

Unarmed Civilian Protection: Norm Diffusion and Community Adaptation

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Abstract

This paper explores the evolution of Unarmed Civilian Protection (UCP) as practiced by Nonviolent Peaceforce (NP) in Myanmar, drawing on its experience before and after the 1 February 2021 military coup. Prior to the coup, NP's UCP engagement focused primarily on security for people, supporting civilian ceasefire monitoring mechanisms and the diffusion of protection norms through structured collaboration with civil society organisations (CSOs). The post-coup environment, marked by intensified violence, fragmentation of armed actors, and expanded digital surveillance, necessitated a fundamental shift in how protection is conceptualized and practiced. NP's approach has evolved toward security with communities, recognizing conflict-affected civilians not only as recipients of protection but as central actors and producers of protection knowledge. Protection norms are now diffused through a dynamic mix of top-down support, bottom-up community initiative, and horizontal learning across communities, reflecting local realities, capacities, and coping strategies. Building on findings from recent research on the diffusion and localization of protection norms in Kachin and Northern Shan, this paper highlights how community-led early warning–early response systems, digital security practices, and proactive engagement have been re-imagined and adapted in the post-coup context. The paper critically reflects on what it means to accompany communities under conditions of extreme repression, how knowledge flows have become more reciprocal, and what lessons NP's evolving UCP practice offers for civilian protection in highly fragmented and volatile conflict settings.