



Center for Civilians in Harm's Way

Any approach to mitigating the harm civilians face amid conflict needs to clearly situate itself within “the universe of things called protection.” The figure below shows **preparedness support** in a proactive and localized position: the *timing* is before the worst of violence hits and the *targeting* is of locals’ own capacity. The most distinctive and defining characteristic of preparedness support is:

1. Proactively help civilians themselves brace for coming violence. There exists of course the vast field of disaster risk reduction—but it has largely limited itself to natural hazards. Though some have begun to speak of “conflict risk reduction,” it is typically becomes a reference to conflict *prevention*.

To further distinguish preparedness support, CCHW separates it from the many things it is not.

2. It is not based on outside ability to *influence* the behavior of belligerents or other duty-bound parties. For example, those in pinstripe suits or blue helmets may find it impossible (or unpalatable) to deter violent actors and events; entire fields devoted to political, legal or social environment-building may be stymied.
3. It is not based on outside ability to maintain or attain meaningful *access* to civilians in danger. For example, aid workers may find it necessary to pull back and security actors may find it difficult to reach civilians in harm’s way.

Moreover, preparedness support is not focused threats other than direct armed violence.

4. Protection programs often address political and legal reform, such as the many efforts to mobilize civil society on behalf of good governance, rule of law, human rights, peacebuilding and more. These long-horizon efforts can save lives in the long run, but may matter little to a civilian at the point of contact with violence *now*. To some extent, outsiders have “substituted a specialized notion of protection *of rights* for actions designed to provide directly and forcefully for the safety of people.”¹
5. Likewise, many (or perhaps most) protection programs address social concerns, like domestic abuse, early marriage, female genital mutilation, sexually-transmitted diseases, inequity, discrimination against LGBT persons or the elderly, unwanted pregnancies, child labor, non-abusive parenting and more. While these are very important issues they should not be conflated with discussions about tactical protection from imminent direct armed violence.

With the stipulations above, much of today’s repertoire called “protection” is removed from the table. And it is under these all-too-common circumstances that civilians stand virtually alone and in which most atrocities take place.

To be clear, efforts of the international community to influence dangerous actors and events and access those at risk have saved a great many lives, and their efforts addressing rights and reforms have benefitted countless more. They absolutely should be and applauded and strengthened. But CCHW’s starting point in the lower left corner of the axes is this: unmitigated violence *is* going to strike and civilians *are* going to face it alone. So what can be done now to support the last ones standing?

¹ Marc DuBois, *Protection: The New Humanitarian Fig-leaf*, *Dialogue No. 4*, *Medicins Sans Frontiers*, September 2007: April 2009; p. 7.

There do already exist some efforts described as fostering community-based self-protection, thus preparedness support needs to further differentiate itself.

6. Many (or perhaps most) “community-based protection” projects actually take place in a *camp*. Refugees or displaced persons camps are often unnatural, dysfunctional polyglots. They are created by a strong push (e.g. violent actors or events compelling people to assemble in camps regardless of their compatibility) or a strong pull (e.g. an aid magnet drawing desperate people from all directions). These settings frequently become forcibly politicized, militarized, and criminalized. As such, they are situations of population control—not cohesion. They are stripped of much of the social capital that gives meaning to the very word “community”. Most importantly, camp-based protections are not proactive. They are reactions after upheaval and displacement, responding to threats that, perversely, are common to camp formations.
7. “Community-based” or “self-protection” protection programs do not always have as much local authorship or ownership as the term would imply. In too many projects called “self-protection,” the word ‘*self*’ is appended to the names of projects that outside parties conceive and a local community then runs it-*self*. That is, in many protection projects, what we call “community-based” is not community-born.
8. Likewise, “community-based” protection programs are in practice not are not always run by or wholly reliant upon the community. As various reports find, it is important not to conflate activities that are geographically localized with those are locally led.² It is also important not to equate host nationals with “locals.” In many places, people from outside a community are not viewed as “local” by the locals themselves—a matter of great importance given that survival often comes down to questions of trust and sacrifice. A look at the actual mechanisms of such protection programs often reveals them to be wired to *nonlocals* and plugged into *external* response—for example the timely influence or intervention of outside mediators or rescuers. (This accounts for the “caveats” in the figure below. ◀ Do the “community liaisons, plans, alerts” and “warning” cited indicate a largely autonomous local response? Often not.

A small fraction of all protection efforts do focus on supporting locals’ autonomous capacity for self-preservation. This refers to a relative few peacekeeping missions, aid agencies, and specialized NGOs that encourage communities to prepare to fend for themselves (typically via protection committees, watch groups, technology platforms, non-formal policing or patrols, contingency plans, warning and evacuation) without the promise of successful mediation or rescue. If these scattered and nascent efforts are fostered properly, they will become important precedents for the next generation of civilian “protection”.

² Imogen Wall and Kerren Hedlund, *Localisation and Locally-Led Crisis Response: A Literature Review*, Local to Global Protection Project, Copenhagen, May 2016; p. 3.



CCHW in the Milieu of Protection Interventions

After Violence Hits Home

Varied Actions post conflict

- Humanitarian aid
- Trauma counseling
- Family tracing & reunification
- Reconciliation efforts
- Restorative justice & amends
- Demobilization & reintegration
- Prosecution of war crimes
- Demining



Mortality rates already climaxed



Most damage & displacement already done

Remedial action



Varied Actors seeking reform

(Long-term projects)

- Human rights
- Rule of law
- Civil society
- Peace education
- Good governance
- Security sector reform
- Gender violence, social equity

Environment-building



Parties to Conflict & Others

(Actions often late or ineffectual)

- Conflict resolution
- Advocacy, denunciation
- Diplomacy, demarches
- Negotiations, truces
- Sanctions, armed interventions
- Harm mitigation in conduct of combat
- ▲ Warning & response systems (with caveats)

Responsive action

Before Violence Hits Home



Preparedness support



Heed & support community action for safety and life-critical sustenance and services

Focus on Locals:

- Often most motivated to act
- Often most familiar with threats
- Often best-positioned to respond in quick and relevant ways (actionable measures)
- Often best-positioned to carry on (sustainable measures)

Locus in Situ:

- Prevention and mitigation on site, when safe enough, is most cost-effective investment
- Intact community has supportable structures for safety, sustenance and service that can be lost in flight and camp



Peacekeepers

(POC mandates: often late, under-resourced & out of reach; often limited by politics and preference for force protection)

- POC mandates to protect
- ▲ Community liaisons, plans, alerts (with caveats)



Aid service providers

(When access & influence allows)

- Wide range of socio-political reform initiatives (cited at top)
- "Presence as protection"
- "Aid as protection"
- Safe camp design
- Abuse monitoring, reporting
- Legal documentation
- Protection clusters, committees, officers, manuals, analyses, etc.
- Emergency livelihoods
- ▲ "Community-based self-protection" (with caveats)

▶ Stress Local Ability to Survive Alone ▶▶▶

Stress Belligerent or Third Party Action