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Strengthening Unarmed Community Self-protection in Cameroon's Anglophone Conflict

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Executive Summary

This brief discusses the innovative unarmed civilian self-protection strategies employed by individuals, groups and communities affected by the armed conflict and their accompanying challenges. In doing so, it not only emphasises the urgency in finding a sustainable solution to the conflict, but equally demonstrates the resilience, resourcefulness, and pro-activeness of civilians in protecting themselves in violent contexts. Some key recommendations are provided for future policy and programmatic interventions.

Introduction

The armed conflict in Cameroon's two English-speaking regions – North West and South West – has been ongoing since September 2017. The conflict is between the Cameroonian security forces and armed separatist groups who are fighting for an independent state in these two regions, popularly called 'Ambazonia'. The conflict has had a devastating impact on civilians, especially women and girls. Figures, though underestimates, illustrate that over 6,000 civilians have been killed (HRW, 2023), with an estimated 628,000 internally displaced persons, and 87,000 Cameroonian refugees in neighbouring Nigeria (UN OCHA, 2023). Additionally, hundreds of villages have been razed in the military's counter-insurgency campaign (The Economist, 2019), and sexual violence is being used as weapon of war and committed with impunity by both warring factions. Many children have been denied the right to education as many government schools remain inoperative (41%) due to a separatist-imposed 'school boycott' and weekly 'ghost-town' or strike days (OCHA 2024).

Despite the untold suffering of civilians, national and international support has been generally lacking, in part due to the government's hostility towards perceived external interference. As a result, civilians have largely been left to their own devices, maximizing local unarmed protective strategies to protect themselves and fellow citizens.

This policy brief presents some key findings from empirical research conducted in February 2023. The study explores the concept of unarmed civilian protection (UCP) in the context of the Anglophone conflict asking the main research questions: What approaches to and types of unarmed self-protection have been taken by local civilians in the Anglophone conflict in Cameroon? How successful have they been and how can civilian self-protection be strengthened, scaled up and broadened out to community-based organisations within Cameroon and across countries?

Broadly, unarmed civilian protection is defined as "the practice of unarmed civilians providing direct physical protection to other civilians before, during, and after violent conflict, to prevent or reduce violence, and strengthen or build local peace infrastructures" (Oldenhuis et al 2021:31). The purpose is to create spaces that enable civilians to protect themselves through nonviolent means (Oldenhuis et al. 2021).

Primacy of the local is promoted in UCP (Oldenhuis et al. 2021). Yet much of its literature and practice thus far have largely focused on external interventions such as those of international NGOs, with limited attention to a bottom-up approach that emphasises the role and utility of local actors and strategies (Molz 2018; Niland et al. 2015). Our study addresses this gap by focusing on bottom-up approaches and strategies of UCP in the Anglophone conflict.

- **Preventive measures** involve strategies used by civilians to prevent attacks and violence from the military or the armed separatists. These measures include but are not limited to: staying indoors, neutrality, dressing appropriately, disguise, travelling with relevant documentation, and relocation. For example, to avoid unlawful detention and arbitrary arrests, young men are forced to “*dress decently and neatly*”⁵ (shaving, no dreadlocks, wearing smart clothes) while women “*dress shabby for protection*”⁶ to prevent sexual harassment and violence from potential perpetrators. Some preventive measures such as dressing appropriately were found to be unique to the Anglophone context whereas others such as neutrality and disguise are used elsewhere.

Collective protection and local agency

Local agency is critical in the implementation of unarmed civilian protection. Social groups such as women’s groups, youth groups as well as community, religious and traditional leaders, were found to play key roles in enabling the collective protection of affected civilians and communities. Women’s groups for instance mobilise themselves by working together on their respective farms to prevent violent attacks including rape and other forms of sexual violence by the armed groups (military and separatist groups). This ‘sisterhood of protection’ created through such solidarity action enables the protection of their fellow women. Moreover, while self-protection is crucial, collective protection was found to be the bedrock of unarmed civilian protection in the Anglophone context. There is a belief that an individual’s protection is not complete unless it is linked to the collective protection of the whole community because “*we are everyone’s keeper*”⁷. The poem below demonstrates some of the ways women mobilise themselves to support the community.

Our Mothers, Our Strength

Guns blazing, houses razed
 Confusion and panic everywhere
 Where do we go? Who do we turn to?
 Who can protect us?
 In our confusion our mothers arose
 As phoenix from the burning ashes
 They empowered the young
 They carried the elderly, our children
 They carried the disabled too as we ran into the bushes.
 In the bushes they fed the hungry,
 Consoled the broken and nursed the wounded
 With their pans they sounded the alarm
 They provided us shelter as war drums drew near.
 They gave us hope amid hopelessness
 Encouraged our weak to persevere
 Don’t give up! They said.
 Victory is on the horizon, they encouraged.
 Where would we be without our mothers?
 Our strength amidst the turmoil.

Figure 2: Our Mothers, Our Strength⁸

Equally, local NGOs, have been playing an instrumental role in the protection of civilians, including organising fostering arrangements for unaccompanied children, providing SGBV protection and prevention pathways, security awareness creation, documentation assistance, health and psycho-social support, monitoring of and compliance with international laws, as well as ensuring the security and safety within their organisations. They do so indirectly and informally while undertaking humanitarian assistance, due to government hostility. They do not want to be “*silent witnesses*”.⁹

Successes and Challenges

Particular unarmed protection strategies were found to be more successful, inclusive of collective protection, early warning strategies, non-engagement strategies (running, neutrality/silence) and interpositioning. With regards to early warning strategies, WhatsApp/social media platforms, were found to be effective. As one participant expressed: “*WhatsApp groups are the most effective. Forward as received [and] it goes viral*”.¹⁰ Furthermore, interpositioning by elderly women, some traditional rulers, and religious leaders, using themselves as barriers between armed groups and civilians to prevent attacks, was equally seen as effective. These groups of people are respected due to their credibility and legitimacy within their communities.

Findings also show the unique and unusual context of UCP in the Anglophone conflict. On the one hand, local civilian agency has been innovative in protecting each other amidst the violence. On the other hand, various challenges have limited such civilian agency. One challenge pertains to the lack of external support (regional and international) partly due to the government’s antagonism towards such interventions. A case in point is the forced withdrawal of Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) from the affected regions in 2021 and 2022¹¹ due to government hostility. Other challenges relate to issues around the implementation of UCP, notably, weakened social cohesion; issues around vigilantism; intimidation by warring parties; risks associated with running away; and financial constraints. For instance, the breakdown of social cohesion within communities, given the levels of violence and fear, simultaneously undermines community collective protection efforts. It is important to emphasise that these challenges do not limit the relevance of these strategies.

5. Poetry Workshop, Dschang, 21/02/2023

6. Interview, Bamenda, 30/03/2023

7. Storytelling Workshop, Limbe, 16/02/2023

8. Poetry Workshop, Dschang, 21/02/2023

9. Interview, Douala, 27/02/2023

10. Interview, Limbe, 17/02/2023

11. For more information see <https://www.msf.org/msf-suspends-medical-activities-south-west-cameroon>

Policy Recommendations

This study took a bottom-up approach to UCP and demonstrated how people in conflict-affected communities are active agents in their own protection. We advocate that external bodies, both national and international, should learn from these protective measures adopted by local actors, and provide appropriate support. In this spirit, we make the following recommendations:

- Community self-protection can be strengthened through enhanced linkages from the grassroots to local and international NGOs. Local NGOs can support community self-organisation by facilitating the formation of community-based organisations (CBOs) out of loose networks of individuals and community leaders. In turn, international NGOs can provide financial assistance to enable local NGOs to expand support and training activities.
- The nature of CBO-NGO partnerships is crucial, however, with careful reflection by NGOs on how to best support community self-protection strategies without the imposition of NGOs' preconceived agendas. Local agency should be enhanced not undermined.
- Best practices of community self-protection can be disseminated by local civil society organisations within the English-speaking territories, and by international NGOs to wider audiences in Africa and globally, with such strategies adapted to other conflict contexts.
- Participatory arts-based methods were relevant and beneficial and recommended for further studies and research on community self-protection, as well as a way for NGOs (national and international) to engage with communities and collaboratively identify their needs. Such methods enabled participants to creatively share their own stories, including in non-verbal ways. The drawing, poetry and storytelling workshops provided a space in which participants could express their conflict-related experiences, emotions, and perceptions in a safe and supportive environment.
- Finally, all relevant actors, inclusive of national, regional, and international policymakers and practitioners, should urgently prioritise negotiations and dialogue towards a peaceful and just settlement of the 'Anglophone' conflict as a core and critical step to restoring protection from violence for all affected civilians.



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