

## **Local Mechanisms of Protection: A Joint Policy Dialogue with Nonviolent Peaceforce and the Baha'i International Community (BIC)**

*Event Report*

*May 2026*

### **Purpose**

On 23 April 2026, Nonviolent Peaceforce and the Baha'i International Community's Addis Ababa Office brought together practitioners, researchers, and advocates to discuss the effectiveness of local protection mechanisms and the urgency of integrating them with formal institutions. This dialogue was spurred by the recognition that current protection arrangements are no longer sufficient to meet the challenges of increasingly interconnected threats. The dialogue sought to understand current local protection mechanisms, identify benchmarks for measuring progress that view protection as a collective capacity, and consider how to deepen coherence between formal institutions and local actors.

Drawing on field experience from the DRC and Sudan, practitioners highlighted how communities already engage in local protection mechanisms to navigate insecurity and assert their own safety. The discussion converged on a core agreement: community protection mechanisms, though often invisible to external actors and undervalued in policy frameworks and formal protection architectures, must become integral components of a more effective system.

The dialogue envisioned an integrated protection system where regional and local efforts act in concert, supported by a knowledge-sharing framework that draws on grassroots realities to refine formal architectures. This approach is supported by practitioners' observations of community resilience, collective agency, and the community as a primary protagonist in their own safety on the ground. This discussion illuminated the urgent need to institutionalize grassroots voices within regional mechanisms and deepen collaboration to fully support the crucial work of local community actors.

### **1. Local Protection Mechanisms as a Foundation**

Across conflict areas, practitioners report that communities step in to fill "protection gaps" left by the absence of state and international institutions. Rather than remaining passive objects of protection, local actors ensure their own security through mutual support organizations and community networks.

In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, community health cooperatives and Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLAs) allow families to withstand looting or forced displacement without systemic collapse. Communities have also established early-warning communication networks—often via radio or mobile devices—to monitor armed group movements. This ability to anticipate danger reduces shock and facilitates an organized response. Furthermore, community resilience is demonstrated by the capacity of civil society to reintegrate youth exiting armed groups, preventing recidivism driven by social rejection.

In Sudan, community groups in El Fasher identified early warning indicators that the city would fall. They created mass relocation corridors and provided "protective presence" to accompany people, reducing the risk of abduction and extortion. When international actors were unprepared, communities created mechanisms to absorb separated children, accompany victims of sexual violence to health facilities, and de-escalate ethnic tensions within IDP camps.

## **2. Enabling Post-Conflict Resilience**

Civilians, who bear the brunt of violent conflict, rightfully expect institutional support but are often let down. Practitioners report that, in the absence of formal assistance, communities demonstrate a high capacity for self-mobilization.

In the DRC's Kivu regions, for instance, women serve as pillars of resilience. They sustain local economies through small-scale cross-border trade and agriculture, even when traditional roles are disrupted. By collaborating with traditional chiefs and male family members, these women respond to immediate crises while shifting social norms toward long-term peace. For example, by involving local men in programs to combat sexual violence, they address a current crisis while simultaneously shifting social norms towards more lasting safety for women.

Real post-conflict resilience will require positioning communities' potential as the primary bridge between a crisis and the flow of external resources. In regions like Kalehe, where communities have become entirely dependent on aid, there is an increasing push for more durable solutions. Speakers stressed that recovering conflict requires recognizing that communities are capable of developing their own solutions. Throughout the discussion, they underscored the need to prioritize strategies that "start the engine," providing the initial spark for communities to drive their own recovery forward.

## **3. Bridging Local and Regional Systems**

Regional structures often engage with conflicts on the ground as mere data, which risks dehumanizing the people affected. This problem is confounded by the failure of many

fact-finding missions to reach affected communities and hear about their experiences, limiting the effectiveness of crisis response. To address this, robust knowledge-sharing systems should be implemented to facilitate communication between local, national, and regional levels. Additionally, reports presented to decision-making bodies should highlight the actions that communities take to protect themselves.

Practitioners in multiple conflict areas shared that local institutions strengthen community unity by initiating consultative spaces. Despite attempts at ethnic manipulation by armed groups, dialogue spaces allow leaders from diverse backgrounds to maintain cohesion, prevent misinformation, and facilitate vocational training of youth in sustainable agriculture and digital skills. Strengthening local and regional systems will not only alleviate current conflict but fortify the social fabric that sustains long-term peace.

#### **4. Protecting the Protectors: Establishing a Duty of Care**

A comprehensive duty of care must be established for frontline responders, including psychosocial support and basic health insurance. Local actors assume huge personal risks to maintain protection structures and often suffer from exhaustion, trauma, or multiple displacements. In Sudan, for example, women providing care to victims of sexual violence are often survivors of such violence themselves. To sustain this crucial work and avoid drawing from a "drained well," we must proactively address the needs of local protection actors.

#### **Key Recommendations**

- **Implement knowledge sharing systems** that integrate community-led evidence into national and regional policy platforms, ensuring grassroots voices are included in high-level spaces.
- **Establish concrete accountability mechanisms** to hold governments responsible for fostering local agency in peacebuilding.
- **Deepen networks between grassroots and institutional protection mechanisms**, reframing international organizations as support systems for local communities rather than bestowers of aid.
- **Ensure "care for the caregivers"** by developing frameworks to deliver health and psychosocial resources to local protection actors on the front lines.
- **Continue convening regular cross-sector dialogues** to maintain learning and collaboration.