



PREPAREDNESS & PROTECTION

This paper is one in a series that examines how the act of helping civilians brace for violence can complement and benefit efforts in many fields related to peace and conflict.

Local capacity for self-preservation has powerful implications for protection, human rights, nonviolent resistance, development aid, disaster risk reduction, early warning and response, humanitarian aid, peacekeeping, and security sector reform, as well as efforts to manage conflict, reduce recruitment into violence, mitigate displacement, and prevent conflict returning.

The knock-on effects of civilians being better prepared for inexorable violence have scarcely been considered (even within the field of protection). Nothing else has such crosscutting potential as preparedness: It is the hidden common denominator of our work.

Aid service providers will often be the best situated to support local preparedness. But by getting better joined up with such providers, the practitioners in these other fields may see a very impactful multiplier upon their work on the ground.

Prepare more local self-protection.

1. Protections that bolster local capacity will be the last protections standing—because they support the abilities of the very people who are left standing alone as violence shuts the world out.
2. Some of the best and brightest in the aid world have long urged aid providers to invest in local abilities for self-preservation. More reports than can be cited here have stressed locals' potential capacity (and outsiders' potential incapacity) in the matter of protection. Yet nothing written or designed under the rubric of local "resilience" resembles the systematic process of preparedness described here.
3. Language can quickly confuse. Work in several different silos refers to helping civilians protect themselves. Yet in too many projects that we call "self-protection," the word *self* is appended to the names of projects that *we* conceive and a local community then runs it-*self*. That is, in most protection projects, what we call "community-based" is not *community-born*. And what we call "civil society support by donors is, by and large, assistance for a narrow group of entities within the broad rubric of organized civil society." This refers to support for NGOs and, as a USIP report finds, "in practice, the term NGO has been treated as synonymous with civil society."¹
4. "Civil society comprises more than the sum total of formally constituted NGOs or CSOs. It includes a wider range of informal organizations, networks, and citizens' groups from traditional forms of civic association."² "NGOs, by contrast, are typically more established organizations, often registered making it easier for donor agencies to partner with them."³ They "demonstrate high capacity with respect to accounting and reporting... [They have] a professional presence—offices, staff, utility bills, computers, and cars."⁴ "Civil society as defined and supported by

donors often privileges elite perspectives and organizations that have grasped donor rhetoric and procedures.”

5. Despite these qualifications, “NGOs are often not the most salient actors in mobilizing people”.⁵ Liam Mahony finds that, “The professional NGO sector is just a small fraction of civil society, and some of the most important civil society capacities for self-mobilization and problem-solving are often found elsewhere. One of the key arenas... is at the level of community coping skills. Communities... confront conflict together”⁶ Too often, NGOs may not be this grounded.
6. There commonly exists grassroots leadership that already tries to help its own people brace for and mitigate the impacts of violence. “Collective citizen mobilization... [is] made up of shifting clusters of organizations, networks, communities, and individuals, connected by challenges...”⁷ This canopy of governance is comprised of potent forms of “community” down below state-established local jurisdictions and of “civil society” down below incorporated NGOs.
7. Typically, the leaders are not formally elected and the structures are neither statutorily constituted nor housed in brick and mortar buildings. (Indeed, a street address, public profile, or any overt form of organizing might endanger the participants.) They are led by individuals who by social standing, social contract, or social unit are motivated to aid their own people. They might be service providers who by profession intimately support the population. They might be respected community elders who by tradition look out for the people. They might be heads of clan or family who by blood protect their own.
8. Despite repeated calls to invest in local genius for self-preservation, no systematic industry-wide approaches that help locals—absent force of laws or arms—physically prepare self-protections have emerged.
9. Quite arguably, the notion of supporting local self-protection has actually been pushed in the opposite direction by the global “Responsibility to Protect” movement. R2P doctrine is very commonly interpreted to mean that if governments are unwilling or unable to protect their citizens, then responsibility vests upward to the international community. We hear far less about how responsibility and the capacity for survival also vest downward. The main staple of our funding appeals, diplomatic demarches, war game simulations, and more, is the rescuer-victim dichotomy.
10. Obviously local populations often do become victims. It is very telling when some neighbors or communities are caught unawares or make a wrong decision—and their neighbors do not. The discrepancy will often reveal a role there could have been for preparedness. One long-time observer in Mozambique noted that, “Various communities prepared for violence differently. It was not unusual to see the inhabitants of one town avoid the ravages of war due to careful escape planning while those of a neighboring community suffered casualties by running directly into the soldiers’ path without any forethought.”⁸ It is quite possible that the simple difference in physical readiness between the two was the quality of leadership and information they possessed.
11. As noted, The Cuny Center has inventoried hundreds of tactics by which local providers and populations protect themselves. Some of the methods are to us unconventional, unpalatable and even illicit. “By their very origin, all coping mechanisms are sub-optimal. They are imperfect and can become more exploitative as crisis intensifies. Yet they represent the best informed response to crisis, because they are developed by those whose lives and livelihoods are most vulnerable.”⁹ Behind unorthodox, unsustainable steps with elements of self-inflicted harm there often is a calculation that we must respect. Some of these tactics have by themselves saved millions of lives.

Prepare more timely protection.

12. Most of the activities described in the ICRC’s three-ringed Egg Model of protection are ill-timed. There is the *Environment-building* ring of action which includes efforts to “foster a social,

cultural, institutional and legal environment supportive of human rights.” While important, these efforts have a long-term horizon which comes too late for those being killed in the present.

13. Next there is the *Remedial* ring which includes efforts to “restore people’s dignity and to ensure adequate living conditions after they have suffered abuse.” Efforts like family tracing, trauma counseling, demining, prosecuting war crimes, reintegration, reparation, restitution, and rehabilitation are all important—but are all taken after the damage and displacement has occurred.
14. The final ring, “Responsive” action, includes efforts to “deal with an emerging or established protection problem, aimed at preventing its recurrence, ending it, and/or alleviating its immediate effects.” Although these measures do not help locals *prepare* to face violence alone, there have been promising experiments in recent years that are more proactively “responsive.” (These are experiments with *physical* readiness—and preparedness support would help take them to the next level, as is noted in the following section.)
15. But a fourth temporal ring of protection could be “Preparedness.” Preparedness action includes supporting local efforts to brace for danger that is coming. In the first go-round it would stress action pre-violence and pre-displacement. That is, it would initially prioritize work in situ before great harm is done. But it is vital “post” violence and displacement as well because in many of today’s chronically unstable places, danger returns again. Support for local preparedness in the first instance is rare in today’s arsenal of protection. Bewilderingly, it is quite rare after that too.

Prepare more physical protection.

16. Médecins sans Frontières’s Marc du Bois once wrote that the international community substitutes a “specialized notion” of the protection *of rights* for actions designed to provide directly for the safety *of people*.¹⁰ [Emphasis added] Indeed, the notion of “humanitarian protection” most cited by aid agencies has long been the ICRC-generated description, which is “all activities aimed at obtaining full respect for the rights of the individual in accordance with the letter and spirit of relevant bodies of law (human rights, humanitarian and refugee law).” That is, protection has largely been moored to rights, laws, and the steps that might win adherence to them. Efforts of this kind are not direct point-of-contact (moment-of-threat) protection.
17. It is a vision of influencing the legal, civil, political order. It is a liberal democratic world of “rights-holders” and “duty-bearers”—but often not the world that those facing atrocity live in. As Phillip Lancaster, Gen. Dallaire’s confidant in Rwanda, said, those actually at risk live in “a separate world” where it is the “survival imperative” that keeps them alive in the moment.¹¹
18. When the Khmer Rouge, Lord’s Resistance Army, Interharme, or Islamic State come to your village; when the Janjiwid, Boko Haram, Arkan’s Tigers, or D’Aubuisson’s death squads come to your home, then if you are prepared you will respond in tangible *tactical* ways. You will deal or pay, run or hide, fool them, join them or shoot them. You will take discreet, unorthodox steps to secure lifesaving sustenance and services. And the paramount measurement of impact will be: did you get your family and assets out of harm’s way—or did you not? Steps taken at the point of contact with violence are fatefully decisive.
19. None of this is to suggest that we who are not in the military or peacekeeping realm should insert ourselves at the point-of-contact and “physically” shield civilians. Maybe this is what many have meant over the years when they said “We don’t ‘do’ protection.” That misses the point: we can indeed help locals prepare for *their own* physical protection.
20. But rather than explore such indirect physical protection, we tend, with exceptions, to dig in and double down on our familiar methods like diplomacy, negotiation, persuasion, denunciation, and prosecution. Again and again we reinvent familiar approaches with new catchphrases and structures.

21. We need to step out of the box, be realistic about the limits of our ability to influence violent actors and events, and accept that civilians should at times brace themselves for violence that might prove to be beyond influence.
22. There are useful precedents. Some programs focus on the unique risks that women and children face amid violence and support physical steps to improve their situational awareness and safety. The most grounded of these programs do not artificially segregate “vulnerable groups” from the family or larger community in which many protections are logically nested.
23. In his remarkable book, *A Long Way Gone*, former child soldier Ishmael Beah wrote: “In a matter of seconds, people started screaming and running in different directions, pushing and trampling on whoever had fallen. No one had the time to take anything with them. Everyone just ran to save his or her life... Families were separated and left behind everything they had worked for their whole lives... We had yet to learn these things and implement survival tactics, which was what it came down to.”¹²
24. As often happens, it was the collapse of family units and assets that left children like Beah most vulnerable to conscription. If programs single out, isolate, and create stand-alone protections for women and children they risk failing to see wider web of family or community protection. “It takes a village,” after all.
25. However, efforts to safeguard at-risk *individuals* capture the heart and imagination. In crass terms, preparedness support for communities needs to become as marketable as the protection of women and children is. The narrative of the heroic village needs to be made as fund-worthy as the narrative of the tragic victim. And it can.
26. There have been other useful precedents too: nascent efforts in support of community policing, community contingency planning, and community early warning. Unfortunately—they constitute only a small fraction of the international portfolio of protection.
27. An aid provider can work with locals on many ways to prepare for their own physical security. If mine awareness campaigns can reach millions with informal pedagogies, then why can’t preparedness messaging and mobilization? If disaster risk reduction regimens can reach tens of millions with rudimentary tactical readiness, then why can’t conflict preparedness?

Prepare more holistic protection.

28. Today’s repertoire of external protections is multi-faceted and undoubtedly saving many lives. But arguably it could save many more by making the three strategic connections cited below.
29. (1) *Make safety, sustenance, and services equal and indivisible parts of protection.* Some claim there tends to be a “disconnect” between how local communities and outsiders (such as aid agencies or peace operations) view protection. In this vein, a Feinstein Center report examined “the wide-ranging security needs of local communities and the uneven extent to which these are understood and responded to by major international institutions. The voices of local communities are not being heard, much less ‘privileged’ by outside actors,” it concluded. “Communities have a more holistic understanding of what constitutes security than the narrower concerns of the [outside] actors.”¹³
30. We on the outside are getting better at holistic approaches. For example, the aid industry increasingly “mainstreams” protection throughout its work, and the nascent field of emergency livelihoods has creatively explored the interplay between locals’ safety, sustenance, and services. Still, we will not “connect the dots” as well as we must if we work inside preferred parameters and narrow silos with inadequate attention to local preferences. The Tufts report concluded that, “If the perceptions of local communities were to be the entry point for outside actor engagement or the benchmark for the effectiveness of international assistance and peace support, a major re-thinking of the ways [these groups] operate would be required.”¹⁴

31. Preparedness support is exactly the kind of consultation process that can guide this re-thinking. It offers, for example, a way for expatriates and locals to address physical safety *and* life-critical sustenance and services concurrently. The logic of factoring these elemental needs into talk of “protection” is irrefutable: the vast majority of people who die during conflict die from malnutrition and disease. (Of the millions who have died in the Democratic Republic of the Congo—only a fraction lost their lives to bullets or blades.) With foresight, many such deaths will be preventable. “Protection” is a hollow concept without the sustenance or services to survive.
32. Just as importantly, civilians often *put themselves* in harm’s way in order to attain life essentials, so safety cannot be tackled in isolation from these other factors. Much of their risk-taking might not be necessary with more preparedness. If we paid more heed to these connections, then we would likely “map the security environment” quite differently.
33. (2) *Make counterpart security a lynchpin of community protection.* If life-critical *sustenance* and *services* are essential to locals’ fundamental security, how then can the ability of local providers to offer such services and sustenance not be just as essential? Half of preparedness support is dedicated to those providers because they must be able to survive before they can pivot and save lives. That is, counterpart security is treated as a lynchpin of community protection. This is a linkage that is not found in conventional efforts called “protection.”
34. (3) *Make local preparedness a common denominator for all fields concerned about violence.* As this paper notes, there are a good many endeavors that struggle to influence violence: protection, human rights, nonviolent resistance, development aid, disaster risk reduction, early warning and response, humanitarian aid, peacekeeping, security sector reform, as well as our efforts to manage conflict, mitigate displacement, and prevent conflict returning. Each has its bottom line: human dignity and survival. In each case, the final way to ensure this is by supporting local ability to be prepared for the worst. This connects all our disparate work.
35. Local preparedness can be the common denominator and very complementary lower canopy to all of these efforts. It is up to the mandarins in each field to recognize the dire need at times for a Plan B. They must figure out either how to provide such support themselves, or determine who in a given instance is the “best platform available” for this work—then get joined up and interoperable with them.

Prepare more scalable protection.

36. As noted, there commonly exists grassroots leadership that already tries to help its own people brace for and mitigate the impacts of violence. Thus the scaffolding for preparedness action already exists. It need not be invented or imported. But it does need to be amplified.
37. Applied research pilots like the Danish *Local-to-Global Protection* program have facilitated the self-protection efforts of such local actors. L2GP’s work in South Kordofan, Sudan, shows the phenomenal reach of even small-scale pilots. At nominal expense, local teams tooled up guidance and then dispersed to animate action in locales cut off from any outside protection. The action centered on indigenous knowledge as well as non-local expertise and experience pertaining to: bombardments, early warning systems, mines/UXO, emergency health and sanitation, wild herbal medicines, inbound displaced persons, psycho-social care, prepositioned food and property, household rationing, first aid, and more.
38. Spin-off teams independently launched a second generation of dissemination. At last count, L2GP’s two pilots reached nearly one hundred thousand people with life-saving messages at a cost of between .50 cents to one dollar per individual. In big aid or peacekeeping operations, that amount would be considered mere spillage. Then third-generation messaging spontaneously occurred through word of mouth. There were also ancillary benefits very much appreciated by the local populace in the form of micro infusions of aid and a sense of accompaniment.

39. The exponential reach of small pilots begs the obvious question of how many more could be reached by scaling up efforts. This goes again to the matter of comparative advantages. As the Brookings Institutions' Elizabeth Ferris wrote, "In addition to providing humanitarian assistance, a particular and perhaps unique contribution that NGOs can make is to build the capacity of communities to protect themselves."¹⁵ Their "self-protection strategies," she adds, "need to be understood, affirmed and supported to the extent possible."¹⁶
40. Beyond such possible unique contributions, aid providers may make the "best platform available" because of their scope and scale. They pose a unique opportunity for ramping up self-protection. In their sheer numbers, local and international aid providers together form a huge latent bulwark in the remote and unstable areas in which they work. Any serious effort to help locals survive alone amid violence should prioritize such scalability.

Use the best platform available.

41. Many organizations impact protection, including those expert in (development or humanitarian) aid, human rights, good governance, rule of law, peace building, conflict prevention, early warning, accompaniment, diplomacy, peacekeeping, security sector reform, and more. Each is vital and offers different strengths. Yet very often it will be the *aid providers* that are best positioned to *support local capacity for self-protection*.¹⁷
42. Generally speaking, they are the most apt to have the best access, contacts, and trust on the ground; the best situational awareness and cultural nuance. They have vital skill sets (recalling that most deaths during conflict stem from the loss of life-critical sustenance and services). Community mobilization is their bailiwick. If anyone can animate information and mobilization campaigns to inoculate communities against the worst of violence—it likely is the aid provider. They are the most apt to have defensible reasons for being in conflict areas and comparatively more autonomy of action. Although aid agencies are sometimes accused of "being political," they are less apt to incur the same level of blowback as the other organizations, cited above, which address peace and conflict with efforts at sensitive political or societal reform.
43. Support for the preparedness of local counterparts and communities to deal with violence alone is not a "substitute" for action by the other types of organizations listed above. Rather, it is a very complementary "lower canopy" of action. Those other organizations will often reach their outer limits, being unable to influence violent actors and events on the ground. They should have a Plan B. Finding ways to get joined up with aid providers who are fostering readiness on the ground may help them fulfill their respective missions.
44. There are many calls these days to stop arguing over mandates and instead look for those with the comparative advantages in a given time and place. And quite often, that "best platform available" will be the localized aid infrastructure. An ongoing, well-rounded environment of incentives can be provided to aid agencies to undertake this challenge for which they may be uniquely qualified.
45. Preparedness support can help transform protection work, making it more local, timely, physical, and scalable.

Endnotes

¹ Maria J. Stephan, Sadaf Lakhani and Nadia Naviwala, *Aid to Civil Aid Society: A Movement Mindset*, United States Institute of Peace, Special Report 361, Washington, D.C., February 2015; p. 4. **See also:** Liam Mahony, *Non-Military Strategies for Civilian Protection in the DRC*, Fieldview Solutions, March, 2013; p. 19. The author states that, “Unfortunately, many ‘civil society’ studies and international organizations focus only on the NGO sub-sector when they think of civil society.”

² Maria J. Stephan, Sadaf Lakhani and Nadia Naviwala, *Aid to Civil Aid Society: A Movement Mindset*, United States Institute of Peace, Special Report 361, Washington, D.C., February 2015; p. 4.

³ Maria J. Stephan, Sadaf Lakhani and Nadia Naviwala, *Aid to Civil Aid Society: A Movement Mindset*, United States Institute of Peace, Special Report 361, Washington, D.C., February 2015; p. 2.

⁴ Maria J. Stephan, Sadaf Lakhani and Nadia Naviwala, *Aid to Civil Aid Society: A Movement Mindset*, United States Institute of Peace, Special Report 361, Washington, D.C., February 2015; p. 2-3.

⁵ Maria J. Stephan, Sadaf Lakhani and Nadia Naviwala, *Aid to Civil Aid Society: A Movement Mindset*, United States Institute of Peace, Special Report 361, Washington, D.C., February 2015; pp. 2-6.

⁶ Liam Mahony, *Non-Military Strategies for Civilian Protection in the DRC*, Fieldview Solutions, March, 2013; p. 20.

⁷ Maria J. Stephan, Sadaf Lakhani and Nadia Naviwala, *Aid to Civil Aid Society: A Movement Mindset*, United States Institute of Peace, Special Report 361, Washington, D.C., February 2015; p. 2.

⁸ Carolyn Nordstrom, *A Different Kind of War Story*, University of California Press, Berkeley, CA, 1997; p. 11.

⁹ Sue Lautze and Dr. John Hammock, *Coping with Crisis, Coping with Aid: Capacity Building, Coping Mechanisms and Dependency, Linking Relief and Development*, for the UN Inter-Agency Standing Committee, by The International Famine Center, Tufts University, Medford, MA, December 1996; p. 2.

¹⁰ Marc du Bois, *Protection: the New Humanitarian Fig Leaf*; p. 6.

¹¹ Philip Lancaster, “Human Rights and the Survival Imperative: Rwanda’s Troubled Legacy,” in William Sweet’s *Philosophical Theory and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, University of Ottawa Press, Ottawa, 2003; p. 143.

¹² Ishmael Beah, *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier*, Sarah Crichton Books, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 2007; pp. 23 and 29.

¹³ Found at: <http://fic.tufts.edu/publication-item/mapping-the-security-environment>.

¹⁴ Found at: <http://fic.tufts.edu/publication-item/mapping-the-security-environment>.

¹⁵ Elizabeth Ferris, *The Politics of Protection: The Limits of Humanitarian Action*, Brookings Institution Press, 2010, Washington D.C., 2011; p. 280.

¹⁶ Elizabeth Ferris, *Who is Protecting Civilians in Syria?*, September 10, 2013. Found at: <http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/up-front/posts/2013/09/10-syria-protection-of-civilians-ferris>.

¹⁷ Rachel Hastie, *Community-Based Protection*, 11-17-2014. Found at: <https://www.interaction.org/blog/community-based-protection>. ... The author states that, “NGOs have long worked within communities in crisis – including as implementing partners for the major UN agencies – so developing community-based protection work builds on their pre-existing strength, experience and networks.”