



Season 2 Episode 6
Community-Based Protection in Nigeria
Episode Transcript

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Interview fragment: Working directly with the community: it is the most important thing. We do not do it for them, but we train them and build their capacity to do it for themselves. So, I will always say: for community programs like this to be sustained, all the community needs is capacity building and a little support to keep the ball rolling.

Teaser Clip: Every day 100 civilians are killed in conflict and countless more are harmed, yet their perspectives are often missing from the stories we tell about war. This is the Civilian Protection Podcast. A monthly podcast produced by CIVIC and PAX.

Annie: Hey everyone, this is Annie Shiel, US Advocacy Director at Center for Civilians in Conflict, or CIVIC.

Marc: ... and I am Marc Garlasco, Military Advisor from PAX. Our organizations work in conflicts around the world to protect civilians caught in war.

Annie: Today's episode brings us to northeast Nigeria, where CIVIC works with conflict-affected communities to advocate for their own protection.

Marc: Before we dive in, some background on the protection issues in Nigeria: Since 2009, northeast Nigeria has experienced sustained conflict between the government and armed opposition groups, including Boko Haram. All parties to the conflict have harmed civilians and caused serious human rights violations during the conflict, which has also resulted in the displacement of some three million people and significant humanitarian need.

Annie: It is in this context that CIVIC has been working with communities in what we call community-based protection. That work is based in the fundamental belief that civilians are not just victims of conflict, but people with agency and expertise about the conflicts they are living in and what they need to be safe. In Nigeria, CIVIC has worked with multiple communities to form Community Protection Committees, or CPCs. These civilian groups come together to discuss protection issues, spread the word about threats, and advocate for their needs with authorities.

Marc: And so to kick us off today, I am going to hand over co-hosting to Bulus Mungopark, CIVIC's Community Engagement Manager in Nigeria. Welcome, Bulus.

Bulus: Thank you Marc. Happy to be here.

Annie: Bulus, welcome. In preparation for this episode, you and your colleagues spoke to a few CPC members about their work and how it has improved protection in their communities, and we will hear from them in a moment, but I was wondering if first, you might like to briefly describe your work and why community-based protection is so important to CIVIC's work and success.

Bulus: I am a community engagement specialist, I work directly with the conflict-affected communities across Northeast Nigeria to provide technical support to the community, to think through their protection concerns, and develop ways to respond and mitigate their protection threats. Community-based protection is one of CIVIC's protection pillars that involves working directly with conflict-affected people as an agent of change in their conflict situations, that guarantees ownership and sustainability. A community-based protection approach is important, because when communities are well equipped with all the knowledge, they can better advocate for their own protection – even when CIVIC's intervention comes to an end.

Annie: And I know we will hear some examples shortly, but can you walk us through, briefly, how a CPC works? What does the set-up look like, what kind of people are in the committee, and how does the group achieve success?

Bulus: CPCs, as you know, Community Protection Committees, are sets of community members who were selected by the CIVIC team. They were trained to monitor threats in their communities, and together they seek to develop strategies to respond and mitigate such protection threats. They are comprised of both males and females of different age and gender. We consider diversity, so we brought about people from different ethnicities and religions, because we are mindful of sustainability, so we ensure that everybody is brought together to form the CPC. And it is worthy also to mention, or I would like you to know, that the composition of CPCs is very unique, because they are drawn from every community, which means that every community is represented. And what the CPC does is they sit together and think through some of the emerging threats in their community, be it attacks from the armed opposition groups, be it threats from the armed groups, I am talking about government forces, some unlawful detention, some kind of harm caused to civilians maybe during crowd control or checkpoints, and what have you. So, those are the kinds of threats that when they see it or identify it, they sit down together and then discuss and see how best they can be able to approach the military leadership to reduce such harm caused to civilians. So, CPCs, as I mentioned earlier, are very important agents of change, of their own protection in their own community.

Annie: That is super helpful, thank you Bulus. And that brings us to the first CPC member that we spoke with for today's episode, whose name is Queen. She has been working with a CPC in northeast Nigeria for five years, since 2018. And she explained that one of the biggest threats the CPC had worked to address was kidnappings or abductions of women and girls by armed groups when they were out farming.

Queen: The threat from armed opposition groups is mostly abduction during farming activities. I remember the last time women and girls went for farming activities and were abducted by the insurgents. The CPC called for a meeting and discussed the issue. We mobilized ourselves and advocated to the commanding officer of Maimalari Barracks and instantly, checkpoints were put around the farmland and military trenches were dug around the farmland. And that was how we mitigated the attack.

Annie: Lack of access to farmland due to fear of violence, especially for women and girls and for other vulnerable groups, was something that came up in a lot of the interviews. Is this something the CPCs deal with a lot?

Bulus: It is, yes. And some of the CPCs' biggest achievements have been in that area. For example, like Queen mentioned, CPCs have come together to convince the military to build fences to stop

attacks from armed opposition groups in their various communities, and to conduct patrols in unsafe areas where civilians, especially women and girls, gather firewood or harvest crops.

Annie: Queen also gave one other example that I thought was really interesting, about community efforts to stop violence and theft.

Queen: There was a time theft was a daily routine in our community, it is what the CPC reported to the security forces and community leaders. We organized meetings and discussed the issue. Mitigation strategies were put in place. As a result of the meeting, they use both Christians and Muslims in the community. We are mobilized and split into two to secure the community: the Christians secure on Friday, while the Muslims secure on Sunday. This did not only secure our community, but rather bring peaceful coexistence. Since then this issue was addressed.

Annie: Bulus, can you explain why they organized these kinds of community patrols this way, with Christian communities keeping watch on Fridays and Muslims on Sundays?

Bulus: Yeah, Annie, you know that Christians have holy days on Sundays and, likewise, Muslims also have their prayer days on Fridays. So, this is a community initiative. It is not like CIVIC came and then helped them to think through how best they can be able to protect themselves from all forms of criminality that are happening in their communities. So, the CPC together with the community leaders and other stakeholders came together and said, 'We need to do something.' Because the harm, I mean the activities, the criminality has become so rampant, in such a way, that every Sunday when the Christian majority goes to church, they take advantage of their absence and rob their houses, and then steal their belongings. Likewise, on Fridays when Muslims go to the mosque for their Friday prayers, the criminals or the thieves or robbers in the community take advantage of that and go to their houses and then steal their belongings. So, the CPC came together with the community and discussed how best they can be able to protect each other. That is why they have come up with that strategy: that on Sundays, when Christians will be absent from their houses, the Muslims will step in for the Christians to ensure the safety of their houses and properties. And also, on Fridays, the Muslims will go to their mosques and then Christian youth will now gather and protect all their houses against the thefts. So, this is the initiative they brought forward and that kind of action has brought about peace and unity in the community, which is very, very amazing.

Annie: So, we also heard from another CPC member in another community in northeast Nigeria, named Habib.

Habib: My role in the community is that I work as a community protections officer.

Annie: Like Queen, Habib also described access to farmlands and firewood as a big issue facing his community. In his case, he described how they negotiated with local authorities and law enforcement to ensure safe access.

Habib: Many people of our community, they cannot, they do not have access to their farm lands, and they cannot go to a far place from their homes. So through CIVIC and then us and then through the traditional rulers, we have managed it, we have talked to those people who are in authority, that is law enforcement agencies. And we have talked to them on the behalf of the people, and then we negotiated with them, and then they have since reasoned that yes, they should have the access to their farm lands.

Annie: Bulus, can you explain more about this issue of farmland and firewood access, and why it is such a big issue?

Bulus: So talking about firewood patrols in the community as Habib and Queen have mentioned, you know, the people in most of the communities in the northeast are predominantly farmers, and they rely so much on firewood as their major source of energy. They use it to cook, they use it to warm their houses, some of them even use it to burn into charcoal and then sell it to get some money from it. So, firewood is very essential for communities in the northeast. And so, because of the attacks and abductions by armed opposition groups, when some of the community have to go from their community to some certain kilometers away to get such firewood, they are being abducted, some killed. Now, the community has advocated to the military to help them escort these civilians to get firewood, so that they can improve their lives and also to use it as a source of energy to cook. And so, every day, the military with other community militias like the CJTF and the hunters will come together –

Marc: Bulus is referring to the Civilian Joint Task Force, or CJTF, and the hunters, different community militias that have formed to protect local communities from attacks by Boko Haram.

Bulus: – and then form a patrol chain to escort these civilians to the bush in order to get firewood. And this was as a result of advocacy efforts by CPCs, and this is happening across all the CIVIC locations. It has been replicated in all our CIVIC locations, and thousands and hundreds of thousands of civilians now are finding it easy, under security cover, to go out to fetch firewood for their own domestic use.

Annie: In another example, Habib described communities' fear and confusion when the military would enter the community with armored tricycles.

Habib: There are some people who are like a part of the community, the civilian JTF, and some other military officers are coming in with a tricycle to the community. You know, the other opposition, that is the armed opposition, that is the people who are attacking the community, were using that kind of thing. And from a distance, you cannot identify whether they are the good ones or the bad ones. So, when they come into the community, many of our people like, they run away, no, they leave their homes. So we talk to the law enforcement agencies. When they look at it, and they see it, and they say, 'Wow, this is unreasonable, we have never thought of it. And you come with these things and I think we are going to put a stop to it. And we will talk to our law enforcement agencies, all of our colleagues and all of the general ranking officers, and all of them to stop coming into the community on those kind of tricycles.' So they talked to their own colleagues, and it stopped.

Bulus: And the communities are in no more fear, right?

Habib: Yes, we are no more in fear. No more in danger. And I think that kind of thing I love, I love doing it. And I love that just the fact that you are CIVIC trainers and then give us the knowledge for us to do it.

Bulus: Yes, basically you had a situation where the military and militias would come in very quickly, without warning or identifying themselves, using tricycles and that is the same that the armed opposition groups also used. For example, in one of the communities, the CJTF have used such motorcycles, and the community thought it was a military, and that is how the community was attacked because they were taken unaware. And as a result, the CPC now saw the need to put a stop to those actions, because it is exposing them to more harm, because the armed opposition group will disguise as a militia or military group to come to their community to attack them. And so, they have visited the commanding officers in one of the military brigades, and they have advocated for the stop of such movements, mostly at night, by the military and the militia groups. And that was given a positive response.

Annie: The last person we spoke to for today's episode is a man named Alhaji Abba, who is part of the government, a District Head, in a community where CIVIC also works with CPCs. He has worked closely with the CPC in his community and has helped foster dialogues between communities and armed forces about protection issues.

Alhaji Abba: Before the CPC was created in my community, most of our community members could hardly reach out to the military to report their security concerns. Because there was tension between community people and military. There was no trust between civilians and the military. But the CPC has helped build a good relationship between the military and our community.

Annie: Alhaji Abba also described how the CPC has served unexpected functions in the community.

Alhaji Abba: I remember during the COVID-19 era, our people did not believe that the pandemic existed. CPC members conducted sensitization and awareness, which helped our community to understand the negative impact of COVID-19 and mitigation measures like hand washing, social distancing, and the need to report any suspected cases. I also remember how CPC members conducted a sensitization campaign against election violence months ago. It was wonderful.

Bulus: Yes – one thing about the CPCs is that, while we at CIVIC work with the community to help set them up, they are owned by the community. So even though they started focusing on maybe a few specific protection concerns, we have also seen them grow to support the community's efforts in other areas, like COVID-19 pandemic and conflict resolution.

Annie: And what happens if CIVIC leaves a community?

Bulus: So, we have already started from scratch. What I mean is: sustainability from scratch. The Community Protection Committees are aware that this program is community-driven, it is owned by the community. And we made them understand that CIVIC will not be there forever. So what we did was to tell them: this is your program, and you should try as much as possible to sustain it because all the knowledge that CIVIC will give you, will help you in the future. And of this, they are aware. For example, in one of our project locations in Bama, we have withdrawn tactically from working there for over a year, but they are sustaining themselves now. They conduct meetings, they do advocacy for their own protection, they have meetings with security forces and other community leaders, and send reports to us here in CIVIC about the activities that took place. And we are sure that other locations are also good to go. When CIVIC stops, they are ready to take over from where we stopped. And these are also some of the things we ask them particularly when we visit them. We ask them, "What do you think when CIVIC stops coming or when maybe CIVIC's funding ends?" They said that they are good to continue the good work that they are doing with CIVIC. That they will surely miss us, but they are also ensuring us that the good work that they are doing will not stop because of CIVIC's absence.

Annie: Bulus, can you speak a little bit about what you, and CIVIC more broadly, have learned from this work about how the international community can do a better job of supporting conflict-affected communities, and why that is so important?

Bulus: So, Annie, one of my best lessons that I learned in all these years working with communities is that, when communities are well-equipped, when their capacity is built, they can surely sustain themselves. What I want to say is: working directly with the community, it is the most important thing. For other international communities, what we are doing is a results-based approach. We do not do it for them, but we train them and build their capacity to do it for themselves. So, I will always say: for

community programs like this to be sustained, all the community needs is capacity building and a little support to keep the ball rolling.

Annie: Yeah, absolutely. And I think, Bulus, so much of what your work and the work of the communities shows, again, is this idea that civilians are not just victims of a conflict, right? That they are agents of their own protection, that they are experts, that they know what they need. And that, I think we have seen often to be lacking in international responses. So, thank you for all that you do on that. And thank you so much, Bulus, for joining us.

Bulus: Thank you.

Annie: That is it for today's episode of the Civilian Protection Podcast.

Marc: It is also the end of Season 2 – thanks for listening! Stay tuned for updates on when we will return with Season 3. For further updates on our work check out the websites for CIVIC and PAX as well as @protectionpod on Twitter.

Annie: The Civilian Protection Podcast is brought to you by Center for Civilians in Conflict and PAX – two NGOs working to improve the lives of civilians in conflict. Today's episode was written by Annie Shiel and Bulus Mungopark with assistance from Erin Bijl, Marc Garlasco, and Hajer Naili. It was produced by the Podcast Guru. Hajer Naili and Matt Longmore made sure we are online. We would like to thank our guests for joining us and for sharing their insights.

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