

Collective Protection

Collective protection for territorial defense. The wisdom of the Mayan people.

When a truck bearing illegal loggers arrived, the community guards were able to turn it back. Yet members of this armed group later returned, heavily armed, intending to attack. The guards activated the community communication network to raise the alarm, and the women – all of them members and often key leaders in local organizations – fled to the mountain with the children. With help from various community members, they were able to escape the assailants.

The all-encompassing worldview [*cosmovisión*] of the Quiché Mayan people of Guatemala is based on an understanding of humanity as a small part of the web of life in which all living beings need one another and are interrelated. As their ancestors have taught them, caring for this web of life by defending the integrity of their territory ensures the survival of the human species.

The Quiché people defend their territory primarily through the creation of communal strategies and practices – many led by women. Decision-making assemblies, communal care practices, economic solidarity, the creation of community guard forces, and mechanisms for emergency communication have enabled them to both prevent extractive companies from entering and to create an alternative way of living.

This territorial defense structure also has enabled them to protect themselves from the extreme political violence during and after the civil war. Their system of guards and rapid communication channels provides alerts that so the community can react quickly to security threats. The strength of their organization and collective leadership enable them to continue their resistance, even when their leaders are criminalized or must leave the community. Resilience occupies an important place: healing practices (through spirituality and ancestral medicine), community festivals, women supporting one another in caring for and feeding their families, [and] holding assemblies to address tensions and conflicts, among others.

The collective impact of violence

Whenever a human rights defender is attacked, his or her entire community is affected. All threats have a collective impact even when the target one person. In fact, some attacks are specifically designed to impact a group in the way they are carried out – such as strategies which seek to divide an organization or community, undermine trust in community leadership, deter organizing or protest, or discredit an organization or community through slander.¹

The impact of violence on the social fabric is particularly strong for activists and organizations defending land at local and community levels, whether rural or urban. The strength of their work is rooted in community relationships, mutual support and trust, and thus weakened by violence, discrimination and conflict within its ranks.

¹ International Protection and Thought and Social Action. The Collective Protection of Defenders of the Rights to the Land and Territory in Colombia: Conceptual Development and Methodological Challenges.

What is territory?

Territory is the intersection of the physical environment, individuals, and collective body of the community.² For the original peoples of Latin America, territory is the space in which the culture and history of a people reside and is maintained, where they belong, and where they honor the memory of their ancestors.

It is the place where daily life transpires, where individuals interact and have their closest ties; it is where organizing against injustice, solidarity and the responsibility to care for others and the living environment take shape. It is the context which forms the shared social and political identities and vision of community members.

It is also the space wherein the impacts of the oppressive powers are experienced, where the most intimate relations of violence and discrimination occur, where inequalities are made manifest, and where persons confront in their bodies and lives racism, misogyny, and other power structures that are deeply rooted in the culture.

Today, the context of deteriorating democracies, increasing fundamentalism, and the violence accompanying extractive economies, is leading entire communities to actively organize to defend their rights in the face of growing risk and the need for protection.

Violence impacts communities in various ways: it jeopardizes the lives and wellbeing of all members of the community and its organizations; weakens their collective power and resilience through fear; generates internal tensions and conflicts; and steals time and energy from efforts for change. For women, the impacts are specific: They are more likely to experience sexual and other forms of gender-based violence, less likely to receive support, and less recognized for their leadership and participation in community and movement struggles.

The violence against activists, organizations, and communities fighting for their human rights and territories, is an attack on their ability to create a just and peaceful society based on the care of life and all living beings.

What is communal and collective protection?

If my community does not feel safe, I will not be protected.
Anabela Carlón, Mexico

Collective protection strategies create the capacity and conditions for greater security and on-going organizing in a territory. It is a community strategy involving the local organizations and residents in a particular area in a coordinated defense of their human rights. Collective protection enables movements and people in the area to proactively respond to risk, remain safely in their communities and work toward their visions for justice, peace, and equality.

From the perspective of movement building, collective protection fosters resilient communities and organizations, committed to mutual care and capable of organizing themselves creatively and safely to resist and challenge violence.³ This combination of mutual care and collective protection enables movements and

² Bis.

³ MCH6.

communities to remain united even in the face of violence, while at the same time working toward social transformation. In this way, the strategies to protect the community and activists from violence, also contribute to the strong and united organizing efforts.

***There is no greater protection for defenders than a territory free of mining
[and] extractive reserves.
Gustavo Castro, Mexico***

The community, if it is unified and well-organized, can very effectively protect activists. A strong social fabric like this, makes it more difficult for governments or non-State actors to commit assaults that intimidate, divide, and undermine human rights. Community-based collective protection allows a network to immediately activate local support that draws on cultural traditions, capacity and resources from the defender's own community.

Such an approach to protection recognizes and responds to the different and added risks of violence for certain members of the community because of racism, sexism, classism, and other forms of discrimination. Community approaches to protection also draw on the experiences and wisdom of women and those most targeted and stigmatized.

The shared history of a community's acts of peaceful civil resistance, self-defense and self-determination as well as of its experiences of autonomous and self-directed organization lays the foundation for collective protection. Local organization, communication networks and existing rituals and processes of community healing and resilience are instrumental in creating and sustaining collective protection. This approach to protection strengthens organizations and their rootedness within their communities and supports critical aspects of their work, including their capacity to perform analyses of risk and power, address internal conflicts, and construct hopeful narratives which inspire respect from the broader society. Though collective protection measures and strategies may enjoy legal or institutional recognition; often that recognition is limited. In some instances they may be protected by the international human rights framework, but are not explicitly recognized by institutions, nor public policy and may be rejected by the State.

Some examples of collective protection:

• **Autonomous forms of community security and community protection teams.** The case of the Indigenous Guards in Colombia and that of the Community Police Force in Guerrero, Mexico:

. . . [T]he peoples of the Guerrero Mountains decided to create a Community Police Force to protect themselves from insecurity, corruption, and impunity... One of the principal distinctive elements of this alternative model of community policing is its independence from the official security system... By committing to principles of fair investigation and non-discrimination and to pursuing processes of conciliation, the community creates a more effective justice system in keeping with the needs of the people.⁴

Women, once excluded, are increasingly playing leadership roles in community security structures.

⁴ Raúl Romeero Gallardo. *La Policía Comunitaria de Guerrero: Un sistema alternativo de seguridad y justicia* [The Community Police Force of Guerrero: An Alternative System for Security and Justice]. UNAM.
<http://www.revista.unam.mx/vol.15/num9/art68/>

• **Safe spaces.** A safe space can be a temporary or permanent physical place of refuge within the community or a specific opportunity for people to meet to share their experiences, fears and the risks they face in their respective contexts. An example of specific places of refuge are ‘humanitarian zones’:

*... utilized in Colombia in rural communities for temporarily defining and cordoning off an area in which the community lives. They have symbols indicating that the area is only for the civilian population, thereby preventing the entry of armed intruders.*⁵

The humanitarian refuges are temporary spaces where whole communities can relocate when they face danger and critical human rights violations. These spaces, maintained until the violence has diminished, help prevent displacement and give communities a degree of control over their territories.⁶ Safe spaces also include the ways in which the community or individual members choose to care for, and heal themselves from the impacts of the violence. An example of this is mutual care and support practiced by groups of women and youth of the same community or local organization.

• **Strengthening collective power, organization and leadership.** Well organized, active community members and strong citizen organizations are essential for protection. Strengthening this capacity requires:

- *Development of collective leadership:* When more people are involved in making decisions and organizing activities, as opposed to narrow and hierarchical leadership structures, not only do people have the necessary power and organizational capacity to react quickly to threats, but also divisive tactics used against them are less likely to succeed. The public assemblies common in indigenous communities in Latin America, and other models of communal organization promote collective power and leadership.
- *Participatory analyses of power, key actors, and threats:* In-depth analyses of the dynamics of power – the structural causes of violence, the roles of State and non-State actors and connections among them, the way in which multiple forms of discrimination intersect in the lives of individuals – and the creation of risk maps, provide the foundation for effective protection strategies. These analyses are most effective when they are created a participatory fashion with high levels of trust among those involved.
- *Security measures integrated within strategies for defending and promoting human rights*⁷: Any action or activity of civil resistance which could entail a confrontation with those in power, should include a safety and protection plan. That plan should have measures in place to keep the most vulnerable individuals safe and respond to emergencies including sexual violence, arbitrary detention and other repressive actions.
- *Address the fatigue, internal conflicts, discrimination and violence within organizations and communities:* organizational strengthening is central to protection processes.

A feminist approach to collective protection recognizes the need for specific measures to protect female and other targeted activists and prioritizes strengthening their leadership, recognizing their fundamental role in the defense of human rights, and addressing the macho violence that occurs in private spaces and organizations.

“It has no value if we come together to defend the territory,

⁵ ABColombia. *Mecanismos de autoprotección: Comunidades rurales y defensores de derechos humanos en Colombia* [Self-Protection Mechanisms: Rural Communities and Human Rights Defenders in Colombia].

⁶ *Ibid.* ABColombia. *Mecanismos de autoprotección: Comunidades rurales y defensores de derechos humanos en Colombia*.

⁷ Diverse measures can be found in the [Manual de Protección para Comunidades Rurales](#) [Protection Manual for Rural Communities].

and then our own male colleagues abuse us in the calm [sic].”
Lolita Chávez, Guatemala

Collective rituals and spaces for healing and collective resilience

“We women aren’t willing to die for the territory but rather, to live for the territory.”
Yayo Guerrero, Spanish State

Festivals, community rituals and healing houses and practices, are fundamental elements of protection: they stimulate hope, strengthen ties of solidarity, and open up spaces for addressing the personal and collective impacts of violence. There are many examples in indigenous and rural communities of this: from festivals and rituals celebrating the ancestors, to traditional medicine practices for alleviating physical and spiritual pain generated by violence.

. . . the nighttime Garífuna dances with the power of their song and the sound of the drums, cover the sound of the gunshots of the narcotraffickers. . . In this place surrounded by death, we the Garífuna are sowing life, culture, and hope.⁸

These communal practices are not exclusive to rural areas: in Brazilian favelas, where police violence that kills thousands of young people, the Fala Acarí Collective has promoted a mental health house that assists the families of victims of police violence. Or there is the La Serena Healing House, created by the Mesoamerican Initiative of Female Defenders with the Oaxaca Consortium as a place where female defenders can relax, heal from the impacts of the violence, and reflect on healthy ways to sustain activism.

Inform [and] construct narratives that support the work of movements in the territory. Mass media and governmental institutions maintain a continuous campaign of disinformation to defame activists and social movements. They manipulate information to favor private interest groups, by denigrating work related to human rights. To counteract these campaigns at the local level, various strategies exist including community radio, social media, local publications, awareness campaigns, and public talks.

Male and female Hondurans were confused. No one knew what was happening. The media were saying practically nothing, and what they did say sounded like lies. Meanwhile, in different parts of the country, a handful of small radio stations worked frenetically. The owners of those radio stations were not participants in the coup. They were not businesspersons, or politicians, or the families of oligarchs. Because those radio stations were owned by communities and organizations, they were not scared to call a spade a spade: in Honduras there had been a COUP D’ÉTAT.⁹

⁸ Radio Progreso. *Vallecito: Resistencia y defensa del último santuario garífuna en Honduras* [Vallecito: Resistance and Defense of the Last Garífuna Sanctuary in Honduras]. <http://radioprogreso.net/index.php/comunicaciones/noticias/item/1420-zona-de-resistencia-y-defensa-del-%C3%BAltimo-santuario-gar%C3%ADfuna-en-honduras>

⁹ María Reyero Fernández. *La senda de la palabra comunitaria en Latinoamérica. Experiencias de comunicación popular y radio comunitaria* [The Path of Community Voices in Latin America: Experiences of Popular Communication and Community Radio]. CESAG. <https://www.cesag.org/ghcs/tempsdecomunicar/?p=318>