



Civilian-Centred Approaches and POC in a Changing World: Moving from Policy to Practice

Monday, 19 May 2025 - 5-6.30 PM

Final report

Summary of the session

As part of the annual 2025 ***United Nations Protection of Civilians week***, which takes place around the annual UN Security Council Open Debate on the Protection of Civilians, a side event on ***‘Civilian-Centred Approaches and POC in a Changing World: Moving from Policy to Practice’*** was held at the Mission of the Kingdom of the Netherlands. The event was co-organised by Nonviolent Peaceforce, CIVIC, PAX, Creating Safer Space, HPG/ODI, UNHCR, the Permanent Observer Mission of the African Union to the UN and the Permanent Missions of the Netherlands, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Panama and Austria.

The presentations and reflections shared during the event underscored the growing urgency (and potential) of civilian-centred approaches to protection in today’s evolving conflict contexts. In light of shrinking humanitarian space, overstretched multilateral operations and the withdrawal of key international actors from high-risk areas, panellists and participants highlighted how civilians themselves are not only responding to immediate threats but also shaping the longer-term architecture of protection. The discussion explored how UN peace operations, regional organisations and Member States can more meaningfully partner with civil society actors who are actively building early warning systems, engaging with armed actors and influencing protection policies. Drawing on diverse experiences from Yemen, DRC and Iraq, the conversation moved beyond policy recognition of the need to protect towards considering what concrete shifts – financial, political and structural – are needed to embed community-led protection in operational practice.

Dr. Djeyhoun Ostowar, Deputy Head of the Political Affairs Section at the Permanent Mission of the Kingdom of the Netherlands opened the discussion by reflecting on the widespread – but often unexamined – assumption that protection responses are inherently civilian-centred. He cautioned that in practice, this is frequently not the case and that such disconnects can undermine the effectiveness and legitimacy of protection efforts. Dr. Ostowar underscored that we are operating in a rapidly changing global context, one marked by escalating threats and emerging risks that demand bold, community-informed approaches. He urged a rethinking of international roles – not to dictate, but to engage more deliberately with civilians and local partnerships. He urged participants to see civilians as *architects*, rather than objects of protection. Reaffirming the Netherlands’ commitment to people-centred protection, he expressed hope that the event would inspire the international community to better centre civilians in protection efforts and embed local agency into practice.

Tiffany Easthom, Executive Director, Nonviolent Peaceforce and moderator of the session, framed the panel by challenging the audience to reconsider what is meant by “civilian” in protection discourse, reminding us that it includes us all. She clarified that community-led approaches are not about bypassing the state’s responsibility but about addressing the very real and persistent gaps where formal protection mechanisms are absent or failing. She noted that the organisations represented on the panel work directly with civil society actors, community leaders and unarmed civilians navigating violence on the ground. Ms. Easthom invited participants to explore what protection looks like in contexts where peace operations are absent or in transition and how communities themselves are leading the charge. Setting a tone of collective learning for the session, she introduced the Mentimeter tool as a way to gather diverse perspectives in the room and online (see below) and stressed that this conversation would benefit from everyone’s insights and perspectives.

Douce Namwezi N’Ibamba, Head of Mission for Nonviolent Peaceforce in the DRC, shared a sobering picture of escalating insecurity in eastern DRC, particularly in Kalehe and Bukavu, less publicly scrutinized than Goma, but where the formal protection architecture has equally largely collapsed. With MONUSCO’s withdrawal and the army’s retreat from strategic positions, civilians are navigating profound threats in near-total institutional absence. Ms. Namwezi described how local communities are filling the vacuum through inventive, organic strategies of protection; adapting prayer groups into early warning networks, youth football gatherings into information hubs and informal trade collectives into mechanisms for safe economic activity. These community-based responses are deeply embedded in local knowledge, relationships and trust. She emphasised that such forms of engagement, including pragmatic interactions with de facto authorities and armed actors, are not theoretical; they are survival strategies already in play. Ms. Namwezi challenged the policy world to acknowledge these difficult trade-offs rather than ignoring or ‘sanitising’ them. In moving from policy to practice, she argued, we must grapple with the complexities civilians are already navigating and find ways to support – not supplant – their own protection strategies.

Dina El Mamoun, Country Director for CIVIC’s Yemen program, reflected on the imperative for a layered, integrated approach to civilian protection; one that works top-down, bottom-up and laterally across stakeholders. She emphasised that sustainable protection requires equipping security forces with the necessary awareness, skills and operational frameworks to prioritise civilian safety, while also enabling communities and civil society organisations to advocate effectively for their own protection. Crucially, she stressed the need to build sustained channels of communication between military actors and communities, allowing for trust-building and reciprocal accountability. In the Yemeni context, such a model serves not only protective aims but also supports local peacebuilding, conflict mitigation and the long-term viability of community security solutions. Ms. El Mamoun underscored that localisation and sustainability must remain at the core of all protection interventions; otherwise, the cycle of dependency and fragility continues.

Saba Azeem, Project Lead for PAX’s Protection of Civilians program in Iraq, brought a post-conflict lens to the discussion, warning that the risks of relapse into conflict remain acute during transitional phases like in the case of Iraq. She therefore argued for responsible, participatory transition planning by peacekeeping and special political missions, underlining the importance of soliciting and acting upon civilian input at every stage. Ms. Azeem stressed that effective communication is critical and that protection actors must engage transparently with civil society to prevent uncertainty and build trust. Drawing on PAX’s experience in Iraq, she highlighted the co-development of the country’s first national Protection of Civilians policy. Civilian voices informed not only the content but also the implementation process, including a ‘dual-track structure’ that distinguishes between periods of active conflict and peace. She noted that this contextual sensitivity ensures that civilians remain protected regardless of the official status of the conflict.

Synthesizing the discussion, **Nerve Macaspac, Assistant Professor/CUNY and researcher with the Creating Safer Space (CSS) Network**, shared reflections from over a decade of collaborative research with 26 project teams across eleven countries. He noted that while “protection of civilians” is a frequent topic in global forums, those most directly engaged in self-protection are often excluded from the conversation. Dr. Macaspac highlighted the consistent thread across diverse contexts: civilians are already leading protection work within their communities, using creative and effective strategies grounded in trust, legitimacy and local knowledge. He therefore urged a reconceptualisation of what counts as “protection work”, recognising its multifaceted nature and the value of flexibility, community-specific tools and ongoing engagement with CSOs. His concluding point was clear: community-led POC is not a complement to existing frameworks; it should be the standard, precisely because it works, and because it is already happening.

In opening the floor to a wider discussion among participants, **Bolívar Jack Barrios La Fontaine, First Secretary at the Permanent Mission of Panama** and speaking on behalf of H.E Ricardo Moscoso, Deputy Permanent Representative of Panama, opened the broader discussion with a strong call to urgency, acknowledging the staggering harm civilians – particularly women, children and persons with disabilities – are enduring in conflict settings globally. He underscored the fragmentation, delays, and reactivity that often characterize international responses. To counter this, he proposed five concrete areas of action: (1) a renewed, collective commitment to IHL as a binding legal and moral imperative – not a mere ‘option’; (2) strengthening accountability and justice mechanisms, including reaffirmed support for the ICC and ICJ, as deterrents to impunity; (3) safeguarding humanitarian access to ensure medical and relief personnel can operate safely and effectively; (4) protecting essential civilian infrastructure, noting that attacks on schools, hospitals and other utilities have become systematic and devastating tactics of war; and (5) prioritising the needs of the most vulnerable through locally adapted, not one-size-fits-all, protection strategies. Mr. La Fontaine closed by urging all present to raise their voices on behalf of those caught in the crossfire, a way to stress the moral weight of inaction.

Julien Richard, Spokesperson and Advisor at the Permanent Mission of Austria, echoed the need for more than rhetorical commitment from UN Member States to people-centred approaches to POC, stating that it is time to “walk the talk” on delivering protection for civilians on the ground. Referencing ongoing debates on peace operations and peacebuilding reforms, he emphasised that these conversations must be shaped by those directly affected by violence and expressed appreciation for the inclusion of voices not present in New York. Mr. Richard posed a critical question for Member States: how can we institutionalise relationships with locally embedded international NGOs, not merely as implementers but as equal partners with comparative advantage? He thus advocated for moving beyond token inclusion to genuine structural space for civil society leadership in New York’s POC discussions, bringing the local to the international in a sustained, systemic way.

Blanche Tax, Senior Policy Advisor at UNHCR, welcomed the event’s focus on practical, grounded examples often missing from high-level policy conversations. Ms. Tax challenged the common assumption that “community” represents a single, unified voice, noting that civilians hold diverse perspectives, needs and views on who speaks for them. In particular, she raised concerns around how displaced populations, including refugees, are integrated into community-led protection frameworks, especially when their relationships with host communities may be tense or hierarchical. Ms. Tax questioned how to improve the inclusivity of protection strategies and navigate the intricacies of intercommunal dynamics when supporting community-led approaches. Her reflections left the group with a key consideration: how to reconcile these plural interests into coherent, yet flexible, protection strategies that do not erase internal diversity in the name of ‘homogenous’ unity?

Serge Banza, First Secretary at the Permanent Mission of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, brought a personal and urgent perspective to the discussion, noting that “as this session unfolds, civilians in eastern DRC continue to die and be abused.” He described the limits and constraints faced

by MONUSCO in recent months as reflective of broader international challenges in responding to rapidly evolving ground realities. At the same time, he reaffirmed the continuing relevance of UN peace operations with robust protection mandates and called for increased resourcing and support. He stressed that there is a persistent need to recognise that the primary responsibility to protect civilians lies with states, but also that the international community has a vital role to play at the macro level. Importantly, he stressed that, despite and in parallel to these commitments, communities in the DRC are not passive recipients of protection – instead, they initiate and lead many efforts themselves. “We cannot be everywhere” he said, hence calling for smarter, stronger partnerships between peace operations and local civil society as a strategic necessity, not a luxury. Supporting local actors is not about delegation, he argued, but about scaling impact through meaningful collaboration.

Ambassador Fatima K. Mohammed, Permanent Observer of the African Union to the United Nations, closed the event with a forward-looking, systems-based reflection on the protection landscape. She reminded the audience that civilians continue to bear the brunt of armed conflict, while humanitarian operations are overstretched and funding is in sharp decline. From Sudan to Haiti, Gaza to eastern DRC, she observed that “these constraints must push us to be more creative in thinking about protection strategies.” Drawing on the AU’s experience, she offered four key takeaways: (1) move beyond policy rhetoric to tangible action that supports those with the primary responsibility to protect; (2) improve information-sharing mechanisms with CSOs beyond formal Security Council briefings to ensure local expertise informs decisions in real time; (3) expand the capacity of military actors to meaningfully engage with communities in line with AU and UN POC frameworks; and (4) adopt a more holistic view of protection. Ambassador Mohammed noted that facing protection needs when in a situation of armed conflict “is a lived experience” and hence must include co-implementation with local communities and endure even after external actors withdraw. She acknowledged that weak governance systems also hamper protection efforts but insisted that existing AU and UN POC policies offer strong foundations. She stressed that what is needed now is the political will to leverage these frameworks through community-centred leadership. “Support for effective protection should go beyond policy – it must be rooted in the experience, leadership and knowledge of communities themselves.”

Based on the above discussion, the following action-oriented recommendations are proposed:

- 1) **Systematise civilian and civil society participation in protection policymaking and operational practice.** Protection policies are only effective when co-developed with the communities they aim to serve. Member States, the UN, regional organisations and humanitarian actors should ensure that the design, implementation and review of both national and international POC strategies are informed by communities. This is in addition to ensuring that multilateral bodies, like the Security Council, proactively solicit and prioritise real-time insights from those in conflict-affected areas.
- 2) **Strengthen structured dialogue between civilian communities and security actors.** Ongoing, local-level dialogue between communities, civil society and security actors is essential to building trust and improving coordination, especially in fragile or transitional settings. Member States and UN missions should support these platforms and invest in dual-capacity building: helping communities advocate for their protection needs and monitor security actor performance and ensuring security actors are trained in civilian protection principles, IHL and gender-sensitive practices.
- 3) **Ensure flexible, accessible funding for community-led protection efforts.** Donors and Member States should earmark funding, via assessed or voluntary UN contributions or bilaterally, for direct support to unarmed local protection communities and trusted civil society organisations, especially in areas experiencing peace operation drawdowns or humanitarian gaps. This funding must be flexible, rapid and tailored to grassroots realities. This means avoiding cumbersome requirements that can effectively exclude smaller organisations. More than ever, supporting community-led initiatives is both a

moral imperative and a strategic investment for more sustainable and adaptive protection responses.

Mentimeter results

To help foster an interactive discussion and engage participants throughout the session, we used Mentimeter to gather real-time input on some of the key discussion points. This tool allowed us to gauge attendees' thinking on several core themes, surface diverse perspectives and invite reflection beyond the formal panel remarks. While there was not time to fully unpack the responses during the event, we offer a brief overview of the audience's input in the following section, with the hope that these insights may spark further reflection or prompt new questions to carry the conversation forward.

What does civilian protection mean to you?

When asked "What does civilian protection mean to you?" participants offered a wide range of reflections that together painted a holistic vision of what civilian protection entails. Protection was consistently described as more than just physical safety – it was about human security, dignity, agency and the ability to live without fear. Many responses highlighted the importance of connection and community, with protection seen as something people create together, not just something delivered from outside. Others pointed to legal frameworks and accountability as essential pillars, underscoring that rights-based protection requires enforcement and institutional responsibility. Several mentioned unarmed and preventative approaches, showing a shared understanding that effective protection must be proactive, people-centred and rooted in both solidarity and structural flexibility.

Why do civilian voices matter in civilian protection?

When asked "Why do civilian voices matter in civilian protection?" responses across the room and online were resoundingly clear: because civilians are not only the most affected by the harms caused by armed conflict, but also the most informed about the protection risks and needs that exist in that environment. Participants consistently emphasised that communities hold vital, context-specific knowledge and are best positioned to articulate their own needs, risks and priorities. Many underscored that sustainable, effective and accountable protection responses are only possible when those who live the realities of conflict are meaningfully included in shaping the strategies that affect them. There was a strong call to move beyond tokenism, phrased powerfully by one respondent as "anything for civilians without civilians is against civilians" and instead recognise civilians as architects of their own protection. Across the board, participants framed participation not as a procedural step but instead as a right, a necessity and a cornerstone for more legitimate and grounded protection efforts.

What approaches would you like to see in action?

Though time was short and fewer responses were captured on the question of "What approaches would you like to see in action?", a couple of thought-provoking reflections emerged. One participant highlighted a desire for more "proof of concept" examples where civilian groups have successfully assumed protection roles following peacekeeping drawdowns, pointing to an ongoing need for visible, evidence-based models of civilian-led protection. Another raised the strategic question of how post-conflict countries like Iraq can be supported to become vocal champions of protection, both within their own contexts and in multilateral arenas like the UN.

Listening to these examples, what ideas, opportunities, concerns or questions are raised for you?

Finally, a rich set of questions from participants highlighted the appetite for deeper dialogue on the complexity of moving from policy to practice in protection work. Many were interested in how locally-led protection initiatives can be better supported, scaled and connected to formal peacekeeping and UN efforts, and how international actors can adapt to truly elevate civilian agency. Others raised concerns around accountability, legal frameworks and the ability of civilians to carry protection burdens in the face of state or institutional failure. Crosscutting themes also emerged, including how to integrate broader priorities like climate, WPS and LGBTQ+ rights into protection strategies amidst shrinking resources and under political pressure, and how to navigate tensions between the principle that states hold the primary protection responsibility and the reality of civilians protecting themselves in the absence of effective and inclusive security (a very recurring theme in conversations on civilian-centred approaches to POC). Finally, several participants questioned the very definition of protection: is it only about shielding civilians from harm or also about interrupting cycles of violence and building safe, empowered environments over the long term? These reflections point to a clear need for continued exploration and peer exchange across different fields and sectors and we hope this conversation continues, both during and beyond POC week.