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Community Self-protection

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I. Introduction

Over the past few years, there has been a growing recognition of the importance of measures that communities employ to protect themselves when faced with conflict. Discussions regarding the protection of civilians frequently focus on what the international community, governments, or armed groups do or fail to do to protect civilians. Yet civilians are often forced to rely on themselves to guarantee their own safety and the safety of their families and communities. Without a nuanced understanding of communities' self-protection activities, external actors risk undermining those measures when they intervene, or missing opportunities to enhance their own protection impact by augmenting or complementing such initiatives.

This chapter draws on research conducted by the Local to Global Protection Initiative (L2GP) on local perceptions of protection. Between 2009 and 2015, local and international researchers undertook in-depth interviews with more than 1,500 people trying to survive and protect themselves in major humanitarian and protection crises in Burma/Myanmar, the occupied Palestinian territories, Sudan, South Sudan, Syria, and Zimbabwe.[1] It also draws on research conducted by the Stimson Center on the importance of community engagement by external protection actors, peacekeeping missions in particular. The Stimson Center research included interviews, surveys, and focus groups conducted between 2012 and 2015 in South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).[2]

The chapter focuses on humanitarian organizations and peacekeeping missions—two key external actors that take different approaches to protection, both of which have attempted to support community self-protection strategies. Other types of external actors, such as human rights and development actors, are

[1] Ashley South, Simon Harragin, Justin Corbett, Richard Horsey, Susanne Kempel, Henrik Fröjmark, and Nils Carstensen, *Local to Global Protection in Myanmar (Burma), Sudan, South Sudan and Zimbabwe* (London: Overseas Development Institute, 2012) 1–36.

[2] See Aditi Gorur, *Community Self-Protection Strategies: How Peacekeepers Can Help or Harm* (Washington, DC: The Stimson Center, 2013); Alison Giffen, *Community Perceptions as a Priority in Protection and Peacekeeping* (Washington, DC: The Stimson Center, 2013); Aditi Gorur, Jok Madut Jok, and Augustino Ting Mayai, *Perceptions of Security in Aweil North County, South Sudan* (Washington, DC: The Stimson Center and the Sudd Institute, 2014); Aditi Gorur, *Perceptions of Security Among Internally Displaced Persons in Juba, South Sudan* (Washington, DC: The Stimson Center, 2014).

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not specifically covered in this analysis. The chapter also leaves aside the question of how government actors can support self-protection measures taken by populations within their own states, focusing instead on contexts where the state is unable or unwilling to fully implement its responsibility to protect, including situations where state actors are actively perpetrating abuses.

The proposition of external actors supporting self-protection measures is not a simple one. The differences between their protection capacities, priorities, and approaches and those of local conflict-affected communities can be vast. Yet the potential impact if external actors are able to augment and leverage the protection capacities of conflict-affected communities is significant.

The chapter begins by examining the different ways that external protection actors and local communities understand protection. It then provides an overview of community self-protection, illustrated by an example from Syria. Finally, the chapter explores how external protection actors may be able to support self-protection initiatives, considering protection objectives, different approaches, and challenges that might be encountered. This is supplemented by two short case studies demonstrating different approaches: extensive external involvement in community watch groups in South Sudan, and minimal external involvement in civil society groups providing training and advice on individual self-protection measures in South Kordofan.

II. Understanding Protection

Protection activities by external actors (such as humanitarian agencies, peacekeeping missions, human rights groups, or development actors) are, when they work best, crucial for saving lives and supporting longer-term rehabilitation. The approach of such actors tends to be defined by translating international law and operational guidance into protection activities in highly complex environments, where such activities do not always resonate well with local realities. In all crisis situations there are multiple, sometimes competing, understandings of what 'protection' means and of what strategies and actions might bring about a degree of protection and increase people's chances of survival and recovery.

While external protection actors may arrive in a crisis situation with a good understanding of the different definitions of protection used by their own institutions and by colleagues in other fields (e.g. concepts of refugee protection, protection in peacekeeping, or humanitarian protection), they are often much less familiar with the experiences of affected individuals and groups and their assessments of their own needs. Local conceptions of protection may differ significantly from what is provided for under internationally sanctioned protection approaches. Such differences in the understanding of protection can be attributed to several factors, including: (a) different motivations of affected communities and of humanitarian, peacekeeping, and other external protection actors; (b) differences in importance ascribed to relevant laws and values; and (c) different concepts of what being protected means in practice.

The following sections summarize humanitarian and peacekeeping approaches to protection, as well as community protection concepts. They explore why the external actors may have very different understandings of protection compared to the local communities they seek to protect.[3]

A. Humanitarian approaches

Humanitarian actors' understanding of protection is rooted in international law.[4] It is shaped by carefully crafted humanitarian principles and refined in institutional mandates and operational policies and guidance. According to the most widely accepted definition, provided by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC),[5] protection

> encompasses all activities aimed at ensuring full respect for the rights of the individual in accordance with the letter and the spirit of the relevant bodies of law, i.e., human rights law, international humanitarian law and refugee law. Human rights and humanitarian organisations must conduct these activities in an impartial manner (not on the basis of race, national or ethnic origin, language or gender).[6]

Guidance documents, such as the widely used and referenced Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action (ALNAP) *Guide to Protection*,[7] which provides an extensive list of violations to address as protection concerns, often reflect the language of international human rights and humanitarian law.

Given this strongly legal foundation, many of the classic examples of humanitarian protection involve advocating with governments to recognize legal rights, such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees' (UNHCR) work to determine refugee status,[8] negotiating with armed groups to secure the rights of affected populations,[9] or sensitizing armed groups to their obligations under international

[3] For a more detailed discussion of the different concepts of protection among humanitarian, peacekeeping, and other actors see Ralph Mamiya, Chapter 3, in this volume, and Haidi Willmot and Scott Sheeran, 'The Protection of Civilians Mandate in UN Peacekeeping Operations: Reconciling Protection Concepts and Practices' (2013) 95 IRRC 517.

[4] On the development of obligations under international humanitarian law with respect to civilians, see Hugo Slim, Jamie Williamson, and Sara Pantuliano and Eva Svoboda, in this volume.

[5] The Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) was established in June 1992 in response to United Nations General Assembly Resolution 46/182 on the strengthening of humanitarian assistance. General Assembly Resolution 48/57 affirmed its role as the primary mechanism for inter-agency coordination of humanitarian assistance. See United Nations General Assembly Resolution (UNGA Res) 46/182 (1991) UN Doc A/RES/46/182, para. 33; UNGA Res 48/57 (1993) UN Doc A/RES/48/57, paras 6, 11–13, preambular para. 13.

[6] IASC, *Protection of Internally Displaced Persons: Inter-Agency Standing Committee Policy Paper* (New York: IASC, 1999) 4. The definition was originally adopted by a 1999 Workshop of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) on Protection. See Sylvie Giossi Caverzasio, *Strengthening Protection in War* (Geneva: ICRC, 2001).

[7] Hugo Slim and Andrew Bonwick, *Protection, An ALNAP Guide for Humanitarian Agencies* (London: Overseas Development Institute, 2005) 11–23.

[8] UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 'Legal Protection' (*UNHCR*, undated) <www.unhcr.org/pages/49c3646cce.html>.

[9] Slim and Bonwick, see n 7, 85.

humanitarian law, as is frequently undertaken by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC).[10]

Humanitarian protection goes beyond these conventional legal activities, however, drawing in elements of humanitarian assistance—the provision of goods and services to alleviate suffering rather than to protect rights. Humanitarian assistance is generally considered a distinct activity from humanitarian protection, but the distinction is based on the purpose of the activities and there is often overlap. For instance, in 1995 in Bosnia and Herzegovina, communities had to wait for fresh water in long queues, where they were exposed to sniper fire. The International Rescue Committee rehabilitated old pipe infrastructure that allowed people to get their water much more quickly, greatly reducing their exposure to risk.[11]Such water projects are common in humanitarian and development assistance, but in this case the primary objective was protection. Humanitarians have also sought to 'mainstream' protection concerns in their activities, being guided by the imperative to 'do no harm', in an effort to undertake activity in a way that seeks to ensure respect for the rights and dignity of beneficiaries.[12]

B. Peacekeeping approaches

The approach to protection in United Nations (UN) peacekeeping missions flows from resolutions of the UN Security Council, as well as policies and guidance developed by the UN Departments of Peacekeeping Operations and Field Support. Although Security Council mandates have long been issued in support of improving security generally, these mandates 'shifted to support "stronger" protection measures through affirmation of international humanitarian and human rights law and a more explicit emphasis on the physical protection of civilians' after peacekeeping failures in the 1990s, including the failure to protect civilians in Rwanda and Srebrenica.[13] The Council issued its first resolution explicitly mandating a peacekeeping mission to protect civilians in 1999 when it authorized the UN mission in Sierra Leone.

Today, protection of civilians mandates are common for peacekeeping missions—over 97 per cent of UN peacekeeping personnel worldwide serve in missions with protection mandates.[14] Missions that are given explicit mandates to protect civilians are generally instructed to protect them from the threat, or imminent

[10] 'Building Respect for Humanitarian Action and IHL among "Other" Weapon Bearers' (*ICRC*, 29 Oct 2010) <www.icrc.org/eng/what-we-do/building-respect-ihl/dialogue-weapon-bearers/other-weapons-bearers/overview-icrc-other-weapon-bearers.htm>.

[11] Slim and Bonwick, see n 7, 89.

[12] The Sphere Project, *The Sphere Handbook 2011: Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Principles in Humanitarian Response* (Bourton on Dunsmore, UK: Practical Action, 2011)'Protection Principle 1: Avoid exposing people to further harm as a result of your actions', also available at: <www.spherehandbook.org/en/protection-principle-1-avoid-exposing-people-to-further-harm-as-a-result-of-your-actions>.

[13] Victoria Holt and Glyn Taylor, with Max Kelly, *Protecting Civilians in the Context of UN Peacekeeping Operations* (New York: United Nations, 2009) 35.

[14] Figure derived from 'Peacekeeping Statistics' (*UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations*, 30 April 2015) <www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/resources/statistics>.

threat, of physical violence. Protection in the context of UN peacekeeping tends to be more narrowly focused on protection from physical violence, in comparison with humanitarian approaches to protection, which may focus on a broader range of protection threats, such as hunger and disease.

Peacekeeping policy now defines the protection of civilians as comprising three tiers of activities which may be undertaken simultaneously: (a) protection through dialogue and engagement, (b) provision of physical protection, and (c) establishment of a protective environment.[15] All components of a multidimensional peacekeeping mission—military, police, and civilian—have a role to play in operationalizing these three tiers. Peacekeeping operations are expected to fulfil their mandates *impartially*, for example, to protect civilians from physical violence without regard to the identity of the population under threat or the identity of the perpetrator. However, they are not required to be *neutral*, and often provide support to one party to the conflict, namely, the host government.

C. Community approaches

Local communities' approaches to protection are shaped by their cultural and socio-economic environments. In conflict areas, the multitude of understandings held by affected individuals and communities are likely driven by their urgent need to act to protect themselves in the chaos and lawlessness of conflict and war.[16] As such, local communities' perceptions of what constitutes a protection threat and how activities to address different threats should be prioritized may be quite different from those of external actors. For example, in a 2012 focus group study conducted by Oxfam and the Stimson Center in conflict-affected communities in the DRC, participants were asked to identify the most important threats in their communities. While most identified threats such as killings, sexual violence, and arson that are familiar to external actors, a few also identified issues such as promiscuity, public drunkenness, or a general attitude of aggression, which are less likely to be identified by external actors as protection threats.[17] Many communities studied by L2GP identified a close connection between protection and livelihoods, indicating that the ability to protect oneself and one's community is often intimately linked to the kind of resources that can be mobilized or otherwise drawn upon when a crisis hits, but many external actors may not consider livelihoods to be a protection issue.

Even where local communities and external actors are attempting to address the same threats, as is often the case, local communities may be confounded by many of the principles, policies, and practices that restrict external actors from taking certain actions. For example, Article 23(c) of the Fourth Geneva Convention provides that parties are obliged to allow the free passage of humanitarian assistance if they

[15] UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO) and UN Department of Field Support (DFS), 'DPKO/DFS Policy: The Protection of Civilians in United Nations Peacekeeping' (New York: United Nations, 2015) § E.2 (UN DPKO and UN DFS Protection of Civilians Policy).

[16] For more detail on the impact of war on civilians, see Hugo Slim, Chapter 1, in this volume.

[17] Data from Stimson Center focus groups with conflict-affected communities in North Kivu, South Kivu, and Orientale provinces, Democratic Republic of Congo, June 2012, on file with authors.

are satisfied that it will not result in advantage to the military efforts or economy of the enemy.[18] The Humanitarian Policy Group has noted that this excludes a 'developmental approach'[19] to humanitarian aid, restricting the capacity-building in which numerous humanitarian organizations engage and which in some cases communities may prefer. Similarly, international legal categories of persons, such as 'civilian', 'refugee', or 'internally displaced person', are important for specific regimes and the actors working to implement them, but are not always helpful for protection in practice.

Humanitarian protection literature and guidance often distinguish between what are described as 'protection needs' and 'pressing needs'.[20] However, communities often do not make similar distinctions,[21] nor do they make a clear distinction between threats to survival, protection, and attempts to recover. On the contrary, people caught up in life-threatening crises often take a holistic perspective where past, present, and possible future threats, challenges, and needs are closely interlinked.[22]

For peacekeeping missions, priorities and restrictions laid out in a mandate may be far removed from what local communities expect, and consider central to their protection. For example, in a 2013 survey conducted by the Stimson Centre and the Sudd Institute in Aweil North county in South Sudan, a number of respondents expressed an expectation that the role of the UN mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) included monitoring and resolving border disputes.[23] Aweil North county borders Sudan and has experienced armed group incursions and bombing from across the border. Although UNMISS had a mandate to protect civilians throughout the country, it was not mandated to monitor or resolve disputes involving the border between Sudan and South Sudan. Similarly, some respondents believed that UNMISS' role included offering humanitarian or development services, such as providing food or mosquito nets, which also fell outside its mandate.[24]

Communities are, of course, not monolithic and different members of a particular community may perceive and prioritize threats and protection differently. For example, the same 2013 survey in Aweil North county found that women were less likely to place trust in government protection actors than men.[25] More broadly, L2GP studies in Myanmar (Burma),[26]

[18] Geneva Convention relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War (adopted 12 August 1949, entered into force 21 October 1950) 75 UNTS 287, Article 23.

[19] Kate Mackintosh, 'The Principles of Humanitarian Action in International Humanitarian Law' (London: Overseas Development Institute, 2000) 9.

[20] Slim and Bonwick, see n 7, 11–23.

[21] Justin Corbett, 'Learning from the Nuba: Civilian Resilience and Self-protection during Conflict' (Local to Global Protection (L2GP), 2011) 23 <www.local2global.info/wp-content/uploads/SK_Nuba_L2GP_report_final.pdf>.

[22] Ibid., 23. [23] Gorur, Jok, and Ting Mayai, see n 2, 38. [24] Ibid., 37.

[25] Ibid., 33.

[26] As a Karen Buddhist migrant worker interviewed in Thailand said, 'Migrant workers here don't go to the refugee camps because we don't know people there—we don't have any connection . . . those who enter the refugee camps have money, or family in the camps'. Ashley South with Malin Perhult and Nils Carstensen, 'Conflict and Survival: Self-protection in South-east Burma' (London: Chatham House, 2010) 36 <www.local2global.info/area-studies/burmamyanmar-karen>. Similarly, a representative of the Karen Women Organization stated: 'Despite all the abuses that the women chiefs are

Zimbabwe,[27] Syria,[28] and Palestine[29] found that variables such as sex, age, ethnicity, religion, and location (rural/urban, government/opposition-held) were often a factor in very different perceptions of threats and resulting self-protection activities. For example, women in Sudan's South Kordofan and Burma's Karen State saw themselves as particularly vulnerable to certain threats but also as much stronger 'agents of protection' than male family members in other respects.[30] These findings imply that the realities of community-based protection may be complex, and a thorough understanding of protection threats needs to take into account the situation of a range of 'sub-communities'. External protection actors that bring a predefined focus on specific vulnerabilities based on institutional mandates or experiences may need to reconsider assumed categories in each context.[31]

III. Community Self-protection

Self-protection measures can be defined as 'any activities that conflict-affected communities undertake with the intention of countering, mitigating, deterring or avoiding a threat'.[32] Protection actors and researchers have also used other terms such as 'coping strategies' or 'survival mechanisms', sometimes interchangeably, to describe these activities. There is no clear and widely accepted definition of these alternative terms. Some terms, such as 'coping strategies', may be interpreted to include a wider range of responses to conflict that are undertaken to improve general wellbeing—for example, strategies to earn income to improve quality of life in the aftermath of conflict, or psychological responses to manage conflict-related trauma.[33] Terms such as 'coping strategies' or 'survival mechanisms' may also be

forced to endure, their testimonies are not merely those of passive victims. On the contrary, the women frequently display a remarkable degree of strength and determination to protect the rights of their communities, regardless of all the risks and personal sacrifices.' Ibid., 27.

[27] An older woman in Zimbabwe stated: 'Women are most at threat, because the responsibility of feeding the family falls on them. In their pursuit of food, they end up facing different threats, such as rape or being asked for sexual favours in exchange for food, which leads to the further threat of disease. The same predicament applies to children, especially girls.' Richard Horsey, 'Local Protection in Zimbabwe' (Copenhagen: L2GP, 2011) 72; <www.local2global.info/wp-content/uploads/L2GP_Zimbabwe_study.pdf>. A retired Zimbabwean magistrate said: 'Boy children are also vulnerable to sexual abuse, but this is not recognized or understood by most communities, and is very hidden. There is little awareness of paedophilia, and most people are incredulous: "what would anyone want to do with a young boy?" they say.' Ibid., 35.

[28] Data from ongoing research on self-protection in the Syria crisis by Kholoud Mansour, Line Urban, and Nils Carstensen for the L2GP initiative, on file with authors.

[29] Rafael Eguiguren and Luna Saadeh, 'Protection in the Occupied Palestinian Territories' (Copenhagen: L2GP Initiative, 2014) 12–13, 91–4 <www.local2global.info/area-studies/palestine-opt>.

[30] Corbett, see n 21, 19–21; South with Perhult and Carstensen, see n 26, 27.

[31] Giffen, see n 2.

[32] Gorur (2013), see n 2, 4.

[33] See, for example, Gilles Carbonnier, 'Security Management and the Political Economy of War', *Humanitarian Exchange* (London, June 2010), which describes economic 'coping strategies' such as poppy cultivation or diamond prospecting in conflict environments; and Theresa Stichick and Claude Bruderlein, 'Children Facing Insecurity: New Strategies for Survival in a Global Era' (Cambridge, USA: Harvard Program on Humanitarian Policy and Conflict Research, 2001) <www.hpcrresearch.org/sites/default/files/publications/ChildrenFacingInsecurity.pdf>, which uses 'coping mechanisms' to

used to describe responses to non-conflict threats, such as natural disasters or domestic violence.

Self-protection measures exist on a spectrum from *positive* (having only a positive effect on the security of the community) to *negative* (having negative effects in the long term despite some short-term benefit, or exacerbating security problems for some within the community while improving security for others). Examples of the latter have included measures such as sending a son to fight with a particular armed group, giving in to demands for bribes and illegal 'taxation', employing armed self-defence as has occurred in Myanmar,[34] and resorting to child-marriage practices as has occurred in Syria.[35] However negative or unacceptable such measures may appear to outsiders, it should be kept in mind that they are often employed in environments characterized by a near total 'protection vacuum'. Often, these are situations where affected communities perceive themselves to be left with few other options, as national and international actors have failed to provide any meaningful degree of protection.

Self-protection measures also exist on a spectrum from individual to communal. At the individual level, for example, a person might comply with an illegal payment demanded at a checkpoint in order to avoid a violent response.[36] At the communal level, the whole community might meet to share information about security threats.[37] Often, self-protection measures will fall somewhere in between—for example, a family may form a plan to flee as a unit if there is an attack,[38] or individual members of the community may spontaneously form groups with people around them for safety in numbers while walking through a dangerous area.[39] Self-protection initiatives may be led by local civil society organizations or individuals that represent smaller or larger subsets of the community, such as religious organizations, trade associations, or women's and youth groups.[40] In some cases, self-protection measures may deliberately exclude a portion of the community (for example, community security meetings that exclude women).[41]

Over the past half-decade, recognition of the importance of understanding conflict-affected communities' self-protection mechanisms has grown. Reports and

describe a wide range of activities undertaken by children in conflict environments, including developing social networks to provide a sense of connection to others.

[34] South with Perhult and Carstensen, see n 26, 18, 23, 24, 26, and 38.

[35] United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), 'A Study on Early Marriage in Jordan' (Amman: UNICEF, 2014) 8–10, 22 <www.unicef.org/jordan/UNICEFJordan_EarlyMarriageStudy2014-E_COPY_.pdf>; see also Save the Children, 'Too Young to Wed—The Growing Problem of Child Marriage among Syrian Girls in Jordan' (London: Save the Children, 2014) 2–11 <www.savethechildren.de/fileadmin/Berichte_Reports/Too_Young_to_Wed.pdf>.

[36] Data from Stimson Center focus groups with conflict-affected communities in North Kivu, South Kivu and Orientale provinces, Democratic Republic of Congo, June 2012, on file with authors.

[37] Ibid.

[38] Gorur, Jok, and Ting Mayai, see n 2, 27.

[39] Interviews by Aditi Gorur and Alison Giffen in Bentiu, South Sudan, June 2015, on file with authors.

[40] Data from Stimson Center focus groups with conflict-affected communities in North Kivu, South Kivu, and Orientale provinces, Democratic Republic of Congo, June 2012, on file with authors.

[41] Gorur (2013), see n 2, 9.

studies on self-protection include a 2009 Oxfam report on community-based protection in the DRC,[42] the Cuny Center's inventory of self-protection strategies,[43] and several documented cases in Colombia,[44] as well as the L2GP and Overseas Development Institute–Humanitarian Practice Network (ODI-HPN) studies of self-protection in seven major crises.[45] The past few years have also seen the development of more practice-oriented guidance for protection actors at international agencies[46] and in peacekeeping missions.[47] In its 2009 *Professional Standards for Protection Work*, and again in its revised 2013 edition, the ICRC encouraged protection actors to avoid undermining positive self-protection measures, to consider complementing them, and to be aware of the risks and limitations involved.[48]

Recognition of the importance of self-protection within the UN peacekeeping community has been more modest than in humanitarian fora. Until recently, the importance of self-protection measures was not acknowledged in any UN peacekeeping policy or guidance. In February 2015, the UN Departments of Peacekeeping Operations and Field Support produced guidelines on the protection of civilians for military components of UN peacekeeping missions, which acknowledged the value of 'the mechanisms locals have established to ensure their own protection'.[49] Shortly thereafter, in April 2015, the same UN departments produced a policy on the protection of civilians in UN peacekeeping, which recognized that 'civilians at risk are also protection actors: they organize themselves to support the most vulnerable and implement measures to enhance their physical security.'[50] Both the policy and the military guidelines on the protection of civilians encourage peacekeepers to complement existing self-protection measures when protecting communities, where possible.

[42] Katherine Haver, *Self-protection in Conflict: Community Strategies for Keeping Safe in the Democratic Republic of Congo* (Oxford: Oxfam, 2009) 1–36.

[43] Casey A Barrs, 'How Civilians Survive Violence' (Arlington, USA: Cuny Center, 2012) 1–25 <www.oxfam.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2011/08/casey-barrs-supporting-documentation-how-civilians-survive.pdf>.

[44] Gimena Sanchez, 'Against All Odds: Experiences of IDP Self- Protection Measures in Colombia' (presented at the Brookings Institution seminar 'Exploring Civilian Protection', 28 October 2010) 1–19 <www.brookings.edu/~/media/events/2010/10/28-civilian-protection-two/case-study-columbia-oct-2010-gimena-sanchez.pdf>.

[45] South, Harragin, Corbett, Horsey, Kempel, Fröjmark, and Carstensen, see n 1.

[46] See, for example, Kate Berry and Sherryl Reddy, 'Safety with Dignity: Integrating Community-based Protection into Humanitarian Programming' (London: Overseas Development Institute, 2010) 5; UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 'Protection Policy Paper: Understanding Community-Based Protection' (undated) 1–29 <www.refworld.org/pdfid/5209f0b64.pdf>; ICRC, *Professional Standards for Protection Work Carried out by Humanitarian and Human Rights Actors in Armed Conflict and Other Situations of Violence* (Geneva: ICRC, 2013); The Sphere Project, see n 12.

[47] Gorur (2013), see n 2; Oxfam, 'Engaging with Communities' (Oxford: Oxfam, 2010) 3–4 <www.oxfam.org/sites/www.oxfam.org/files/file_attachments/bp141-engaging-with-communities-221110-en_4.pdf>.

[48] ICRC, *Professional Standards for Protection Work* (Geneva: ICRC, 2009) 24; ICRC, *Professional Standards for Protection Work* (Geneva: ICRC, 2013) 28.

[49] UN DPKO and UN DFS, 'Protection of Civilians: Implementing Guidelines for Military Components of United Nations Peacekeeping Missions' (New York: United Nations, 2015) 3.

[50] UN DPKO and UN DFS Protection of Civilians Policy, see n 15, Annex A.

The following example of community self-protection in Syria highlights a range of measures that communities under threat have taken to protect themselves in an environment where external protection efforts are highly restricted. It demonstrates both the resilience and initiative that conflict-affected communities can demonstrate as well as the limitations and challenges they encounter.

A. Community self-protection in Syria

As the conflict and subsequent humanitarian crisis in Syria has spread and deepened, aid agencies have continued to struggle with access to many of those most in need, and '[t]he lack of physical presence of international aid agencies has shone a spotlight onto what is commonly called "the local response"'.[51] Ongoing interviews with individuals and communities inside Syria, and with families who have sought refuge in neighbouring countries, have revealed the employment of vast and diverse protection strategies.[52]

Community self-protection in Syria has proven effective in addressing a major obstacle to external humanitarian assistance: government consent. Despite the Security Council's authorization of cross-border assistance without the approval of the Syrian government, many areas remain inaccessible to international organizations. Yet inside Syria, community-led protection activities take place regularly in opposition-controlled as well as government-controlled areas. Networks of activists have repaired and tried to maintain life-saving water supply infrastructure. They also organized low-profile food and non-food distributions in war-affected communities across the country. Throughout the crisis, health professionals have continued to provide life-saving services under extremely dangerous and difficult circumstances, often at great risk to their own lives.

Some Syrian self-protection activities face the same potentially negative outcomes that communities face in conflicts elsewhere. Many refugee families consider it necessary to keep girls out of school in order to protect them from sexual abuse or exploitation.[53] Self-taught volunteers try to defuse, move, or otherwise neutralize unexploded cluster and barrel bombs in densely populated areas. Other volunteers undertake equally dangerous rescue work in the ruins of recently bombed buildings.[54] Activists engage in 'risk education messaging', spanning from graffiti warnings against sniper fire at dangerous street corners to using a wide range

[51] Eva Svoboda and Sara Pantuliano, 'International and Local/Diaspora Actors in the Syria Response' (London: Overseas Development Institute, 2015) iii <www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/9523.pdf>. On access challenges faced by humanitarian actors in Syria, see also Sara Pantuliano and Eva Svoboda, Chapter 17, in this volume.

[52] This section draws from ongoing research on self-protection in the Syria crisis by Kholoud Mansour, Line Urban, and Nils Carstensen for the L2GP initiative, on file with authors.

[53] A Syrian woman interviewed in Lebanon stated: 'I cannot send my daughter to school because of the harassment and insulting comments we often hear in the streets. Men would tell us: "What is your price?" or "Syrian women are for sale" and other humiliating comments. I do not send my daughter to school in order to protect her.' Ibid.

[54] See for instance the homepage of volunteer rescue workers in Syria, 'The White Helmets' <www.whitehelmets.org>.

of media to alert parents and children to the dangers of touching or just being close to unexploded bombs, grenades, and missiles.

The self-protection strategies of ordinary Syrians also highlight the limits of international legal protection, with some avoiding international protection efforts due to the risks they incur. Some Syrian families, having fled to Lebanon, seek shelter and assistance from extended family networks and exhaust their own resources rather than registering with and seeking assistance from established humanitarian actors.[55] In doing so, they try to avoid the dangers they associate with being registered as refugees, which many view as likely to hinder or complicate their possible future return to Syria.

IV. Supporting Self-protection

The previous section demonstrated that conflict-affected communities can play a critical role in their own protection. External protection actors may be able to augment communities' protection capacities and support self-protection measures, potentially producing more effective protection outcomes. This section examines the conceptual goals of supporting self-protection, identifies different approaches that external actors could take to support such initiatives, outlines some of the major challenges and offers two short case studies of ways in which external protection actors have tried to support self-protection in South Sudan and Sudan. These examples demonstrate both the potential benefits and the complicated challenges that supporting self-protection entails.

A. Goals

Given their different mandates and understandings of protection, various external protection actors may conceptualize their goals differently with regard to complementing self-protection measures. For humanitarian organizations, support for self-protection could be viewed simply as a form of immediate relief—a way of boosting the impact of organizational protection programming by combining international and community capacities and resources. They may proceed on the assumption that once the protection crisis ends, the self-protection mechanisms will no longer be needed. For peacekeeping missions, support for self-protection could be viewed as a way to bridge the gap between the second tier (provision of physical protection, i.e. direct physical intervention by peacekeepers) and the third tier (establishment of a protective environment, i.e. developing capacities that allow the state to fully implement its primary responsibility to protect). This view would take into account the reality that security sector reform is an idealistic and

[55] Data from ongoing research on self-protection in the Syria crisis by Kholoud Mansour, Line Urban, and Nils Carstensen for the L2GP initiative, on file with authors.

long-term goal, and that developing the community's own self-protection capacities may be a pragmatic way to offer improved protection in the interim.[56]

External protection actors may take on more or less modest goals with respect to self-protection, ranging from simply avoiding undermining existing self-protection mechanisms (e.g. ensuring that the organization's presence is managed carefully so as not to undermine agreements or settlements between neighbouring communities that have historically been in conflict), to providing resources and capacities that complement or boost the strength of existing mechanisms. Either goal requires external actors to engage with communities to understand their perceptions of security and protection and the strengths and weaknesses of their existing and potential self-protection measures.[57]

The emerging focus on self-protection should not obscure the fact that national governments are ultimately responsible for the protection of their population.[58] Community self-protection is never itself a satisfying solution to the wide-ranging and serious abuses suffered by people at risk. All the L2GP case studies demonstrate that while self-protection strategies may be necessary for survival, they do not in themselves provide the degree of safety, security, and dignity that people need and to which they are entitled; such protection comes only through an effective and accountable government. Thus, vital as it is, local agency must never be regarded as a substitute for the protection responsibilities of national authorities or, failing that, relevant international actors.

B. Approaches

External protection actors' approaches to supporting self-protection mechanisms can be conceptualized as falling into three categories. First, external actors may support truly community-led protection mechanisms, wherein members of the community define the priority threats and identify the appropriate protection strategies for the community to adopt with the support of the external actors. Second, external actors may help to set up new protection mechanisms in consultation with the community, and both parties may participate in their operation. Third, external actors may learn from communities about their existing self-protection mechanisms and find ways for their own actions to augment or complement those mechanisms such that they meet both the community's and the external actor's objectives and priorities.

All three approaches, to differing degrees, require external actors to cede control to the community under threat. Self-protection is fundamentally concerned with

[56] See further Fairlie Chappuis and Aditi Gorur, *Reconciling Security Sector Reform and the Protection of Civilians in Peacekeeping Contexts* (Stimson Center and Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces, 2015) <www.stimson.org/images/uploads/research-pdfs/CIC-No3-web.pdf>.

[57] On ways to engage conflict-affected communities, see further Aditi Gorur and Alison Giffen, *Engaging Community Voices in Protection Strategies: Annexes on Lessons Learned* (Washington, DC: The Stimson Center, 2013).

[58] Responsibility to protect populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity. See UNGA Res 60/1 (2005) UN Doc A/RES/60/1, paras 138–40.

individuals and communities identifying their own protection threats and needs, and then acting on their own initiative, based on their own knowledge and priorities. From an external actor's perspective, supporting self-protection requires empowering communities, which implies surrendering a significant degree of control over activities and funds.

While many international protection actors ascribe significant importance to the role of affected communities in their policy documents and public statements, protection efforts that are truly locally led are rarely acknowledged or supported by outside agencies.[59] This reluctance was illustrated in a 2014 survey on community-based protection.[60] While the majority of respondents (staff with international agencies) understood community-based protection as activities 'originating from within and being led by communities to protect themselves', only a handful could identify to concrete cases that they knew of, or that their organization had supported. In contrast, the vast majority of respondents could offer examples of community-based protection that originated from an external agency but included engaging communities at different stages of the activities.

Transferring direct control over projects and funding to affected communities presents a particular challenge for many larger humanitarian agencies and other large institutional protection actors answerable to (and constrained by) the politics and policies of host governments, donors, inter-governmental bodies, and often very elaborate in-house procedures and manuals. Many such actors may be able to deepen and expand the manner in which they consult and include the perspectives of local communities, ultimately though, they may find it difficult to go much further. Smaller, more flexible national or international agencies with experience in genuinely nurturing and supporting local initiatives may be better positioned to empower and support local protection efforts on the community's own terms.

Where positive self-protection strategies exist, and fall within the mandates and objectives of external actors, the third approach, taking communities' existing self-protection mechanisms as a starting point for external actors' protection programming, may offer several benefits over the second approach, which involves setting up a new mechanism in consultation with the community. First, it may improve a given programme's chances of success, since working with existing mechanisms can mean that members of the community are more likely to identify culturally with or place trust in the programme. Second, it may help to ensure that the programme causes minimal disruptions or negative side effects for members of the community. Third, it may be an efficient entry-point to protection, since communities that have been dealing with a threat for a long time may have already tried several self-protection measures and identified the most effective one. Finally, it may help to ensure the sustainability of the protection programme after the external actor leaves.

[59] Ashley Jackson, 'Protecting Civilians: The Gap Between Norms and Practice' (London: Overseas Development Institute, 2014) 4.

[60] Joint UNHCR-NGO-Academia team, 'Community Based Protection, Survey Findings and Analysis' (prepared for UNHCR's 2014 Annual Consultation's session on Community Based Protection) 2–3 <www.unhcr.org/ngo-consultations/CBP-Survey-Findings-Final-June2014.pdf>.

One example of how an external actor might try to work with existing local protection mechanisms is through engagement with local laws, norms, and traditions. Customary law, as well as local values and traditions, often matter at least as much as formal rights in local conceptions of protection. The L2GP study of local protection in Jonglei, South Sudan, for instance, found that 'the Dinka concept of *cieng* is the rights framework within which local people operate, and family mediation and the court structure are the institutions that protect their rights if they have behaved "properly"'.[61] This study also found that 'family mediation plays the primary role in seeking a solution for the vulnerable. But for those without any kind of protective family structure, the courts, including those practising both customary and judiciary law, play a vital role in providing "protection" for local people.'[62]

External protection actors may see Dinka customary law as being different from, and in some cases incompatible with, their own approaches. Yet it may be important for external protection actors to acknowledge and accept customary law as a point of departure. It is one of the local protection mechanisms in place, one by which most local people live, and one that frequently offers positive as well as negative elements of protection. The South Sudan case study, below, demonstrates some of the challenges involved in engaging with traditional justice.

C. Challenges

A major challenge for external actors in supporting self-protection measures stems from the fact that local perceptions of protection are often quite broad. When asked to name what they see as the most pressing threats and useful protection strategies, local communities often raise issues related to livelihoods, strengthening social cohesion, local leadership, and psychosocial support. These concerns go well beyond what many external protection actors understand as their mandate, responsibility, or area of competence.

Other difficulties which external actors wishing to support self-protection might encounter include: exclusionary or unrepresentative protection initiatives; disproportionate participation or control by elites; protection measures that might be considered unethical or dangerous; protection measures that might be considered benign or positive but outside the mandate or aims of the external actor; and protection initiatives the benefit of which may be difficult to measure or explain to donors. Communities may also prefer protection measures that present challenges with respect to: monitoring and evaluation or accountability; keeping pace with changing conflict dynamics; and impartiality and/or neutrality, particularly in cases where the community is seeking protection from a government actor.

[61] Simon Haragin, 'South Sudan—Waiting for Peace to Come: Study from Bor, Twic East & Duk counties in Jonglei' (Copenhagen: L2GP Initiative, 2011) 8 <www.local2global.info/wp-content/uploads/L2GP_Jonglei_S_Sudan_TR_FINAL.pdf>.

[62] Ibid., 8.

D. Supporting community watch groups in South Sudan

The messy and complicated reality of external actors' support for community self-protection measures is demonstrated by the recent experience of the UN peacekeeping mission in South Sudan.[63] The mission, UNMISS, operates 'protection of civilians sites' (PoC sites) within several of its bases. These sites are IDP camps that formed after civilians fled to UN bases for protection from fighting, including deliberate violence against civilians, when civil war broke out in December 2013. At the time of writing, there were over 150,000 civilians living in PoC sites around the country.[64]

UN police are responsible for maintaining internal safety and security within the PoC sites, but their numbers are small in proportion to the total population living in the camps. Their capacity is also restricted by their mandate, which does not include most of the functions usually associated with law enforcement, such as the conduct of criminal investigations or arrests. As a result, they worked with communities to establish Community Watch Groups (CWGs). UNMISS' support to CWGs takes an external actor-led approach to supporting self-protection. CWG members are nominated by the community, but UNMISS retains the authority to remove members from the CWG if they violate certain standards. UNMISS helps to train and empower CWG members to intervene in low-level disputes, but CWG members are required to refer cases to UNMISS police if they rise to a level involving the use or threat of violence. The protection efforts of CWGs and UNMISS thus complement one another, with UNMISS establishing roles, responsibilities, standards, and guidelines to define their activities and relationship.

Community Watch Group members serve several protection functions: they patrol and keep watch for dangerous activity; receive complaints by community members of misbehaviour; informally investigate allegations in minor disputes; mediate disagreements between members of the community; and serve as a liaison with and reporting avenue to UNMISS police. To assist them with their activities, UNMISS offers CWG members training on a variety of subjects such as patrolling, child protection, gender-based violence, conflict avoidance and resolution techniques, and fire safety. Although CWGs are instructed not to intervene physically in violent situations or to deal directly with serious crimes, they play important protection roles in preventing situations from escalating to violence and ensuring that such incidents are reported to UNMISS.

Engagement with the CWGs offers UN police significant benefits including enhanced situational awareness and capacity within the PoC sites, cultural knowledge and linguistic skills that increase the ability of UNMISS police to maintain security, and improved legitimacy and trust through the interface with community

[63] The information in this example is drawn from interviews conducted in South Sudan (Juba and Bentiu) by Stimson Center staff in June 2015. The interviews were conducted with protection of civilians site residents and community watch group members, UN personnel including UN police, and others (such as humanitarian personnel working with protection of civilians site residents).

[64] UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS), 'UNMISS Protection of Civilians (POC) Site Update No. 81' (7 July 2015) <reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/07-07-Update%2081%20%283%29.pdf>.

representatives. The CWGs provide valuable assistance to UNMISS in dealing with very serious internal safety and security issues, including crowd control, gang violence, weapons possession, and violent crimes.

Working with CWGs also presents UNMISS with complicated challenges. First, there are issues related to representation. Although UNMISS has made efforts to ensure that women participate in the CWGs, cultural barriers and expectations around gender roles have meant that women remain underrepresented. In the PoC site in the capital city, Juba, women are estimated to make up 15–20 per cent of CWG representatives, and in the largest PoC site, near the town of Bentiu, they are estimated to account for only 10–15 per cent. Moreover, as inter-county and intra-tribal tensions rise within the country more broadly, these tensions have been reflected within PoC sites and could complicate the mission's relationship with the CWGs. UNMISS police try to ensure regional diversity within CWGs by seeking representatives from different zones within the PoC sites, which often align with different regions and sub-tribes. However, this measure may not be sufficient if tensions continue to escalate. In the Bentiu PoC site, tensions between IDPs from Mayom County (who are perceived as pro-government) and the rest of the IDP community have grown to the point where the communities have decided to establish separate 'high committees' (community leadership structures) instead of one integrated high committee. Given how important it is to UNMISS to be perceived as impartial, this issue has the potential to present serious difficulties in working with CWGs.

Second, there are issues related to accountability and abuse of power. There have been several instances of CWG members acting beyond their authority, for example, detaining or imposing physical punishments on persons they deemed to have committed offences. There have also been unconfirmed reports that CWG representatives were charging community members for some services. There is no thorough way for UNMISS to vet the CWG representatives nominated by communities. Although UNMISS can and has removed members from CWGs for egregious abuses of power, this kind of accountability can prove difficult; members of the community are often very reluctant to identify specific CWG members who have abused their authority. Moreover, UNMISS police are put in a difficult position of deciding whether specific instances of abuse warrant removal from the CWG. If they were to remove members for even slight abuses of authority, the system might become unworkable altogether.

Third, there are also issues related to different understandings of threats and protection. Residents of the PoC sites in Bentiu[65] and Juba,[66] for example, have frequently expressed dissatisfaction with the fact that UNMISS refuses to punish behaviours that are considered serious infractions of traditional laws and cultural norms, such as adultery, or elopement without paying the bride's family a dowry in cattle. Cultural norms often dictate that this behaviour necessitates detention or physical punishment, and these responses may even be seen as a way of protecting

[65] Interviews conducted by Aditi Gorur and Alison Giffen in Bentiu, South Sudan, June 2015, on file with authors.

[66] Aditi Gorur (2014), see n 2, 13–14.

the perceived victims as well as the wider community by acting as a deterrent. However, the mission's policies and approaches to protection do not permit it to acknowledge these behaviours as threats or to detain or expel the perceived offenders.

The UNMISS's experience with CWGs demonstrates that supporting community self-protection measures is not necessarily a simple proposition for external protection actors, but it can nevertheless offer significant benefits for improved protection programming. Despite the flaws and challenges, the combined efforts of the UN police and the CWGs have likely played an important role in enhancing the capacity and perceived legitimacy of UN police in the PoC sites, and in doing so improved their protection effectivensess.

E. Supporting self-protection in South Kordofan

In contrast to the UNMISS case study, L2GP has worked with a more community-led approach to self-protection in opposition-controlled parts of South Kordofan in Sudan. An estimated one million people remain in the area, trying to survive a civil war that broke out in 2011.[67] The civilian population continues to be targeted by aerial bombardment and ground attacks. At the same time, they are denied any formal humanitarian assistance or public services, despite a severe food crisis, massive displacement, and increased mortality from disease. The Sudanese government was perceived by those interviewed as being the main source of threat, while international actors—be they political or humanitarian—were seen to be paralyzed by the government's continued obstruction of access.[68]

L2GP researchers working with local NGOs and volunteers established and funded a programme to strengthen local communities' self-protection capacities, drawing on earlier research into self-protection responses in the area.[69] With this support, local civil society actors, increasingly led by a local women's association, developed a project that reached several hundred thousand individuals. Volunteers moved between villages offering training and advice on practical individual self-protection skills, including: (a) avoiding injury or death from armed conflict, by hiding from aerial bombings and providing first aid; (b) avoiding life-threatening risks from lack of food, income, basic services, and shelter, including through pre-positioning food and property in safe places; and (c) dealing with fear, a sense of isolation, despair, unhappiness, and the erosion of dignity and core values,

[67] Because of access restrictions related to the conflict, exact figures on the size of the population residing in South Kordofan remain elusive. The opposition's 'Sudan Relief and Rehabilitation Association' in its January–June 2015 report (on file with researchers) lists the total population in conflict areas of South Kordofan as 1.3 million, with some 466,630 displaced by conflict. Based on secondary sources, the June 2015 Humanitarian Snapshot by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA) in Sudan suggests that up to 538,000 people may be displaced in South and West Kordofan and Blue Nile State combined. UN OCHA, 'Humanitarian Snapshot: Sudan, June 2015' (June 2015) <reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Sudan_Humanitarian_Snapshot_30_Jun_2015_A4.pdf>.

[68] Corbett, see n 21, 1–77.

[69] Justin Corbett, *Protection in Sudan's Nuba Mountains: Local achievements, International Failures* (Copenhagen: L2GP Initiative, 2012) 1–77.

including through building and maintaining psychosocial support within family structures.

Building on existing networks, local civil society actors set up a system of 'training-of-trainers', which gradually expanded to larger areas in South Kordofan. Self-protection messages quickly spread to schools, mosques, and churches. An evaluation of the project based on household interviews demonstrated that the information provided that was perceived to be most helpful was advice on staying safe during aerial bombardment, followed in descending order by information on: health and sanitation; family budgeting and food storage; women's rights and violence against women; traditional medicine and first aid; and finally, dealing with mental trauma and psychosocial issues.[70]

The minimal involvement of external actors demonstrated how much the community was able to accomplish on its own, but also brought some challenges. The difficulties associated with international protection actors not having a local presence limited the ability for external monitoring and evaluation.[71] Access limitations made it difficult to ensure reliable and regular monthly payments to cover programme costs.[72] The limited oversight meant that it was difficult to identify volunteers who needed additional training or who were not a good fit for the programme.[73] Local actors were able to overcome most challenges and the programme continued to develop and considerably expand its reach. However, the limited support from external humanitarian actors did mean that the local volunteers could not adequately address many critical protection concerns, such as severe and prolonged food insecurity.[74]

Despite these challenges, the programme is believed to have reduced casualties from aerial bombardments in the area.[75] The initiative proved to be sustainable over four years of intense war in an area with no international access. Unlike most traditional rights-based, internationally led protection responses, it reflected a holistic understanding of threats and incorporated a wide range of issues, treating them as deeply interconnected.[76] Further, the communities' and local leaders' appreciation of these activities gave the women's association the influence and momentum to go on to address issues such as women's rights and violence against women, with both civil and military leaders.

V. Conclusion

While many external protection actors now recognize that communities affected by conflict often take measures to keep themselves safe, there is still considerable confusion about how they might be able to support community self-protection measures. Some external actors may be able to adopt a truly community-led approach

[70] Justin Corbett, 'Experiences with Local and Global Responses to the Protection Crises—South Kordofan and Blue Nile, Sudan 2010–2015' (Copenhagen: L2GP Initiative, October 2015) 9–10 <http://www.local2global.info/wp-content/uploads/L2GP_SK_BN_2015_final.pdf>.

[71] Ibid., and Corbett, see n 69, 5–6. [72] Corbett, see n 69, 3, and Corbett, see n 70, 5–6.

[73] Corbett, see n 69, 6. [74] Ibid. [75] Ibid. [76] Ibid., 3–4.

to supporting self-protection, while others may be constrained from doing so by their existing mandates, policies, and practices. However, there are other ways that external actors can engage positively with community self-protection: by incorporating local communities' understandings of protection into their own protection activities; by ensuring that they have a nuanced understanding of local self-protection mechanisms to avoid inadvertently undermining them; by working with communities to design protection programmes that leverage both the external actor's and the community's strengths; and by identifying ways to complement or strengthen any positive self-protection mechanisms that are already in place.

For external actors, working to empower communities to protect themselves can present diverse and serious challenges. External actors and local communities may perceive protection differently, and may not share the same assessment of the most appropriate self-protection measures to employ. These challenges echo the complexities, constraints, and roadblocks that protection actors encounter in their work more broadly. Any effort to protect civilians from conflict will necessarily be complicated by varying expectations of how host state governments, parties to the conflict, external protection actors, and civilians should behave; which threats should be prioritized; and how limited resources should be allocated. Decisions about who to protect and how always involve trade-offs, and as a result, full or even adequate protection is rarely accomplished.

Yet the pursuit of protection is still of fundamental importance, given the impact it can have for people whose lives are devastated by conflict. Support to community self-protection is riddled with challenges, but as recognition of the importance of self-protection grows, and as external actors make more attempts to engage with and support self-protection, organizations may be able to learn from each other's experiences. Over time, the protection field can draw lessons from its successes and failures and reshape its approach to strive for a less imperfect response to civilians under threat.