BROOKINGS

Exploring Civilian Protection: A Seminar Series
(Seminar #2: Community Self-Protection Strategies)

Thursday, October 28, 2010, 9:00 am — 1:45 pm
The Brookings Institution, Stein Room, 1775 Massachusetts Ave, NW, Washington, DC

The second in a series of three seminars on the protection of civilians was held at the Brookings Institution on October 28, 2010 and focused on the ways in which communities protect themselves.[1] Elizabeth Ferris of the Brookings Institution and Lawrence Woocher of the US Institute of Peace introduced the session, noting the importance of analyzing community self-protection strategies for both humanitarian action and conflict-prevention. Casey Barrs of the Cuny Center began the program with introductory remarks on the conceptual framework, which was followed by presentations of case studies on the Democratic Republic of Congo, Burma/Myanmar, and Colombia by Mike Jobbins, Nils Carstensen, and Gimena Sánchez, respectively.

Participants in the seminar including 25 representatives from the United Nations, international humanitarian and development organizations, non-governmental humanitarian and human rights organizations, agencies of the US government and the diplomatic community explored strategies that local communities use to protect themselves from violence, and the role of international actors in supporting community-led protection efforts. Meeting under Chatham House rules, the participants did not attempt to reach consensus, rather, they unpacked complexities and contradictions associated with community self-protection. This report provides a brief account of the presentations and sets out the main themes that emerged from the discussion. In doing so, the report aims to highlight areas for subsequent debate and action.

Conceptual Framework and Inventory of Community Self-Protection Measures

Reflecting on the magnitude of civilian deaths that have occurred due to internal conflicts over the last fifteen years and remarking on the inevitability of mass violence in the future, Casey Barrs questioned the capacity of the international protection apparatus to "protect" civilians. Noting that participants in the first seminar had identified local communities as the first actors for protection, Barrs commented on

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[1] The first seminar, held on 14 September 2010, explored different understandings of protection, ranging from physical security to protection of all human rights. The third seminar to be held in early 2011 will focus explicitly on the role of the international community in protecting people.

the need to overcome the paternalistic approach toward victims held by various actors. According to Barrs, 'actors waste precious time wrangling over the definition of protection; when locals take steps to protect themselves, they are defining protection for us.' Although some actors 'appreciate' civilians' remarkable capacity for self-preservation, and identify the 'critical importance of civilian self-protection,' Barrs said that there have been 'limited or ad-hoc attempts to inventory civilian self-protection tactics and strategies and to support them.'

'Community groups undertake deliberate, planned, life-saving practices' which need to be 'understood and shared so that the learning curve for survival can be shortened' said Barrs. To this end, Barrs proceeded to discuss a preliminary, non-exhaustive, non-prescriptive inventory of conventional and less conventional tactics and strategies that are (or could be) utilized by civilians for their own protection and could be supported by external actors.[2] Barrs has compiled a preliminary inventory of some 500 actions for community self-protection; the use of specific strategies depends on the particular context.

Barrs indicated that local views of security often differ from those of peace support and aid missions, encompassing not just physical safety but also life-critical sustenance and services. In fact, more civilians die in times of conflict from the collapse of sustenance and services than from weapons. Reflecting this reality, civilians often take great physical risks to obtain access to such goods and services.

Within the context of physical protection, Barrs noted that communities may seek accommodation with armed groups by negotiating with or paying rents to them. They may seek to avoid a conflict by escaping from the area or to protect themselves by organizing community police forces. They often rely on affinity groups to provide necessary support in the absence of state or international protection. Under the umbrella of life-critical sustenance, Barrs highlighted strategies and tactics related to subsistence agriculture, foraging, emergency movement and separation, social and money networks and asset stripping. Barrs also discussed indigenous and low profile relief and welfare services as alternative ways of providing life-critical services.

Acknowledging that 'self-protection is not a panacea,' Barrs noted that community self-protection strategies for physical safety as well as life critical sustenance and services 'will be the last safety nets because they rely on the abilities of the very people who are left standing alone as violence shuts the world out.' In this context, he identified aid agencies as being in the best position to 'promote and support local preparedness strategies' which can save lives when international agencies must withdraw from a particular situation. 'If Plan A is based on protection by the presence of international actors, then Plan B relies on local capacity. We have a responsibility to ensure that communities are prepared to implement Plan B.'

Case Study: Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)

Mike Jobbins contrasted community self-protection efforts in two Congolese trading cities – Butembo in North Kivu and Dongo in Equateur. Despite being profoundly affected by the conflict between 1996 and

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[2] See Casey A. Barrs, *How Civilians Survive Violence: A Preliminary Inventory,* The Cuny Center, October 2010 and Casey A. Barrs, *Preparedness Support: How to Brace Beneficiaries, Local Staff and Partners for Violence*, The Cuny Center, November 2009.

2003 and being a strategic target as a consequence of straddling a major trading route, Jobbins indicated that 'elite-driven, civilian-led collective action by close-knit leadership in Butembo played a key role in minimizing civilian suffering. The strong influence of the Catholic Church and other civil society groups led to effective advocacy on several occasions to reduce or prevent violence. Accommodation of rebel financial demands by business leaders ensured a degree of internal security and influence of the local community over rebel actions. Reinvestment in social services, local security and support networks reduced mortality.' As a consequence of the protection afforded to civilians in Butembo, its 'population more than doubled from 150,000 inhabitants in 1996 to an estimated 400,000 in 2003.'

Noting Butembo as an 'outlier in terms of civilian response,' Jobbins commented that 'social cohesion among the community is one of the most important factors in determining whether a community response is feasible.' Butembo's homogenous population, closely inter-linked through longstanding patronage structures, family ties and past dealings, allowed church and business leadership to present a united front in advocacy and accommodation efforts.

In contrast, 'in Dongo, ethnic divisions and bureaucratic leadership left the city paralyzed and prevented collective action prior to the city's sacking by rebels in late 2009.' Jobbins indicated that individuals and households were left to decide and adopt their own strategies and measures to minimize harm. However, as a consequence of ethnic divisions, information was not shared which led to uninformed decisions and aggravated the long-term humanitarian consequences of the conflict.

Case Study: Burma/Myanmar

Nils Carstensen presented research on Burma/Myanmar and in particular on the manner in which local populations understand "protection" and their views of the roles of various stakeholders.[3] According to Carstensen, people in 'armed conflict-affected South East Burma have a detailed and sophisticated understanding of threats to their safety, livelihood options and general wellbeing. For ethnic Karen civilians, protection and livelihood concerns are deeply interconnected' and 'vulnerable communities display high levels of solidarity and cohesion, with local leaders playing important roles in building trust and "social capital."'

The 'impact of international protection actors on people in conflict areas remains marginal' and the 'biggest contribution to people's protection stems from their own activities' said Carstensen. 'Limited amounts of international aid are delivered by community-based organizations and local NGOs – which are often, but not always, associated with conflict actors.' 'In some cases, armed opposition groups offer a degree of protection to displaced and other vulnerable people' and a 'range of armed groups position themselves as protectors of the Karen nation.'

Carstensen indicated that civilians are subject to 'multiple masters' and because of this communities have identified different "leaders" to liaise with different stakeholders based on affinity with the

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[3] This is one of several case studies undertaken by the Local to Global Protection project which explores how people living in areas affected by natural disaster and armed conflict understand the idea of protection. The case study on Burma, "Conflict and Survival: Self-protection in south-east Burma" by Ashley South with Malin Perhult and Nils Carstensen was previously presented at Chatham House, London UK, September 2010.

stakeholder and required skills. According to Carstensen, civilians are aware of the importance of family ties for their protection and aim to keep families together irrespective of the decision to flee or stay. He also mentioned that civilians are undertaking protection mechanisms – such as making homemade land mines to protect homes and villages and village protection committees using arms – which are often anathema for external aid agencies. Supporting community support mechanisms can be uncomfortable for humanitarian actors.

Case Study: Colombia

Gimena Sánchez discussed self-protection measures by internally displaced persons (IDPs) and civilian-led efforts to prevent displacement in rural communities (known as "communities in resistance") in Colombia. Sánchez focused on IDPs in the San José de Apartadó Peace community, the humanitarian and biodiversity zones in Chocó, the Afro-Colombian Yurumangui River Mingas and the civilian rural campesino zones. In discussing the history and experiences of these communities, Sánchez highlighted the following attributes, which are not necessarily common to all: many of these communities live in the midst of conflict; they declare themselves to be non-violent and refuse to collaborate with warring armed groups on any side; they designate civilian areas with signs, fencing, flags; they prohibit trespassing and refuse to allow persons carrying arms to enter, they agree upon rules to be followed by the inhabitants of the community, they create self-autonomous and self-sustainable practices to guarantee their communities' food security; they learn to address threats to their security (i.e. learning to de-mine) and they educate themselves on human rights, humanitarian law and the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement.

Secondly, Sánchez also discussed self-protection measures put in place by urban IDPs including those mechanisms intended to protect IDP leaders or IDPs at high risk of harm. These self-protection mechanisms include establishing strong relationships and networks with IDP community organizations at the regional and national levels, maintaining fluid communication regarding security situations, and pooling resources as needed to relocate leaders at risk of violence.

According to Sánchez, in some cases, the government of Colombia has been interested in duplicating the self-protection strategies implemented by the communities in resistance. In other instances the Colombian government has implemented policies that undermine the self-protection mechanisms. However, Sánchez also explained that while these models have by and large prevented people from becoming displaced, they have not prevented people from being killed. Nonetheless, the visibility these IDP resistance communities have generated in the domestic and the international spheres as a consequence of their implementation of self-protection measures and the violation of their rights by various actors has expanded their protection and advocacy networks.

Thematic Highlights

A number of common themes emerged in the discussion of the conceptual presentation by Barrs and the three case studies. While there seemed to be a consensus that it is important for international actors to understand and recognize the importance of community self-protection measures, some cautioned against romanticizing these efforts. 'Many lives have been saved by international actions,'

one participant emphasized. 'Remember that when the internationals had to withdraw from Cambodia, 1.5 million Cambodians died in the genocide. Community self-protection measures were not sufficient to protect people there.'

Inventory of Community Self-Protection Strategies: One participant claimed that in principle agreement could be reached on both the need for, and support of, community preparedness. However, he felt that more specificity in the form of a 'how to guide' listing limited examples of community self-protection strategies that 'have worked or will work' was required to move the agenda forward. Just listing the strategies without indicating the context in which they have been effectively used is insufficient. Another participant emphasized that choosing a community self-protection strategy and determining its viability is necessarily 'context dependent' and that supporting such strategies should be dictated by the 'capacity and self-critical awareness of potential protection support organizations' and the 'practices, wishes, and reactions of the communities.'

Another participant remarked that donors needed guidance on when these types of projects shold be supported. To do them well, international agencies would need to have long-standing relationships with the community and a deep understanding of the conflict dynamics and vulnerabilities of civilians. Further, the communities, international agencies and donors should include risk analysis tools to decide on appropriate courses of action as some of these strategies may exacerbate threats while others may have negative consequences requiring mitigation measures. Participants also emphasized the need to identify longer-term as well as temporary self-protection options. 'If outside actors intend to support community efforts to protect themselves,' one participant affirmed, 'they need to be there for the long haul. These are not short-term strategies that correspond to donors' budget cycles.'

Consequences of Community Self-Protection Strategies: Participants discussed the potential for community self-protection efforts to undermine the protection of certain segments (particularly vulnerable populations) of the community and the protection available to other civilians. For example, some community protection strategies may put women, children, disabled or elderly members of the community at risk while others may ,prolong conflicts or negatively impact other communities. According to Jobbins, accommodation of armed groups by the patron-driven elite networks in Butembo, despite benefiting the communities they served, 'may have aggravated the conflict' by 'prolonging the war' and resulting in 'worse consequences for neighboring communities.' One participant also questioned whether habits adopted to accommodate community self-protection strategies would become liabilities during peace – for example, whether individuals would invest conservatively and hide wealth for fear of need to flee.

 'What are the moral hazards and unintended consequences of supporting community self-protection strategies?' asked one participant. 'Could this agenda facilitate forced displacement or put groups at risk by drawing attention to them?' 'Could it generate inter-group conflict?' Another participant expressed concern over the 'potential for retaliation against communities.' Yet another asked, 'what are the challenges when these activities are undertaken on a much larger scale?'

Visibility: Participants engaged in a lively discussion on the ways in which supporting community self-protection strategies could lead to greater visibility for communities and what this would mean in terms of protection. 'There is a fine line between visibility providing political protection and saving lives and visibility undermining protection efforts' said one participant.' When discussing the viability of more low profile efforts, one participant argued that 'low profile aid delivery, for example, in Iraq, Somalia and Burma, are not shining examples of aid support or of meeting the needs of people.' 'Low profile aid delivery is failing in certain situations and there is a need to find other models' said another.

Another participant suggested repackaging community preparedness support in more 'banal' terms. 'For example,' he said, 'in my elementary school, we routinely had fire drills. Everyone accepted these as normal, but they served a useful function of preparing children for future emergencies. Could something similar be tried in communities likely to be affected by violence?'

Information and Misinformation: Communities need reliable information in order to assess the risk that they face; sometimes international agencies have that information and share it with their staff, but not with the beneficiaries. 'How can information be used to improve outcomes for communities notwithstanding its potential liabilities' asked one participant. 'Rumors and false information can be spread as easily as accurate information,' one participant noted. 'And while cell phones and internet can spread information more quickly, they can also spread misinformation more effectively.'

Livelihoods: Participants offered many examples of the close relationship between livelihoods and protection as did all three of the case studies. Stating that many communities held livelihoods as integral to their protection, and were willing to take risks to secure livelihoods, one participant questioned how the international humanitarian community should support community livelihood preparedness. Discussing livelihood projects more generally, the participant indicated that these projects were effective because they are 'undertaken on a small, invisible scale' but felt that 'increasing the scale and visibility of livelihood support efforts could run counter to their effectiveness.'

Community Self-Protection Strategies and Neutrality: While some communities, particularly those in Colombia, refrain from engaging with any actors to the conflicts, other communities' accommodation strategies involved the payment of "rent(s)." In describing these diverse modes of community self-protection, the case studies demonstrated that community self-protection activities are not necessarily neutral. 'We might see armed groups only as a threat,' one participant observed, 'but for communities they can be protection actors.' Power holders see the 'payment of rent as legitimate taxation' said one participant, and went on to note that many communities may also want to contribute to what they see as 'legitimate causes.' 'Neutrality is a luxury that they cannot afford,' reflected another. 'How can we reinforce community structures of protection without risking our own neutrality?' asked one participant, while another noted that there was a need to 'de-emphasize the focus on neutrality when determining how to engage with the communities.' Many participants wanted further discussion on the interrelationships between community self-protection, humanitarian aid, military engagement and neutrality.

Role for Humanitarian Actors: In promoting community-self protection, one participant warned 'we need to be cognizant of, and sensitive to, persons who want to shut out humanitarian action for nefarious reasons' as the absence of a humanitarian protection system 'is going to lead to the death of a lot of people.' Another responded that he 'understood the importance of aid' but that there was a 'clear need for more community preparedness in circumstances where the humanitarian aid apparatus falls short.' One humanitarian actor quoted a villager: 'we survived before you and we will survive after you' and yet another said that 'in Haiti half a million people lived off friends and family during the immediate aftermath of the earthquake' demonstrating the importance of supporting community self-protection strategies. Supporting community self-preparation strategies 'reinvigorates the role of aid organizations, which are struggling to determine how to make protection real' said one participant.

'We need to better understand community priorities' and ensure that 'local institutions and organizations play a larger role' when determining how to support community self-protection strategies commented a participant. This approach, the participant continued, is 'preferable to sending in expat experts' to determine the protection that communities require. While 'many aid organizations have local staff and offices, the power has always been with the overseas operations' and the 'humanitarian model is based on flying in and rescuing people'; we need to 'shift the focus.' We 'cannot pay lip service to participatory approaches' said another, 'humanitarian actors need to de-emphasize programs with doubtful protection value and not assume that their programs are valuable to local communities.' Discussing a relevant example, one participant remarked 'NGOs pick and choose which rights they are going to protect even in circumstances where the community has vocalized which right they want protected.' Another said 'we need to challenge the '"don't call us, we will call you" attitude' and ensure that when communities are talking to us, we 'let them talk to us in their own time and in their own way.'

'But we've been talking about the importance of listening to communities for at least 30 years,' one participant said, questioning why the debate had not moved further. Another countered that the discussion had progressed significantly since the 'mantra' on the 'need to listen to communities' and the debate at present centered on 'understanding community self-protection strategies, and determining how humanitarian actors could assist in such preparedness.' Another questioned whether the humanitarian community has the capacity to respond in the ways discussed during the seminar.

'Make sure that whatever you do you do not undermine existing community self-protection mechanisms' advised a participant. 'We need to work out how to reinforce strategies without undermining them' he continued. 'We have to remember that for communities, humanitarian actors are just one of many actors with which communities are negotiating.' In this regard, he suggested that humanitarians 'act with humility' and be 'honest and transparent and not overpromise and overestimate their capacity and the potential for assistance.' Such 'honesty and transparency' he opined, 'will allow communities to develop their own coping mechanisms' based on an informed understanding of 'what they are likely to receive from humanitarian actors.' Another participant noted that such action 'might promote community organizing'. Yet another noted supporting community protection strategies requires long-term field engagement, reduced staff turnover at senior levels and bi-directional humanitarian access (humanitarian access to the community and community access to

services and markets). Participants also indicated they need to understand their own capacity as well as the different understandings of what it means to build local capacity.

Funding and Donors: 'If the key is preparedness then there has to be more money for it,' stated one participant. 'It is one thing to talk about flexible donors but the humanitarian community needs to capture more resources from private donors so that they have the ability to provide the flexibility that is needed on the ground' said another. Some participants conceded that attracting donor funds for preparedness in the context of community self-protection strategies would be challenging. They showed little optimism with regard to the likelihood of large institutional donors handing over money to small-scale local groups to undertake preparedness activities. 'We still need to have international NGOs joining with locals and we need to build capacity and train together' said one participant. 'Who is in charge?' inquired one participant introducing the subject of accountability. 'Who are we being held accountable to: the taxpayers in the donor country or the local communities in the beneficiary country' questioned another?

While protection is a state responsibility, it is when states fail to protect people that both communities and international actors try to step into the breach. And it is important to note that we often have different understandings of what terms like community and protection mean. While the 'English notion of community is based on geography this is not the case everywhere' said one participant, noting that community can refer to an ethnic or religious group and that community self-protection strategies may apply only to that group and not to others living in the same physical location. Similarly participants appreciated that notions of protection may differ between local communities and humanitarian actors and consequently emphasized the need to better understand the disconnect between the ways international actors respond to protection concerns facing civilians and the ways that civilians respond to their own protection concerns.

Areas for Further Research, Discussion and Action

The thematic issues discussed in the seminar highlight complexities and contradictions associated with community self-protection strategies. They also raise questions which deserve further research and analysis, such as:

- How do international actors and local communities understand protection?
- What is the relationship between rights based approaches to humanitarian assistance and community self-protection? For example, stripping assets or turning a child over to a non-state actor may protect a family from an armed gang but are difficult for humanitarian actors to support.
- How does the concept of neutrality come into play – both for humanitarian actors and for communities?
- What is the impact of community self-protection strategies on (a) different members of the community (e.g. vulnerable populations) (b) other communities of civilians (c) the conflicts themselves and (d) peace processes?
- What are the effects of viewing armed non-state actors as protectors of civilian populations?
- Can a context- specific inventory of community self protection mechanisms be developed?