



Centring Civilian Agency and Community-Led Protection in an Era of Constraints, Austerity and Impunity

Wednesday, 20 May 2026 – 8.30 – 10 AM (EST)

Venue:

Mission of the Kingdom of the Netherlands to the UN
666 Third Avenue (42/43rd Streets)

This event is organised by Nonviolent Peaceforce and the Permanent Mission of the Netherlands to the UN, in partnership with PAX, Center for Civilians in Conflict, Ceasefire Centre for Civilian Rights, the Humanitarian Policy Group, Airwars, the Global Protection Cluster, Geneva Call, the Permanent Missions of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, El Salvador, Panama and the Philippines to the UN, UNHCR and UNICEF.

Civilian protection needs are rising precisely as UN institutional capacity contracts: shrinking budgets, mission drawdowns, and declining donor engagement are restructuring the entire humanitarian system and broader peace and security architecture. Across many of today's most serious conflict-driven humanitarian crises, civilians most at risk of harm bear the consequences of this contraction most acutely.

Yet even as institutional capacity contracts, civilian and community-led action to reduce harm, monitor violations, and influence armed actor behavior has never stopped. People living through war have continued to develop and deploy a wide range of protective strategies, from grassroots early warning and response to civilian harm documentation to direct engagement with armed actors. This event turns the lens toward those efforts and the people behind them. It asks what it takes to sustain civilian protection outcomes when state and institutional actors have reduced

presence or capacity, directly addressing the PoC week question “How to Ensure Protection of Civilians amid Reforms and Constraints?”

The scale of the violence experienced by communities around the globe makes this question increasingly urgent. The Secretary General's 2025 report on PoC¹ documented worsening trends across every dimension: rising civilian harm, systematic violations of international humanitarian and human rights law, entrenched impunity, and shrinking access, among others. Since that report, the conditions that civilians are face have continued to deteriorate and the international capacity to respond to them has contracted at the same time. OCHA's global humanitarian overviews have flagged widening gaps between assessed needs and available funding, with civilian protection efforts often among the first to be cut when budgets tighten. UN agencies have already begun scaling back in contexts where displacement and civilian harm are accelerating, and major INGOs have similarly reported reduced field presence, suspended harm monitoring, and the closure of community-level programs that often serve as the last line of referral for people facing violence.

The political backdrop makes the overall situation worse. Across the globe, states are unwilling and/or unable to translate commitments into action. While the rhetoric of civilian protection and the importance of IHL compliance remains present in multilateral forums, few states are translating their words into concrete protection action, meaningful violence reduction efforts, or willing to expend political capital in efforts to maintain essential civilian protection norms. Those that do, through concrete political advocacy and action, funding protection responses, naming violations and holding those responsible accountable, for example, remain a minority. Even where conflict-affected states are willing to abide by their protection responsibilities, many face significant capacity limitations that leave them unable to deliver comprehensive, inclusive security to their populations. In context of UN transitions in particular, host nations are expected to absorb greater protection responsibilities as missions close, yet frequently lack the resources, institutional backbone or political conditions to do so credibly. What remains is a landscape where international actors are stepping back, and national actors cannot fill the space they leave behind.

It is important to be clear about what centering community-led protection means, and what it doesn't. Community-centered and locally-led protection is not a stopgap, nor a substitute for failing institutions. Grassroots actors are vital and central agents of protection in their own right, and their proximity, relationships and contextual expertise are essential to effective civilian protection in any circumstances. What the current moment does is shed light on what has always been true, namely that communities are already protecting themselves, often with little recognition, fewer resources and no guarantee of external support. The contraction of institutional presence makes this more visible and makes the case for investing in it more urgent.

While at UN, this has gained particular traction in the humanitarian reset debate, with concrete commitments around localisation, the shift also raises critical questions about the transfer of risk

¹ <https://docs.un.org/en/S/2025/271>

to local actors. Supporting community-led protection requires a deliberate “do no harm” approach where external engagement does not expose local actors to additional risk, instrumentalise their efforts, or undermine existing community dynamics. Localization must be accompanied by sustained investment, equitable partnerships, and safeguards that protect local actors’ agency, safety, and independence.

In particular, this event looks at locally-led unarmed civilian protection (UCP) approaches, how civilians and local organisations monitor, document, and advocate for community-level protection needs, and how this evidence can directly inform and strengthen civilian harm mitigation and response (CHMR) by armed actors, including by shaping how missions and military actors prevent, respond to, and account for direct and reverberating harm. Special attention will be paid to how gender shapes protection risks and strategies, including how violence affects women, men, boys, and girls differently, and the leadership roles these groups play in community protection. Through direct testimonies from civilians leading these efforts on the ground, interactive case study discussions, and a short panel, it asks what Member States, UN agencies, and humanitarian actors can do to recognise, resource, and meaningfully partner with these approaches, at best, and how to avoid inadvertently undermining them, at worst.

Objectives

- 1) Highlight the perspectives, strategies, and protection contributions of local communities and civil society, including self-help measures, inclusive dialogue processes, and civilian harm monitoring, and the acute risks they face as formal systems contract.
- 2) Explore what the UN and Member States can do, even amid reform and austerity, to sustain and deepen partnerships with local actors as a core element of an adapted and more responsive PoC architecture and how these actions can be taken forward.

Expected Outcomes

- 1) Diplomats and humanitarian staff in attendance have more nuanced understanding of the complex protection challenges experienced by civilians, how they are responding based on their agency and capacities as well as civil society efforts to support them.
- 2) Concrete opportunities and strategies for Member States and UN agencies to protect, resource, and partner with local civil society on civilian protection, including actions that can be used to inform CHMR practices, are identified.
- 3) Greater awareness of how community-led protection approaches keep people safe when formal systems fall short, and what is lost when that role is not recognised or supported. Voices and testimony from civilians in active conflict settings enter the diplomatic record of PoC Week.

Event format: This is a hybrid event with in-person and online attendance. Please RSVP [here](#) by 18 May. For any request for information, please reach out to Imane Karimou, ikarimou@nonviolentpeaceforce.org.