

**Staying Safe in Armed Conflict Contexts: What do crisis affected people prioritize and does it work?  
Do humanitarian actors and others take note?**

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*World Peace Foundation, The Fletcher School of Law  
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## **Introduction**

The core purpose of the World Peace Foundation workshop was to:

- (a) Identify what is known about the practices deployed by at-risk groups to maximize their safety, and that of their families, in situations of acute distress (civilian self-protection);
- (b) Review how international humanitarian actors relate to the agency, priorities and aspirations of civilians at imminent risk; and
- (c) Outline a potential research program on civilian self-protection practices.

The World Peace Foundation brought together a group of leading scholars and practitioners with extensive field experience of armed conflict situations in order to develop a better understanding of the strategies and tactics deployed by crisis-affected communities, individuals and groups. Examples of groups who might deploy specific sets of self-protection activities are young men anxious to avoid conscription by armed groups, or young women anxious to avoid sexual violence and exploitation

During the two-day workshop, the group explored who, among the affected population, defines the priorities, goals, and strategies; what these are; and what challenges arise as they are implemented. Numerous factors were examined at the individual, family, and group levels. Across cases and contexts, the researchers demonstrated how and why strategies change over time, and explored the existence of tensions within families or groups with regard to identified priorities, strategies, and tactics, how decisions are made, and how differences over priorities, where they exist, are resolved. Finally, the discussion explored when and how the priorities of people within the conflict affected population converge with or diverge from international humanitarian protection strategies. Two key challenges were discussed: how to better understand the perspective and actions of people confronted with grave threats to their safety and well-being, and how to make these priorities and choices legible to international humanitarian actors.

## Background

For international humanitarian actors, the protection of civilians is too often seen as something *done to* passive recipients, rather than activities undertaken to reinforce the priorities of and engage with these populations as key actors in their own futures. Furthermore, there is very little scholarship that pays serious attention to the priorities and goals of people in crisis situations. Overlooked are the questions of how those at risk identify the most acute threats; how they seek to protect themselves from these risks; and the balance of which strategies and coping mechanisms produce outcomes that are beneficial, detrimental or a combination thereof. This in effect often means that there is little appreciation of affected people’s priorities and goals in situations of crises. Thus, a critical issue is whether humanitarian action, including protection practices in particular, addresses the reality of people’s primary concerns and experiences and, by extension, strengthens rather than undermines effective civilian self-protection initiatives.

The challenge of listening to and learning from these vulnerable populations is further complicated by the fact that international humanitarian actors did not themselves possess a shared understanding of the meaning of protection. Likewise, ‘protection’ is understood differently by local populations across contexts. To illustrate, research undertaken on at-risk people’s attempts to protect themselves, their families and communities from the effects of natural disasters and armed conflict in Myanmar (Burma), Sudan, South Sudan, Syria and Zimbabwe finds that local concepts of ‘protection’ extend beyond, and at times are in tension with, the concepts and practice of international humanitarian agencies. One research program found that,

In most of the studies, livelihoods and protection were intimately linked. Customary law and local values and traditions mattered at least as much as formal rights. Psychological and spiritual needs and threats were often considered as important as physical survival. Local understandings and self-protection activities, while hugely important for everyday survival, are rarely acknowledged or effectively supported by aid agencies.<sup>i</sup>

Today, there is the beginning of interest in better understanding the strategies and tactics of crisis-affected populations and how this intersects with international humanitarian efforts, under the heading of Civilian Self-Protection (CSP). The available literature and insights on CSP remain relatively limited, but existing research suggests that civilians’ efforts to stay safe and out of harm’s way will likely include a number of inter-connected factors that individuals struggle to balance when under duress: such as physical, psychological, emotional and spiritual well-being, community relations and values, social cohesion, cultural norms, family and individual safety, social and other networks, and gender, age and disability considerations. Additional factors that may play a role in defining measures geared to enhancing protection relate to maintaining assets, protecting livelihoods, preserving documentation (for example to facilitate movement), calling on or creating solidarity networks, whether built on marriage and sexual exchange, religious connections (which can also spiritually sanction actors and actions), and with armed actors and local power brokers.

We propose that external interventions should take into account peoples’ resourcefulness and diverse means of surviving in dire circumstances with few available choices. Failing to do so, means that opportunities can be missed to help individuals and communities affected by conflict. Effective

humanitarian action should support and strengthen the (less harmful) decisions that people themselves make to try to ensure their own safety in conflict.

This workshop sought a more nuanced understanding of the practices deployed by at-risk groups to maximize their safety in situations of acute distress, examined how ‘external’ humanitarian actors can improve their interventions through such understanding, and outlined a potential research program to develop these insights. It examines these questions in diverse contexts: from the perspective of contemporary humanitarian response crises, along the paths of migration through Central America, in terms of protecting children, in Somalia through famine, and through the tactics and strategies of women under siege in Syria.

## Real Time Protection Issues

### ***What is Known, Unknown, and the Implications for Protection Outcomes***

The international humanitarian system is today under enormous stress, with significant outcomes for the work of protecting civilians from harm. The civilian protection agenda involves a series of inter-related activities designed to mitigate, respond to, and recover from physical harm caused by armed conflict. However, this agenda is confronted with serious challenges, including poor compliance with International Humanitarian Law by state and non-state actors, limited leadership and political will on the part of the “international community,” inept or inappropriate “peace-keeping” missions, and dysfunctional aid coordination structures.

As the world lurches from a sole super-power to a multi-polar environment, globalization processes are redefining the role of the state, exposing the weakness of global governance, and contributing to dynamics whereby crises are part of a ‘new normal’ that complicates any humanitarian endeavor. At the same time, thanks in part to the prevalence of new technologies, including social media, as well as the emergence of human rights vocabulary as a critical element of the narrative of people fighting oppression or fleeing persecution, those who are adversely affected by crises are better able than before to communicate their views including the nature of the harm they are experiencing, how they are dealing with it and means to combat it.

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The human costs of war means that the bulk of humanitarian action occurs in and around armed conflicts. The rise of urban warfare has forced civilians to adapt and employ new self-protection strategies as humanitarian action struggles to adapt protection responses to urban environments. Armed conflict in urban environments, such as Gaza (2009, 2014) or, more recently in Syria, illustrates the challenges faced by civilians trapped in asymmetric warzones that have, effectively, become IHL-free battlefields.

Our analysis of civilian self-protection proceeds from this contemporary context. Since time immemorial, family and friends have helped each other in times of crisis just as norms that regulate warfare can be traced to ancient times. However, even though there is awareness of the significance of local agency, to a large extent it operates distinct from institutionalized humanitarian initiatives notwithstanding the



potential negative implications of parallel efforts.<sup>ii</sup> There is evidence to show that the routine lack of engagement by formal humanitarian entities in local survival strategies – that is, civilian self-protection – is detrimental to the goal of saving lives, in general. An overarching concern raised in many CSP-related papers is the extent to which CSP is ignored or not sufficiently recognized by humanitarians in their strategies and programs. Concern has also been expressed that institutionalized humanitarianism routinely denies civilian agency and is slow to analyze how civilian agency responds to organized humanitarian action.

Many contextual, cultural, and political factors influence CSP decision-making in conflict settings, and the tactics employed must be varied, flexible, and dynamic to ensure survival. Categorizing these strategies remains problematic due to the many nuances and intangibles that contribute to efforts to counter the deadliness and destructiveness of contemporary warfare. A number of factors including the profound, transformative changes that are currently re-shaping the balance of power within the so-called “international community” point to the importance of an improved understanding of the complexity and convoluted dynamics of contemporary and near future war zones from a CSP perspective. Given the range of conceptualizations of CSP, it may be productive to pursue a multi-disciplinary approach involving a variety of social and political scientists, as well as experienced humanitarian practitioners, to further explore this issue.

### ***Planning from the Future: Changing Context, (Self-) Protection Implications***

Humanitarians often see protection as political or confrontational. Trade-offs between access and protection are often used as an excuse not to raise contentious issues, agencies often equate protection with human rights, and some aid workers feel that protection is “not their responsibility.” Protection concerns are rarely dealt with in a strategic, system-wide manner by humanitarians. Protection issues are rarely addressed and if so, only in a cursory manner.

The recent adoption of a statement on the Centrality of Protection by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee and the Human Rights Up Front agenda by the UN Secretary General indicates an increased awareness of the significance of a protection lens in humanitarian action. However, such declarations are paralleled by the growth of a fragmented and atomized “system” that has not kept pace with multiple changes in the operating environment, and confusion remains as to what “protection” means in practice. The ineffectiveness of the current architecture and division of labor on protection issues points to the need for a dramatic re-thinking of the systems and methodologies. Practical ways need to be found to demystify protection and to ensure that humanitarian leaders and agencies prioritize protection both at the strategic and operational levels.

Two fundamental obstacles challenge the incorporation of CSP approaches into the work of mainstream international humanitarian agencies. First, the parlous state of protection policy and practice in the humanitarian system has prevented a culture of protection from permeating all levels of policy and practice. Second, the top-down, dominant nature of the humanitarian relationship leaves little room for participation and bottom-up approaches. When local self-protection initiatives do emerge, they are often not recognized or supported because they do not fit the western canon or because they challenge the dominant power relationships in the humanitarian system.

Can this situation be remedied? Humanitarian staff, particularly those in senior positions, must be held accountable for protection failures and ensure that the protection of civilians is at the core of humanitarian

work by speaking out against abuses. Supporting these efforts without compromising humanitarian’s ability to reach those in need of assistance will help combat the first challenge. With respect to the second obstacle, much more profound change will be needed if CSP is to become a reality supported by the humanitarian sphere, including recognizing the impediments that accompany the top-down system, adopting a CSP lens in researching past crises, and constructing a typology of CSP actions and identifying which ones can be supported.

*Response*

While capacity and funding for the humanitarian system have increased, the service delivery is still lacking and the system remains run by an oligopoly. A superstructure has been created within the humanitarian sector that spends disproportionate energy and funds on maintenance of management standards and coordination rather than humanitarian assistance. Despite the rhetoric, there is little action in this sphere on real-time protection issues, and many senior managers shy away from protection work (or do it quietly) because they think it is political.

A reform agenda exists to address these issues, but little is actually being done. We must look to history to teach us lessons in this regard and ask: What kind of protection issues were identifiable in eras when humanitarian protection did not exist and how were they approached by local populations? This “cultural archive” of self-protection can be galvanized to support more informed action today. One self-protection strategy employed by communities is making their institutions illegible, demonstrating that protection is required from both exogenous and endogenous factors, as well as the humanitarian actors. If we are to be faithful to principles of humanitarianism, we need to know where to stop and how better incorporate CSP perspectives into protection programming.

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***Violence and Survival: Flight, Unauthorized Migratory Routes, Arrival***

How do migrants cope with extraordinary violence and scarcity of information, and what are the implications of these conditions for the provision of humanitarian assistance and protection? The uncertain and ever changing route north for Central American migrants is a context where these questions shape protection realities. In a context so characterized by risk and uncertainty, migrants, and those seeking to assist them, must grapple with this informational dilemma wherein information can serve as both a resource and curse; migrants must learn from past practices and protocols for navigating the journey, but the very availability of this information renders it suspect—already infiltrated by those who might prey on migrants. If the most experienced migrants and guides feel daunted by this uncertainty and violence, how do the poorest pioneers move along the route with the barest of social or financial resources at their disposal?

Strategies for self-protection along this migratory route must be dynamic and take into account the uncertain dangers that require improvisation and departure from known routes and strategies. Informational artifacts, such as graffiti and footprints, can guide one to safety or to danger. Shelters become a both source of information and of risk. This tension between protection in these spaces and



migrants’ own survival strategies highlights how formal protection spaces can both help and hinder self-protection. In particular, efforts to increase security within these facilities sometimes impede information flows, undermining the adaptive capacity of migrants in transit.

In situations where civil society organizations, formal institutions such as shelters, and religious institutions can serve as both assets and liabilities in protection, how can international and humanitarian organizations support civil society and individual self-protection efforts? By recognizing the migrants as proactive agents, and understanding the double-sided nature of many formal aid and information sources, those seeking to assist Central American migrants can gain more insight into how efforts for formal protection can both help and hurt self-protection strategies that have been improvised in this context.

### *Response*

Shelters and information are essential to survival along this migration route but also pose unique risks to CSP. The role of local municipalities and the media in supporting shelters and dissemination information can further amplify both the risks and rewards of these double-sided pieces of the CSP puzzle. Detention centers are similarly a key piece of self-protection strategies for many that also impose risks, but more research is needed on how they factor in to CSP strategies in Latin American migration contexts.

Protection issues shift over terrain, and vary at the source of migration, along the route, and at points of final destination. The closer migrants are to their destination, the more they are “worth” to smugglers, a reality that creates additional CSP challenges. Additionally, the concept of “protection,” particularly for those relying on smugglers, can be co-opted to rob people of individual agency, hindering self-protection efforts even further. Widespread acceptance of instability, uncertainty, and fluidity in this context is accompanied by increasing violence as well. Whereas before mainly younger males were migrating, now more women and children are leaving and seeking asylum. U.S. policies targeting the deportation of men specifically are splitting families and sending men back to the very violence they were attempting to flee. Violence along the routes is escalating as well, and those in transit deserve protection regardless of their motivation for migration.

### ***Children and Self-Protection***

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) marked an important legal recognition of children’s agency. However, initiatives focusing on abuses against children have often internationalized and garbled the politics of countries in crisis, and have reshaped children’s budgets towards more narrowly targeted protection programs aimed at new categories of hyper-vulnerability. As a result, protecting children from participation in militarized political orders has sometimes outweighed the imperative to support children in the exercise of their own political rights.

The CRC expects states and families to help children exercise their political rights, freedom of expression, association, and assembly, and the right to participation in decisions affecting them. However, the CRC does not have ready explanations of how children and young people develop the capacity to exercise consent. Armed conflict can reframe patterns of learning about adulthood and its coercive environments can change the nature of consent, causing children to “grow up too quick.” Protection as conceptualized by the CRC requires states to protect good things and protect from bad things, and even goes so far as to



protect children from over-protectiveness that threatens their agency. A tension between agency and protection emerges, and eroding children’s agency can become oppressive, with protection concerns outweighing considerations of agency.

In Syria and South Sudan, definition-creep is playing out with negative implications, and children associated with armed groups are being viewed as legitimate military targets. In contexts like these, exercising child agency is a daunting task that can have negative implications for child protection. However, education systems provide one avenue wherein this tension between agency and protection can be addressed. Linking education services with protection imperatives can reduce risks associated with drop out. Improvised child protection services based on alternative curricula of basic learning activities and psychosocial support can attract children facing different challenges. Rising percentages of children with access to these services represent a commitment from children and families to keep attending school despite the surrounding violence. While these efforts do not address all protection issues for children in conflict contexts, child commitment to education seems to offer a starting point for protection.

*Response*

In conceptualizing and understanding children’s self-protection strategies, we must be cognizant that different influences are at play, and strategies are being conceived of, implemented, and enforced by parents or guardians. However, when parents or caregivers are no longer present or able to influence their decisions, children themselves become active agents in how they try to protect themselves. Self-protection strategies of avoidance, alignment, and distress sales of assets take unique shapes when applied to children and the risks and rewards associated with these strategies are also influenced by gender and age. Additionally, children who exhibit characteristics of resilience, such as a sense of agency, social intelligence, empathy, community connection, and a sense of the future, hope, and growth have better mental health outcomes. Thus, building resilience and communities of resilience can be an essential protection strategy for children.

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Paying attention to how these strategies are adapted from previous strategies in the past is vital, particularly for humanitarian actors. Deep challenges to child protection by the humanitarian system remain, particularly in highly militarized societies. Hyper-vulnerable children can and should be clearly identified from the larger war-affected populations and causes and consequences of that vulnerability addressed, but at the same time protection efforts need to address the larger

war-affected child and family population. Importantly, expression of resistance to patriarchy and other forms of oppression by girls and boys is often not understood as a key motivator for children to choose different strategies to protect themselves and advance their issues, thus their political voices are dampened. These challenges -- and a nuanced understanding of how past protection strategies are being adapted by children for current contexts -- must be further explored by those seeking to assist conflict-affected children in the pursuit of protection.

***Somalia: Famine and Response***



Between late 2010 and early 2012, South Central Somalia suffered the worst famine of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Protection of livelihoods and self-protection are closely intertwined factors in the Somalia famine, and many lessons can be drawn from the extraordinary measures people took to protect their livelihoods and themselves. Flexibility and diversification of livelihoods and risk are fundamental in the ability of people to manage (or not) extreme conditions. But it is social “connectedness that crucially defined the extent to which people were able to protect their livelihoods, and where they went and what happened to them if they were displaced. However, the social networks that served to protect certain groups are also evident in the level of exploitation and discrimination that takes place between groups or clans, and humanitarian organizations are commonly not aware of how their organizations may be “captured” by these dynamics.

Al Shabaab were a critical actor, and Al Shabaab control was a significant factor in the causes and complications of the famine. However, people were most at risk from the collapse of their livelihoods and the threat of distressed displacement that this entailed. Social connectedness helped many survive displacement through the mobilization of various resources, but new risks emerged for those who were displaced. People’s self-protection strategies in displacement included being mobile and moving in groups, but those with the least strong social connections faced higher mortality and more brutalizing experiences of life in displacement camps that were controlled by stronger clans that often used the displaced as bait to attract aid that was later looted.

The implications for humanitarian action in this case are several. Intervention and practices to identify the most severely affected people in crisis has to take social networks into consideration. Furthermore, agencies need to be acutely aware of the extent to which clan dynamics play out in their own internal processes and the effect that these have on programs, targeting, diversion of aid, and “elite capture.” Most notably, protection concerns arise not only in violent conflict but in all crises, and particularly in crises that involve displacement—whether fleeing violence or distressed livelihoods.

#### Response

The 2011 famine occurred within a continuum of chronic and appalling structural crisis punctuated by periodic disaster—Al Shabaab seizing control was just the latest development. The majority of people live in a permanent state of economic, social and existential stress and insecurity, and the famine came on top of all this.

Those whose livelihoods did not collapse avoided displacement, which meant they were safer than the displaced. The role played by people’s social connections was also critical, and those who had links to the business community or access to remittances through diaspora connections survived despite losing livestock. Kinship and clan identity were major influencing factors, determining the degree of social connectedness and therefore the likelihood of survival.

Taking a gender perspective, the rise of the female breadwinner in this context is well documented, but further livelihoods-related research is needed to determine what level of assets women and men need, and have, to absorb different shocks. Effective interventions need to consider the well-being and resilience not just of individuals, but also

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of the Somali family as a whole moving forward. More research is also needed to understand the gendered nature of security in this context, and what, if anything, can be done to support or engender useful social connections that could enhance survival and resilience.

## ***Syrian Women’s Protection Strategies: Families, Communities, and Voice***

Syrian women play a central role in promoting peace and advancing security inside Syria and in the region. They engage local and international decision makers with the aim of improving conditions for civilians and negotiate local ceasefires, among other activities. Syrian women have a definitive stake in shaping the future of their country. As the war enters its sixth year, they continue to innovate and persevere in the face of unimaginable adversity.

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Women leaders in Syria are fighting back against early marriage. They are uniting to support other women captive inside prisons and speaking out against the detention of activists. Protecting children’s education, participating in ceasefire negotiations, and promoting women’s empowerment are all areas where Syrian women are organizing and mobilizing direct action. These are a sample of the protection strategies employed by Syrian women and are stories that often go untold.

In the Syrian context, protection strategies and needs differ based on which political entity controls the territory. In opposition-controlled territories, there is a heavy emphasis on state-building and governance perpetuated by a parallel state infrastructure. This is the framework Syrian women must navigate to pursue strategies for protection including human smuggling, early warnings, migration to the countryside, ad-hoc schooling and public services, and a reliance on the Civilian Defense Force. Local groups of mediators across the countryside have been successful in negotiating local truces and ceasefire agreements, and more information is needed about the role and contributions of women in these efforts.

In government controlled areas, the use of fake identities, alignment with humanitarian groups permissible to the government, and information collection on potential covert operations designed by government are key strategies. These differ from the strategies employed in besieged areas, which include utilizing tunnels, public media campaigns, creation of informal medical centers, food and medical supply smuggling, and negotiating with the government’s education directorate. Women are also organizing functioning day care centers in besieged areas. In ISIS-controlled areas, strategies such as adaptation to Islamic framing, establishment of women’s commissions, reliance on tribal alliances, and localization of armed protection are being adopted and utilized by Syrian women.

Additional protection strategies for detainees include smuggling and bribery of prison guards, rotation sleeping systems, and maintaining appearances to bolster dignity. Activists have adopted several strategies to avoid imprisonment, including using false identification and developing coded languages to avoid detection. Women and families have employed a range of specific strategies as well. Child marriage



(doing it, mobilizing against it, and attempting to prevent it), marriage to foreign fighters, creating all women police units, employing anti-sectarian peace building efforts, particularly among children, and manipulating gender norms to use for their protection. These examples demonstrate the adaptive, creative, and specialized nature of protection strategies currently being employed by women in the Syrian context.

### Response

These examples speak to a different set of norms outside the traditional thinking of international humanitarian law, human rights, and humanitarian action. We need to better understand the frameworks of traditions, values, and laws and how these frameworks are used to advance agendas from protection and dignity. Through an examination of what local people bring to bear on problem solving, the analysis of and response to humanitarian crises can be more grounded in reality and effective.

The ability of a community to effectively negotiate with armed actors is grounded in its ability to remain cohesive. Women’s stories in the Syrian context demonstrate this cohesion and its mobilizing power. Self-representation at national and international negotiations can in and of itself be a protection strategy, and therefore it is imperative to include women in these efforts; political engagement is essential and at the core of self-protection. More information is also needed about the interlocutors that span both worlds of the Syrian crisis to better understand how current self-protection strategies can be more effectively adapted and how collaboration with different stakeholders can increase protection for all.

## Conclusion

The group agreed that there is a need for high quality, in-depth, action-oriented research and knowledge production about how people in crises (in urban and rural locations, in different crises settings past and present, and over time) protect themselves. Attention should be paid to the interplay among civilians self protection efforts and surviving, resisting and rebuilding. The research and findings should prioritize learning from the civilians themselves who are adapting and improvising in their attempts to survive, resist and rebuild through their self-protection efforts. Additionally, we need to know more about what humanitarians know and don’t know about what people are actually doing, and why the humanitarian system seems too often ‘blind’ to what people do to stay safe; lack of this understanding by humanitarians can put civilians at risk.

There is also a need for better research and knowledge on protection efforts and programs that work to help reduce risk and experiences of violence, and how these intersect with civilians’ own efforts. The research should pay attention to differences due to people’s geography, urban and rural locations, age, gender, disability, ethnicity, class/caste and other key social influences that position and shape people’s options within crises. The group concluded by discussing different possible outputs and audiences for future research on this topic.

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<sup>i</sup> Ashley South and Simon Harragin, with Justin Corbett, Richard Horsey, Susanne Kempel, Henrik Fröjmark and Nils Carstensen, *Local to Global Protection in Myanmar (Burma), Sudan, South Sudan and Zimbabwe*, Humanitarian Practice Network, Network Paper Number 72 February 2012, p. iii. Available at <http://www.local2global.info/wp-content/uploads/networkpaper072.pdf>

<sup>ii</sup> South, Ashley et al (2012) “Local to Global Protection in Myanmar (Burma), Sudan, South Sudan and Zimbabwe”, *Humanitarian Practice Network*, <http://odihpn.org/resources/local-to-global-protection-in-myanmar-burma-sudan-south-sudan-and-zimbabwe/>

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