

Civilian Self-Protection: Programme Overview

1. Introduction

The objective of this guidance note is to clarify the programme and framework underpinning NRCs Civilian Self-Protection (CSP) programme.

2. Background and Definitions

It has [long been acknowledged](#) that local actors have a critical role to play in their own protection, as they can draw on their own contextual knowledge, relationships and community resources to both prevent violence from occurring and to mitigate its impact. However, the recent [whole of system review of humanitarian protection](#) reaffirmed that civilian self-protection remains poorly understood and under-utilised by humanitarian actors. Protection efforts in humanitarian contexts have largely focused on risk mitigation and response services, while there remains a gap in the prevention of protection violations – preventing them from happening and stopping them from recurring.

NRCs Civilian Self-Protection programme aims to protect against immediate, direct threats of violence against civilians imposed by, or as the result of, duty bearers or armed actors, through the identification or strengthening of self-protection actions and strategies, which are primarily selected and employed by civilians during an armed conflict or Other Situation of Violence.

Self-Protection strategies can manifest at an individual, community, household, and other subgroup level. For instance, an individual who negotiates passage at a checkpoint, a family who hides when weapon bearers approach their village, or an entire community that decides to flee to avoid conflict are all adopting self-protection strategies.

What is a community → For the purposes of this programme, community is defined as a group of people that recognizes itself or is recognized by outsiders as sharing common cultural, religious, and other social features, background or interests.

The fact that certain qualities are shared however does not mean that it is a single entity: many subgroups or communities can exist within communities. Therefore, the term “community” should not be treated as a block. The level of cohesion and power dynamics needs to be understood as it will change the way we engage with the community members.

3. The Programme

The programme promotes a shift away from the provision of protection by international, external actors. Rather, it supports communities to prevent, reduce and mitigate protection risks through strengthening their own civilian self-protection strategies. Initially trialled in Afghanistan and Colombia in 2019, the programme works with communities to facilitate the identification of self-protection strategies and supports with the strengthening and/or development of the strategies they have chosen through the provision of material support and NRC ‘Protection Tools’. This programme is structured around a 4-step process, that has been integrated into the humanitarian programme cycle.

In 2020, NRC developed our CSP Toolkit, which guides community groups through structured and pedagogical sessions on protection risk and self-protection strategy identification. The CSP Toolkit, which has been structured around the protection risk equation, has been specifically designed to support community groups and NRC identify which strategies they want to prioritise, which material support may be required to supplement their strategies and which additional ‘protection tools’ will be needed to be implemented to complement their strategies, all aiming to prevent violence and/or mitigate the humanitarian consequences of armed conflict and OSV. The nuances around what a community may decide to implement to help strengthen their self-protection mechanisms will be dependent on each community and will not be pre-determined by NRC.

The programme is based on grants implemented in Colombia and Afghanistan between 2016-2022, with formal piloting happening between 2019-2022. This program falls within the scope of the Protection from Violence Core Competency and will continue to be developed and refined based on experience and learning over the current Strategic Period. This programme is fundamentally a violence prevention programme and can be implemented in the same location as other specialised protection from violence response services.

The Programme also includes a strong national and global learning component, including research on how and when the international humanitarian community should support Civilian Self-Protection strategies, such as community-led negotiations with armed actors and other duty bearers; and contributing to the humanitarian protection communities’ efforts to develop simpler and more effective prevention monitoring and evaluation approaches.

4. Civilian Self-Protection – Theory meets Practice

Increasingly, civilians are being recognised as active players who have agency in their own protection. Kaplan argues that civilian communities in areas of conflict can often offer a more nuanced, contextualised understanding of armed groups and that compared to international organisations, communities in conflict areas often have greater interest, legitimacy, and access in seeking to mitigate violence, at times with more success than national civil society actors or international organisations (Kaplan, 2013)¹. Civilians have a range of options that can be utilised and combined in different ways at different times (Arjona, 2017). In situations of prolonged instability (‘no-peace no-war’), such as in Eastern DRC, civilians develop sophisticated understandings of armed group behaviour and develop a range of self-protection strategies (Suarez, 2017). And existing empirical work suggests that these interactions can have profound effects on how armed groups behave, enact violence, and govern².

Analytical frameworks, such as the [everyday Peace Framework](#) which considers methods that individuals and groups use to navigate their way through life in deeply divided societies, focusing on bottom-up peace and survival strategies and the [social contract framework](#), which sets out formal and informal agreements between groups and authorities in power, all are contributing to academic topic on civilian agency and civilian-armed actor relations.

Civilian Self-Protection as a thematic area, although having a very light touch footprint in the humanitarian protection sector, is based on clearly defined international relations theories and rigorous academic practice. The shift toward humanitarian protection actors implementing Civilian Self-Protection programming is one that has emerged as a response to calls for increased protection programmes that focus on prevention. There is a noticeable gap in the

¹ ODI, Community Agency and Engagement in Conflict: Community agency and engagement with conflict parties towards improved civilian security in conflict: implications for protection and peacebuilding actors.

² Jackson, Ashley., Weigand, Florian., Tundall Theo. ODI, Roundtable framing note on Civilian-Armed Group Relations, p.2

protection sector on actors who engage with duty bearers directly on addressing protection rights violations. ICRCs [Roots of Restraint](#) report found that increased efforts were needed to focus on prevention, emphasising civilian self-protection, negotiations and mediation as tools to reduce and address protection risks.

Existing academic literature suggests that Civilian Self-Protection strategies can be categorized according to their:

1. effect on threats;
2. level of engagement with perpetrators and/or primary duty bearers; and
3. impact on the community.

In their efforts to ensure their own protection, individuals, households, and communities may adopt strategies aimed at preventing, avoiding, mitigating, or ending a threat. These can be categorized as³:

Type of Strategy	Examples
Prevention strategies entail deterring the (actual or potential) perpetrators from committing violence, thus preventing it from occurring.	Negotiations with armed actors for safe return of displaced persons Negotiations by communities for weapons-free villages
Avoidance strategies are those that allow for individuals and communities not to be exposed to a threat. The threat itself still occurs, but it is avoided.	Early Warning Early Response plans to facilitate safe evacuations during conflict
Mitigation strategies entail reducing the severity of a threat, or the humanitarian consequences of armed conflict and OSV.	First aid responder networks and communication trees during curfews and times of confinement
Cessation strategies are those that bring an end to an ongoing threat.	Mediation team tasked with de-escalating tribal conflicts and ensuring violence does not target community members

For more information about CSP please see our [Civilian Self-Protection Programmatic FAQ Note](#) and [Oxfam’s Guidance note on Civilian Self-Protection](#). Other Protection from Violence definitions can be found here.

4. Civilian Self-Protection Principles

CSP PROGRAMME PRINCIPLES

NRCs Civilian Self-Protection programme has four main principles, with additional sub-elements, which ensures all programmes are flexible and adaptable to any operational context⁴.

1. **Primacy of Local Actors:** The acknowledgment that most of the Civilian Self-Protection influencing, advocacy, and strategy strengthening will happen at the local level, within communities and between civilians, armed actors, and local authorities. This means

³ Oxfam Community-Based Protection Resources Pack, Civilian Self-Protection, <https://oxfamlibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10546/621233/gd-supporting-self-protection-170921-en.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>

⁴ These principles are largely inspired by the AAP CHS and Safety with Dignity methodology developed by ActionAid .

NRC must place the design of our programmes in the hands of communities and break down humanitarian architectural structures to support community-led action and programming.

- a. *Inclusion*⁵ - This element seeks to empower people and aims to ensure inclusion of the entire community, including those whose voices may traditionally not be heard, to meaningfully participate in the design and strengthening of their own strategies.
 - b. *Local Conflict and Protection Analysis* – For the primacy of local actors to be fully integrated into how our CSP teams function, this means we must seek to understand local conflict analysis which identifies who threats are, how individuals are vulnerable to those threats, how to mitigate their impact (thereby reducing risks) and how to potentially prevent violence through our activities, all at a community and area-based level.
2. Relationship Building: Relationship building and trust are crucial to any CSP programme and are rooted in the acknowledgment that civilians are at the centre of and experts in their own protection. If we are to work with communities on CSP, we must recognize our limitations, accept that we are mere facilitators and give control back to affected communities.
- a. *Dialogue and two-way communication* - Community workshops, training and engagement sessions serve as platforms of mutual exchange and engagement. This builds upon regular communication, participation and helps to build critical relationships with the community. Open discussion forums encourage individuals to clearly voice their concerns, perspectives, and knowledge of the context, upon which field teams can effectively base a humanitarian response. Relationship building and two-way dialogue is just an important activity as providing material assistance to strengthen self-protection strategies.
 - b. *Empowerment* - This positions NRC as a facilitator which creates an environment where communities are at the centre of forming and deciding on their own protection needs, in addition to how they wish to implement the decisions that affect their situation.
 - c. *Trust & Accountability* – Trust within and between the community and NRC is paramount, in addition to building in accountability mechanisms throughout the PCM. Taking account, giving account, and being held to account are integral to the programme⁶.
3. Conscious Visibility & Presence: The intentional use of visibility and presence to act as either a deterrent to, or witness of, protection rights violations, and to build the confidence of civilian populations.
- a. *Complementarity* - When working on Civilian Self-Protection, teams should seek opportunities for *complementary* humanitarian and peacebuilding

⁵ Inclusive of Age, Gender and Diversity approach. *Age, Gender and Diversity (AGD)* © Conflict and displacement affect individuals differently and every person is unique. Ensuring that age, gender and diversity considerations are included is not only imperative for accountability reasons, it is critical for success for the overall implementation of programmes. The actual and perceived differences between us shape our opportunities, capacities, needs and vulnerability; and perceptions of difference can influence how we are treated by others. “Applying an AGD approach is not an add on, it is a core element of fair and equal protection. By analysing the AGD dimensions as interlinked personal characteristics, we are able to better understand the multifaceted protection risks and capacities of individuals and communities, and to address and support these more effectively”⁵. Therefore, it is imperative that we acknowledge these differences, analyse how they affect perceptions of safety and capacity for self-protection, and tailor our programming accordingly.

⁶ You can find more information about AAP in humanitarian action [here](#).

actions with other actors and stakeholders, to ensure coherent action for the benefit of the affected community and avoid duplication of activities. Humanitarian activities also can often serve as a powerful justification for regular access to threatened populations that might otherwise be isolated.

Sustained Multi-Level Advocacy: Multi-level advocacy, discourse, and influencing of local authorities and armed actors. The effect of these interactions is cumulative and has the power to affect both local and national decision making, reducing abuses and violent conflicts.

5. Minimum Programming Standards

The following minimum standards are the basis of NRC Civilian Self-Protection programme. These standards are based on NRC experience in implementing CSP in Afghanistan and Colombia since 2019, in addition to academic research and recommendations from other CSP program reviews and interagency discussions. Furthermore in 2022, NRC created a CSP base curriculum (also known as The Toolkit) to guide the systematized and effective implementation of programme activities. These are the minimum standards that each Country Offices that wishes to start a CSP programme and achieve proactive protection on the ground must fulfil.

1. Conducts the three phased Civilian Self-Protection assessment to determine applicability for programming that must be used in each country office, regardless of context. This assessment is unique in its profile in such that it is organized around 14 criteria and implemented in a staged fashion. NRC short-lists and creates a detailed profile of potential communities, including their make-up, key actors, resources, causes of conflict and insecurity, and likely attitude towards external engagement (albeit through local partners) before starting a programme. While developing and supporting Civilian Self-Protection programmes across a range of contexts there are several factors that can fundamentally impact the success or failure of an intervention. These must be considered and addressed where appropriate during the scoping and programme design phases and monitored throughout the action.
2. Ensures the minimum required staff and appropriate structure to implement a CSP programme (see organigram below). This ensures quality standards are maintained and workloads are realistic.
3. Ensures a secure financial basis for CSP programming including increased appropriate resources and a donor dialogue that supports our work on CSP.
4. Following the Framework for CSP M&E Data Analysis and Synthesis (hereafter referred to as the Analysis and Synthesis Framework) set up a comprehensive data analysis system and team to organize, code, analyse and synthesise the data. This will require dedicated human resources and software packages.
5. Ensures CSP programme are not less than 12 months in length. A recommended and preferred length would be 12-18+ months.
6. Ensures CSP activities are NOT mainstreamed in other CC programming, or implemented by staff outside of the Protection CC.