Summary Report: PAX Protection of Civilians Conference 2022

People-centered approaches to security: Applying lessons learned for future programs

On 8 November 2022, PAX hosted its annual Protection of Civilians Conference (PoCCon22) in The Hague. The event convened a rich community of experts to discuss lessons learned about people-centered approaches to security. This year's conference provided reflections from policymakers, military experts, researchers, and civil society leaders on how to meaningfully engage with civilians living in conflict in order to sustainably and inclusively improve security. The purpose of this summary report is to highlight some of the key points of discussion from PoCCon22 and relevant recommendations and opportunities for the future. The responsibility for selection and phrasing of these points lies with PAX.

Setting the Scene

Given political and conflict conditions around the world, protection of civilians (PoC) must remain on the agenda of the international community. To achieve meaningful and sustained security, experts agree that **authorities and security providers need to more effectively and genuinely engage with civilian populations in order to better understand and respond to their security needs**. Successful protection should translate into people feeling secure and ensure that perspectives from all kinds of communities are considered, while creating opportunities in parallel for civilians to hold security and justice actors to account.

Institutions like the UN and NATO are working to institutionalize and implement nascent PoC policies and guidelines, and several key member states are also improving their own policy frameworks and practice. For instance, the Netherlands seeks to champion these themes at home and abroad by promoting security and rule of law as central priorities in foreign policy, especially supporting resilience and conflict prevention efforts at the community level. This requires strengthening social contracts between civilians and authorities, which is correlated with less violence,

particularly against civilian populations. The Dutch military is also making key revisions to its own PoC approaches (discussed in more detail below). Core to these updates is the idea that military institutions should make harm mitigation integral to military planning, and in cases where it occurs, transparency should be the norm—before, during, and after operations.

Below are a few key reflections from the discussion:

- Context matters greatly for security programming, especially while applying a people-centered approach, as contextual awareness is necessary for developing relevant and inclusive strategies for improving dynamic security environments. Concepts and strategies developed by policymakers in distant headquarters will never be as effective as those meaningfully informed by the local context.
- Efforts to improve social contracts in any context need to happen horizontally between different identity groups in addition to vertically between the population at large and formal authorities or institutions.
- The legitimacy of all our operations is at stake if we are not seen as trustworthy by the people we seek to protect and serve. This refers both to civilians in our programmatic contexts as well as taxpayers financing security programming abroad. All stakeholders therefore deserve transparency in situations where protection interventions fail or civilian harm occurs.
- Open, two-way communication is needed to improve the ability of officials to listen to its population and address their needs. We all too often get this wrong by undervaluing community engagement and having insufficient communication skills and mechanisms within state institutions, which undermines trust.

Further, mis/disinformation is a reality due to manipulation of the situation by groups who benefit from disharmony.

Contributors: Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance (DCAF), Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), Netherlands Ministry of Defense (MoD)

What does the evidence tell us about people-centered approaches to security?

There are a variety of local and international organizations conducting valuable research about civilian protection dynamics and providing evidence of the need for people-centered security from experience in practice. At this year's PoCCon, we heard from SIPRI about in-depth research in the Sahel region about civilian perceptions of security actors, from DCAF about their practical assessment framework for people-centered security sector reform, and CIVIC about lessons learned based on years of supporting community-based protection and facilitating constructive engagement between civilians and security forces.

Below are a few highlights from the discussion:

- Effective security needs to be interconnected across three levels: (1) bottom-up, focused on local empowerment and championing civil society; (2) top-down, building awareness and capacity at the level of formal institutions; and (3) at the intersection between the grassroots and state levels with the purpose of redistributing power balances and improving social contracts.
- State and civilian concepts of security may differ considerably. Understanding how civilians perceive their security requires examining it

holistically and acknowledging that physical security may be closely linked to economic, social, and political conditions. Further, communities' needs vary significantly based on geography, gender, identity group, migration status, age, livelihood, and various other factors. To ensure relevance, update context analyses often and not just in response to crises or as a check-the-box exercise. For practitioners, also be sure to consider the external motivating factors that may also influence security actors and their behavior (e.g., media coverage, pending legislation).

- Civilians may have positive opinions of local or national security actors, but when they do not have direct engagement or communication with forces responsible for providing security, there is a greater risk that security providers will not be willing or able to intervene effectively or in time during a crisis. However, civilians are often hesitant to engage with security forces and provide them with information in contexts where they are readily mistaken as fighters or fear reprisals. Meaningful interactions between communities and security forces therefore require a long period of trust building on both sides, which can be difficult in a dynamic security environment. For those operating in the PoC field, consider focusing less on advocacy, and more on trust building in programming.

Thank you to the contributors: Center for Civilians in Conflict (CIVIC), Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance (DCAF), and the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI).

How can we create more programmatic space for engaging security actors in fragile settings?

According to Geneva Call, there are twice as many informal and non-state armed groups operating in the last 6 years than there were in the preceding 60 years. In total, 150 million people in the world today live under the influence of security forces and 60 million people are directly governed by them. This means that regular civilians, as well as civil society organizations and diplomatic institutions are living or operating in contexts where they need to be able to engage effectively with security actors, both formal and informal.

Appropriately balancing the supply and demand of security in a fragile context requires social capital and trust, both of which take time to cultivate. Without these key conditions, there is a risk of designing interventions or organizing one-off workshops for the sake of it and without more thoughtful strategies behind them. Each context requires its own unique inputs and chemistry to enable effective working relationships and sufficient political will, and these factors should be considered thoughtfully when designing and implementing PoC or security sector programming. Experience also points to the need to be culturally appropriate, to ground programming in local experiences and capacities rather than always translating Western concepts, and to question how progressive or prescriptive you ought to be in a given context. (For instance, should you refuse to work with local security forces because there are very few women present, or should you take the opportunity to engage the men on gender topics?)

More specific observations and recommendations from the discussion included:

- Prior to designing an intervention, take the time to build relationships with your counterparts in targeted institutions. Avoid politicizing topics like PoC and work with a wide range of stakeholders who can contribute distinct perspectives. Ensure that you understand where their motivation and interests lie so you can focus your efforts on where you will be most effective.
- Be sensitive to the potential for mitigating risks like complicity or being utilized as cover by politically motivated actors. Acknowledge the sensitivity of engaging directly with security actors. If you provide political platforms to security forces, you may no longer be seen as impartial or apolitical, so be sure to clearly adhere to core principles. You can further mitigate potential reputational or operational risks by demonstrating tangible positive results on the ground. For instance, encourage security forces to make formal public commitments (e.g., written codes of conduct that reflect the local context and for which they can be held to account).
- Long-term engagement is necessary for both credibility and understanding the human environment. Engage with security actors and relevant non-state armed groups before a formal end to hostilities, and not only afterwards.
- Given how dynamic conflict contexts can be, adaptability and opportunistic approaches are also often necessary. Without losing track of desired outcomes, be prepared to operate flexibly.
- Translate materials and knowledge into appropriate languages and simplify jargon so it is accessible to target audiences. Use contextually relevant examples in trainings and exercises to ground principles in relatable practice, rather than working with fictitious cases. However, also ensure that inclusive policies rooted in best practices are integrated into programming.
- Diplomats and policymakers should also be actively sharing lessons learned amongst themselves, e.g., between troop contributing countries (TCCs) or relevant ministries.
- Remain keenly aware of the media context; leverage when possible but be sensitive to the influence of mis/disinformation.

Thank you to the contributors: Iraqi Al Amal Association, Geneva Call, Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), and PAX.

Lessons learned in planning people-centered approaches in military operations

PoC experts from across all contexts and institutions agree that understanding the lasting impacts of security operations and mitigating potential civilian harm are legal, moral, and operational imperatives. During the conference, we explored two countries' efforts to better integrate these principles into their

policies and practices: the Netherlands and the United States.

The event came at a particularly useful time for providing input into the Dutch security policy space, as the Netherlands Ministry of Defense works to refine relevant security approaches, including to people-centered protection strategies and civilian harm mitigation and response. Following a series of consultations with civil society organizations led by PAX, known as the "Roadmap Process", **the Dutch MoD is working to improve accountability in its security operations. This reflects a cultural shift as well as doctrinal and practice changes**. The policy changes require that the Dutch military informs Parliament before a security intervention on how civilian harm mitigation works, including the targeting procedures, intelligence procedures, red card holders, etc. Further, the Dutch government acknowledges that they need to do better in terms of civilian casualty investigations and in terms of transparency while still recognizing the need to protect against putting operations, personnel, or national interests at risk). It is the ambition of the Dutch MoD that PoC becomes a central part of mission evaluation.

The event also provided the opportunity to discuss similar developments underway in the United States, where the recent Civilian Harm and Response Action Plan (CHMRAP) reflects a significant opportunity to update security approaches to both make American use of force more accountable and improve strategic outcomes. The CHMRAP is a reinforcing framework directed by the US Secretary of Defense that includes both the mandate and resources to overhaul critical aspects of military planning, operations, and assessment. The Action Plan and subsequent Department of Defense Instruction (DoDI) will standardize the approach of assessing potential or actual civilian harm and institute affirmative procedures for commanders that are contextually appropriate, rather than "one size fits all". It further creates formal civilian harm assessment cells and coordinators at the combatant command level and establishes a Civilian Protection Center of Excellence. The CHMRAP is currently at the stage of establishing the framework and allocating resources, but a phased approach will transition in the coming years towards tangible doctrinal change, including establishing Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs), training programs, etc. **Many valuable lessons from this process**

will be relevant for institutions like NATO and the UN, as well as their member states and partners.

Below are some additional reflections and lessons learned to date:

- Leverage a community of committed and diverse experts to craft and refine PoC and civilian harm mitigation policies and implementation strategies. What was critical and unique about both the Roadmap and CHMRAP processes was that NGOs were in the room contributing expertise from the outset, which all sides viewed as incredibly valuable.
- Invest time to build awareness about the subject within a given institution. Knowing the organizational context and culture is key, and mapping champions and spoilers can be an important tool for navigating and planning. Take a step-by-step approach of building awareness about the subject to avoid moving too fast and losing allies, but still remain ambitious.
- Ensure sufficient financial and human resources are available to meaningfully implement new policies. Further, be strategic in positioning PoC, human security, and civilian harm mitigation policy offices thoughtfully within ministries and institutional structures. This will facilitate "comprehensive" and "whole of government" approaches and avoid sidelining these critical themes. Although (as described above), one also needs to go a step beyond and integrate expertise from outside of government as well in order to effectively move from policy ambition to reality.
- Incentivize civilian harm mitigation through rewards, rather than the risk of punishments. Often it is understood as placing limitations for

militaries on how to operate (fighting with one hand tied behind your back), rather than as an operational imperative.

- Countries building national PoC policies also need to discuss mutual expectations in partnered missions or when providing bilateral security assistance to allies. This will require updated

policy guidance, training support, and means of enforcing new standards.

Thank you to the contributors: the Netherlands Ministry of Defense (MoD), PAX, and the United States Department of Defense (US DoD).

Thank you to everyone who contributed to this valuable event by sharing their unique perspectives and expertise. If you have any questions or comments, please do not hesitate to reach out to PAX's Protection of Civilians team at:
poc@paxforpeace.org.

For more information about PAX or its work on protection of civilians topics, please visit us online: www.protectionofcivilians.org, www.paxforpeace.nl

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