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Preparing for self-preservation

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All too often, violence proves to be beyond influence, forcing international aid agencies to pull back and leave local civilians to face the danger alone. External actors need a far deeper understanding of local communities' experience of and strategies for self-protection, and a far greater commitment to support those communities.

In each new crisis, it is often the basic elements of community which provide the first, last and perhaps only tactical responses for survival. The international humanitarian community, however, is often not predisposed to recognise these elements, relying rather on institutions as partners – but institutional partners in the governmental and non-governmental sectors may lack legitimacy and durability, and they may lack relevance. We tend to conflate NGO partners with civil society yet they are only a small part of civil society; when atrocities descend, people go to protect and be protected by those closest to them; they do not walk into an NGO office. Civil society does indeed hold the answer to local self-protection but in forms that are far less institutionally based.

For example, there are leaders with a legitimacy that commands the confidence, cohesion and rapid compliance that are so essential amid fluid violence. Often such leaders are not formally elected and their structures are neither statutorily constituted nor housed in brick and mortar buildings. They are 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 support the population. They might be community elders who by tradition look out for the people. They might be heads of clan or family who protect their own. In this article, the word 'community' will be shorthand for this wider social architecture of protection.

The Cuny Center has inventoried hundreds of ways by which locals survive violence. The inventory documents self-protection relating to safety as well as to life-critical sustenance and services. Amid conflict, malnutrition and disease are bigger threats than machetes or bullets; far more

people die during violence from the collapse of sustenance and services than from direct violence – and civilians often risk their safety to obtain these basics. Some local strategies have saved the lives of millions: deals with belligerents, homegrown early warning systems, subsistence farming and foraging, sharing and remittance networks, shadow and coping economies, discreet service delivery, and flight.

If civilians do decide that flight is the best option, the better they prepare the more likely it is that they will arrive at destinations with their social units and economic assets more intact. This 'intactness' helps postpone the day when they have to succumb to dangerous coping practices or fall foul of the predatory behaviour of others. It forestalls the exhaustion of resources at these destinations – which is often what compels more dangerous secondary and tertiary flight. Having this social and financial capital might even help them better navigate the challenges and costs of returning home and rebuilding their lives at an earlier stage.

Limits and hard realities

"By their very origin, all coping mechanisms are sub-optimal. [...] Yet they represent the best informed response to crisis, because they are developed by those whose lives and livelihoods are most vulnerable."¹ However, the calculations and choices that people at risk make to protect themselves and their communities do not necessarily take account of all alternatives, consequences and needs.

Firstly, people's strong drive to protect their own might exclude minorities. Secondly, societal beliefs also affect the protection calculation, at times in ways that may make outsiders feel uncomfortable, especially in regard to gender, as the gatekeepers

of protective action are generally male. And, thirdly, communities often arm themselves or align themselves with armed groups. This might afford them protection but it also risks deepening the cycle of violent abuses. Supporting non-violent capacities for survival can mitigate the push-and-pull forces that compel violent response; it can offer choices where there appeared to be none other than the gun.

Local capacity for self-protection is far from perfect. But as Nils Carstensen of the Local to Global Protection initiative notes, we need to strike the right balance between principles and pragmatism; working with ‘unconventional’ structures and strategies will require us to develop “new, agile, and flexible support modalities.”² We already have the skill sets for most of this work; the greater challenges come from our mindsets. Too much of what we call ‘innovation’ is actually tinkering around the edges of the box. MSF’s Bernard Kouchner once argued that “professionalization and bureaucratization would harm the organization’s revolutionary, nimble, and heretical orientation” and “overwhelm its improvisational tactics.”³ Today we need more of Bernard Kouchner’s heresy and Fred Cuny’s exasperating brilliant unorthodoxy. Many have long urged support of local capacity for self-protection but no such approach has yet been systematised throughout the aid industry.

Supporting self-protection

Of the varied organisations concerned with matters of peace and conflict, it will very often be the aid service provider that is best positioned to support local capacity for self-protection as it generally has the best access, contacts and trust on the ground, as well as the best awareness of context and cultural nuance. Aid providers have the necessary skill sets (from providing life-critical sustenance and services), and are committed to community mobilisation. They are also the most likely to have defensible reasons for being in conflict areas, and have comparatively more autonomy of action.

When local and international aid providers work together, they can

significantly ramp up self-protection preparedness in remote and unstable areas. As violence approaches, an aid provider can do more to support the capacity of its counterparts – its local staff and partners – to serve alone in the face of danger, and, with those counterparts in the lead, do more to support the capacity of communities to survive alone in the face of danger.

Of all possible protections, the ones that bolster local capacity will be the last ones standing because they strengthen the people who are left standing alone as violence shuts the world out. Even here, we must take care that any initiative we call ‘community-based self-protection’ is indeed community-born and not merely a project that we conceive and a community then runs. We must also ensure that such protection is **not** premised primarily on the ability to influence violence or on the presence of outside parties.

At times those of us working in the international aid community express the belief that “presence is protection”. The risk is that our local counterparts and communities believe it too – and consequently feel a false sense of solidarity and security that may delay their own natural instincts to brace for survival. This in turn violates another protection dictum: “Do no harm” to those we serve. The maxim has twin responsibilities. One is not to put them in harm’s way – for example, by giving false hope. The other is not to leave them in harm’s way – for example, by withdrawing without having supported their capacity to survive.

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For background and guidance on supporting local preparedness, please visit www.civiliansinharmsway.org.

1. Lautze S and Hammock J (1996) *Coping with Crisis, Coping with Aid: Capacity Building, Coping Mechanisms and Dependency, Linking Relief and Development*, p3. www.alnap.org/pool/files/erd-2690-full.pdf
2. Correspondence with L2GP Senior Advisor, Nils Carstensen, 27 January 2016.
3. Barnett M (2011) *Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism*, Cornell University Press, p152.