

Event report
Centering civilian agency and community-led protection in an era of institutional constraints, austerity and impunity
20 May 2026

The event was convened by Nonviolent Peaceforce and the Permanent Mission of the Netherlands to the UN, in partnership with PAX, Center for Civilians in Conflict, Ceasefire Centre for Civilian Rights, the Humanitarian Policy Group, Airwars, the Global Protection Cluster, Geneva Call, the Permanent Missions of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, El Salvador, Panama and the Philippines to the UN, UNHCR and UNICEF.

Recommendations coming from the panelists and session participants:

1. Recognise civilians as protection agents, not just beneficiaries.
 - a. Integrate civilian-generated evidence (photos, videos, damage documentation) into formal harm mitigation and accountability frameworks, including UN Monitoring and Reporting Mechanisms and the work of UN Panels of Experts.
 - b. Support civilian harm monitoring capacity directly, including through partnerships with international organisations and ensure military-civilian dialogue processes such as those facilitated through civil-mil coordination mechanisms are structured, accessible, and do not impose additional risk on the communities they engage.
 - c. Don't underestimate the rehumanising function of this work. Civilian testimony and documentation are among the most powerful tools available for countering political apathy in donor and Security Council contexts.
2. Fund local protection actors as strategic partners, not subcontractors.
 - a. Member States should increase direct, multi-year, flexible funding to local civil society through mechanisms like the UN Peacebuilding Fund's gender-responsive windows or OCHA's Country-Based Pooled Funds, and push for local actors to access these without prohibitive administrative requirements.
 - b. UN agencies should move from consultation to co-leadership, meaning local actors sit at decision-making tables within Global Protection Cluster structures, not only as informants but as co-designers.
 - c. Humanitarian reform processes currently underway are an entry point but only if localisation is treated as a structural commitment.
3. Assess comparative advantage and act accordingly.
 - a. International presence is not always protective. The harder question i.e when to be present, when to step back, and what financial, political, or diplomatic solidarity might serve communities better, needs to be asked more consistently and more honestly. F
 - b. or Member States, comparative advantage often lies in political pressure and accountability i.e using Security Council platforms, supporting the ICC,

conditioning arms transfers, and keeping situations on the agenda when attention fades.

- c. For UN agencies, it means ensuring that OCHA's coordination function, UNHCR's protection mandate, and the Global Protection Cluster architecture actively create space for local leadership rather than crowding it out.
- d. The militarisation of humanitarian aid (visible most acutely in Gaza) is a warning sign of what happens when these roles collapse into each other. Staying distinct and staying honest about what each actor can and cannot do, is itself a protection commitment.

Overall, the discussion looked at locally-led unarmed civilian protection (UCP) approaches, how civilians and local organisations monitor, document, and advocate for community-level protection needs, and how this evidence can directly inform and strengthen civilian harm mitigation and response (CHMR) by armed actors, including by shaping how missions and military actors prevent, respond to, and account for direct and reverberating harm. Special attention will be paid to how gender shapes protection risks and strategies, including how violence affects women, men, boys, and girls differently, and the leadership roles these groups play in community protection.

Summary:

The Dutch Ambassador opened by noting that after two years of exploring why civilian-centred approaches to protection matter, we will now focus on the “what” and the “why” to the “how”. She reminded of the sobering state of civilian protection around the world and statistics highlighted in the SG's PoC report which recorded approximately one civilian killed every 14 minutes in 2025. She highlighted that in a week where most events tend toward the top-down and state-centric, and expressed genuine appreciation for an event that sought to cut through that register and centre the voices of those most directly affected by conflict.

The moderator built on that framing by naming the “elephant in the room” - that the very people this event sought to centre those doing the daily, often invisible work of keeping their communities safe, were not in the room. That absence was not glossed over but held up as a reflection of something structural about who gets included in humanitarian conversations, and why that has to change.

Two things were made clear from the outset. 1) that centring community-led protection is not about relieving states of their legal responsibility to protect civilians. That responsibility is absolute. What the session was concerned with is what happens in the gaps, in the many contexts where that responsibility is not being met and where communities are already responding with their own knowledge and strategies, often at considerable personal risk. 2) at the same time, people know what they need to stay safe. The question it kept returning to was how external actors, humanitarian and diplomatic alike, can become more genuinely attentive to those efforts, and what would have

to change for that to happen. From that grounding, the session moved into testimony from civilians joining remotely from active conflict settings, before turning to what external protection actors in the room owe in response, and closing with open reflection.

Featured local community members on the panel:

Alawiya Abdallah Heron, Member, Women's Protection Team, Tawila, North Darfur, Sudan

- gave a firsthand account of fleeing violence in Darfur in April 2025. a three-day journey on foot, without food or water, predominantly undertaken by women, for many widows, responsible for children and the elderly. She described how communities self-organized: digging trenches, reuniting separated children, forming groups to care for orphans, and returning to warn others still behind. She emphasized that pre-war training in unarmed civilian protection which covered a wide array of collective protection tools such as rumor control, GBV, child protection, and conflict resolution, was critical to the decisions communities were able to make. Even after displacement, communities convened security forums to address new threats and support GBV survivors.

James Gatbany Akiop, Member, Community Security Committee, Payinjiar, Southern Unity State, South Sudan (PAX program),

- spoke to PAX's work in the town of Payinjiar, in South Sudan's Unity State, where Community Security Committees (COMSCOMs) comprising youth, women, chiefs, and IDPs implement locally developed security strategies. They mediated and resolve conflict, promote early warning, early response and information-sharing. He described how communities, when given inclusive space to work, resolve disputes independently (including cattle raids) and reduce reliance on external actors. This is particularly important for early warning and conflict prevention where, as James has outlined, local community members are best placed to detect context-specific indicators that may be far from evident to external actors.

At this point in the session, we had some technical issues. A pre-recorded video had been prepared as a backup for Marwan Al-Sharey, but it proved incompatible with simultaneous interpretation and could not be used. We were therefore only able to hear part of Marwan Al-Sharey's remarks, which are captured below.

Marwan Al-Sharey, Head of Aden Foundation for Rights and Development (AFRD), Southern Yemen,

- described AFRD's youth-led approach to civic engagement and conflict resolution in Al-Dhale Governorate, southern Yemen which is a context with minimal formal institutional protection. Since 2021, AFRD has worked to bridge divides between institutions and communities, listen to civilian grievances, and engage youth in sensitizing communities to the impacts of conflict and its drivers at local level. Among their concrete

achievements: establishing a youth-led working group that facilitates dialogue and has successfully opened blocked roads for humanitarian access.

To complement the voices of conflict-affected civilians, we enjoyed some insights from civilian protection policy/advocacy experts.

Mae Thompson, Senior Advocacy Officer, Ceasefire Centre for Civilian Rights highlighted the structural disconnect between conflict-affected communities and the discussions shaping their protection, particularly around military operations. She pointed to the dangers both of military presence itself (civilian casualties, peacekeeping misconduct) and of militarized humanitarian aid citing Gaza as an example of how this can undermine humanitarian principles. She called for stronger military-civilian dialogue built on three principles: (1) structured, institutionalized civilian voices; (2) accessible and inclusive engagement, facilitated by the UN and NGOs; and (3) meaningful consultation that does not impose additional burden or risk on civilians. What was central to her argument is that member states must recognize civilians as active agents capable of monitoring, documenting harm, and building self-protection systems. This posture of humility and spirit of partnership is long overdue.

Megan Karlhøj-Pedersen, Policy Specialist, Airwars, focused on the gap between armed actors' stated intentions and their actual impact, and on the role of civilian documentation in closing it. She argued that integrating civilian voices into harm mitigation requires three things from external actors: 1) understanding how civilians describe harm (language, cultural context); 2) meeting civilians where they actually report harm; and 3) understanding what evidence civilians produce (photos, videos, damage documentation). She framed this as essential not only for accountability but for countering political apathy, for rehumanizing those affected by conflict.

Elisabetta Brumat, Division of International Protection and Solutions, UNHCR / Global Protection Cluster Lead, argued that protection starts with communities as first responders, and that the task of international actors is to recognize and enable what already exists, rather than build parallel systems. She outlined three pillars for responsible partnership: 1) move from consultation to co-leadership which means systematically including local actors in decision-making at all levels; 2) shift decision-making to localized spaces, which requires international actors to have better access and presence; and 3) resource local organizations as strategic partners through multi-year, flexible, direct funding. She warned that shrinking budgets disproportionately hit community-based protection and frontline staff and called on humanitarian reform to improve localisation.

Q&A

We queried our audience on the following question: *in the current context, what would it mean concretely, for you, your government or organisation, to genuinely listen and respond to the calls from civilians, including in how funding is allocated? What would have to change?*

The discussion from the floor surfaced several prominent themes. On prevention and education, one delegate drew on Global South experience to argue that meaningful civilian protection requires

investment long before conflict erupts particularly through embedding IHL principles in school curricula, on the basis that children can be reached in ways that combatants, especially non-state and gang-affiliated actors operating outside any legal framework, cannot. On the risks within community-based protection, a humanitarian representative offered an important caution that community structures are not inherently neutral and can themselves reflect conflict dynamics, including along ethnic lines. And the fact that any serious conversation about community-led protection must grapple with questions of equity and the need for guardrails around the concept of neutrality. A third intervention touched on the accountability dimension, raising the situation in Sudan specifically where civilians are deliberately targeted, including through the systematic use of sexual violence as a weapon of war along ethnic lines and asking how community protection structures could credibly advance accountability for such violations while also supporting dialogue across divided communities. In response, an NP staffer based in Tawila described efforts to connect survivors and community committees with legal support, and to create spaces for women to articulate their needs while acknowledging that the gap between community-level action and formal legal system support remains a persistent and significant challenge.

Key reflection / takeaways:

To start, the first of what we set out to do landed well. Local perspectives, strategies and risks were genuinely centred in this PoC week discussion. Civilian voices entered a diplomatic space where they are too rarely heard, and the conversation stayed grounded in what protection actually looks and feels like when formal systems fail or withdraw.

We think that awareness in the room about local protection strategies and the role of external actors in supporting them deepened. One remaining challenge is that awareness that does not translate into changes in funding, authority, or access risks becoming another instance of communities offering knowledge and testimony in spaces where the decisions still get made without them. So concrete opportunities for outside support and recognition of local frontline civilian leadership were named, but the harder structural question who actually holds decision-making power, and whether that shifts was underexplored.

The session's central insight was probably that you cannot choose between genuine inclusion of local knowledge and sustained external responsibility. They are not a trade-off. Localisation, as it is too often practised, becomes a way of offloading rather than sharing responsibility. International presence is not always the right or protective form of support, and the harder questions about when to step back, and what other forms of solidarity might serve communities better, were raised but left open.

We also experienced some technical difficulties that were frustrating in the moment but in retrospect, they were a testament to the fact that connecting speakers remotely because of current US visa environment made in-person attendance impossible was itself a demonstration of what inclusion costs and requires. It was a reminder that pushing through it matters more than the comfort of a smoother event without those voices in it.