious about risk and responsible partnerships

[As NP Ukraine has analysed at length](#), partnerships with local organisations for protection are often pursued and implemented without a holistic commitment to the safety and well-being of local partners, both physically and psychologically. Partnerships that localise funding without considering the risk burdens shouldered by local actors, and providing strategies to share and manage that risk, are fundamentally unethical, and donor states and grant-making organisations need to have clear strategies in place to ensure duty of care for local partners is upheld.

4. Have an exit strategy

Local communities live the consequences of protection and other humanitarian interventions long after third-party actors have departed. For INGOs and other third-party actors, having an exit strategy that ensures the continuation of safety and protection in their absence is essential to sustainable and ongoing protection work within communities. This means that seeds of longer-term sustainability must be inherent even in third party interventions, with meaningful roles for communities to shape both immediate protection realities and future sustainable peace.



*Women Protection Teams from across South Sudan meet for a conference in Juba, 2022
Photo: Nonviolent Peaceforce*