Support of Local Capacity to Survive Violence

Casey Barrs, Phnom Penh, November 2010

Twenty-five years ago, in a time when governments and institutions failed, many, many people died in this country. But many also endured, and devised their own survival. I want to thank [preceding speaker] Mr. Neou for the humbling reminder.

I am going to talk about civilians protecting themselves from mass atrocity, and the ways that we do or do not support that.

When I say "protecting", I place as much importance on *preparedness* as on *prevention*. It is important to prepare for a failure to prevent conflict. And it is important and prepare for a failure of outside rescue. Is early warning a complete failure if it doesn't result in prevention or outside rescue? No! If properly wired, warning can lead to preparedness. It can give the people at risk more time for preparing ways to protect themselves.

When I say "protecting themselves", I place civilians at the center of own protection. The responsibility to protect often becomes theirs first and foremost. The responsibility to prepare often becomes theirs too.

We know that preparedness includes mechanisms for early warning and response. Yet when I say warning and response, I refer not only conventional warning operated by "outsiders", but also to warning run by the civilians who actually in path danger. I refer not only conventional responses focused resolving conflict or sending in rescuers, but also local survival responses focused simply on staying alive. There are hundreds and hundreds of such tactics and strategies. We've begun to inventory them. These local tactical "lessons learned" are almost never shared from one crisis and culture to another.

And when I say warning and response, I refer not only to that based on technological breakthroughs, but also that based on human behavior and the social "architecture" behind self-protection. I may be wrong, but I don't think the early warning community and responsibility-to-protect community talk much about how locals survive and even serve each other, alone, in face of violence.

Why are their methods of survival of more than anthropological interest to us? Why is Mr. Neou's story of more than historical interest to us? Maybe it is because his story was multiplied my many thousands of individuals and families; because their capacity to learn survival saved more than outside world did.

I will to suggest that if you want your good efforts be even more connected with local self-protection, you may need a "connector". And I will suggest that there is a third community that may be able help facilitate that connection. (Please excuse me for using a simplistic term like "community" to identify groups of responders.) The third community that I refer to is the aid community—development and relief NGOs; both *indigenous and expatriate*. These organizations can: (1) Support local capacity for self-protection, and also (2) support two-way awareness between local and outside protection efforts.

So these are my key points:

- Outside efforts to protect locals are too often incapacitated.
- But locals themselves have enormous capacity. They very often take the initiative—the responsibility—to protect.
- When there is no resolution of conflict or rescue from it, then their methods of warning and response can be very different than ours.

- Still, there is great potential in our responsibility-to-protect and early warning efforts.
- One challenge is to adapt/connect such efforts to civilians at actually risk.
- If there's any entity that can adapt/connect to civilians at risk, it's the local or foreign aid agency.
- Though there are sensitivities, the responsibility-to-protect, early warning, and aid communities can work together on protection in smarter ways, and with much greater awareness of local efforts.

The Responsibility to Protect. The Endeavour to Warn and Respond.

In the last 15 years there were some 87 wars, as listed by Wikipedia. And a war just a war—that list does not include things like genocide in Rwanda or regime-induced famine and repression in North Korea. In the last 15 years were 54 conflicts with state-induced displacement of civilians, and God only knows how many times non-state actors attacked and displaced civilians.

And all the while we had Geneva conventions, and genocide conventions, guiding principles, international humanitarian law, and peacekeeping apparatus. We had tens of thousands of groups dedicated to conflict resolution. We had advocates, think tanks and donors supporting all those good efforts—they saved many lives. But as you all know, over the last 15 years we were still unable to save *millions*. It is reasonable to guess that over the *next* 15 years there *will again* be millions more who face violence alone within their own country's borders.

I agree with Professor Luck who, two months ago, told members of UN General Assembly that "We need a keen appreciation of the limitations of external action." He added that, "Our capacity...will never match the scope of the task." [1] So, while we continue to improve our good efforts—that's Plan A—let's *also* prepare for our professional limitations and inevitable failures, and let's think outside box—that's Plan B. Let's just agree for this talk that sooner or later the things your organizations are good at are going to fail. Let's agree that somewhere sometime Hell will be visited upon earth. I trust you all will agree that we have another crucial responsibility, and that is the responsibility to admit and anticipate our limitations.

The common description of the responsibility to protect goes something like this: States have the primary responsibility to protect their own citizens. But when a state proves patently unwilling or unable to protect them, the responsibility then vests *upward* to the international community. You hear much, much less about how responsibility—and capacity—for raw survival and for service *also vest* downward to the civilians themselves.

Of all the possible protections, *self*-protection will be the last one standing because it rests on the abilities of the very people who are left standing alone as violence shuts world out.

Locals Protecting Themselves

Let me draw your attention to a preliminary inventory called "How Civilians Survive Violence". Some copies of it are available for you here today. We invite you us help us improve and expand upon it in months ahead. The inventory currently cites about 500 ways that civilians keep themselves alive, and I am sure you could think of more to add. It focuses on three things: *physical safety*, as well as *life-critical sustenance* and *life-critical services*. Why sustenance and services? Because civilians themselves (1) often equate these elemental needs with their "security", (2) often take physical risks to obtain these elemental needs, and (3) always die in far greater numbers not from direct violence but from a collapse of sustenance and services—a collapse that to some extent can be anticipated and *prepared* for.

[1] Statement by Edward C. Luck, Special Adviser to the United Nations Secretary, *General Informal Interactive Dialogue on Early Warning, Assessment, and the Responsibility to Protect*, United Nations General Assembly, 9 August 2010; pp. 2 and 4-5.

Altogether, these tactics and strategies have saved *millions* of lives.

Their self-protection often begins with more conventional political, civil, legalistic measures (the types of measures we outsiders are more familiar with and supportive of) that attempt to *engage* dangerous actors and *influence* events. But locals pragmatically recognize the limits of efforts to influence a maelstrom. (In 2009, the ICRC interviewed four thousand people in eight war-torn countries. When asked what civilians living in areas of armed conflict need the most, only 3% chose "to influence decisions that affect them." [2]) When such efforts reach their limits, then locals' actions become more unorthodox.

At the point of contact between victim and abuser, self-protection is unconventional and very tactical. When the Khmer Rouge, or Arkan's Tigers, or D'Aubuisson's death squads, or the Interharme, or Janjiwid, or Lord's Resistance Army come to your village or your home, you are going to react tactically: (1) you're going to deal or pay, run or hide, shoot 'em or join 'em. (2) you're going to take discreet, unorthodox steps to secure lifesaving sustenance and services—you will!

There are many unconventional ways to *accommodate* abusers. To pick just one: Neou Kassie made himself too valuable to his abusers to be killed. Dith Pran, I believe, did same by becoming a caretaker to his captor's child.

There are many strategies by which to *avoid* abusers. These sometimes become integrated and rather sophisticated, culminating in local early warning and flight. There are many strategies by which get life-critical *sustenance* amid the collapse of production and markets. There are many strategies by which continue life-critical *services* amid collapse of conventional programs.

Our inventory is a global list of actions that civilians sometimes take. We place no judgment on whether a specific action is wise in a specific crisis. An act that can save lives in one place might cost lives in another. We invite you to review this inventory and consider (1) the broad scope of civilian self-protection, (2) how life-saving practices can be shared, and (3) how the learning curve for survival can be shortened.

Protection Role of Development and Relief ("Aid") NGOs

It is important to point out the unique comparative advantages that aid NGOs often possess. Think of the sheer number of indigenous and expatriate aid agencies. Consider their vast reach/presence and their potential—potential—to be a massive bulwark for protection. They are the most apt have the best access, local contacts and most trust on the ground; the best situational awareness and cultural nuance. Not always, but often. And this creates unique chances to support protection and warning in *locally-understood ways*. Aid NGOs are the most apt to have the most appropriate skill sets (in life-critical sustenance, service, and grassroots mobilization). They are the most apt to have plausible cover for being in remote/unstable areas, and comparative autonomy of action. (We can talk about that later.)

How do aid NGOs operationalize what they feel is their own responsibility to protect? For well over a decade they have fostered protection firstly through their mainstream aid mission (making programs far more sensitive to conflict), and secondly through an expanded mission (some would say "mission creep") addressing rights, governance, rule of law, and civil society, all with aim of preempting violence.

I see two other areas of big potential: One is to support local capacity for self-protection, period. The other is to support two-way awareness between local and outside protection efforts.

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[2] *Our World. Views From the Field, Summary Report: Afghanistan, Colombia, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Georgia, Haiti, Lebanon, Liberia, and the Philippines*, Ipsos/ICRC, Geneva, November, 2009; pp. 45-46.

In regard to the first area of potential (supporting local capacity for self-protection), I agree with Ms. Wynn-Pope, one of our good conference organizers, who has written that there's "much that NGOs can learn and provide in terms of community preparedness so that if violence does occur, communities have strongest possibility of survival." [3]

There already are precedents in NGO support of local, physical, tactical, protections. In terms of *safety*, aid agencies increasingly support community policing (camp or village watches, patrols, etc.), and this can sometimes be taken to the next level. They are also deeply involved in disaster risk reduction. The analogy is not perfect, but at least shows aid organizations can work with local populations on physical, tactical, protections. In terms of *sustenance*, aid NGOs increasingly support civilians' emergency livelihoods in the middle of conflict. And this can sometimes be taken to the next level. Finally, in terms of *service*, they increasingly provide remote support to low profile service delivery by indigenous providers in the middle of conflict—and this too can be taken to the next level.

These are useful precedents. But given that many of the best and brightest individuals and institutions in the aid world have long said it's vital to support local capacity for self-preservation before violence hits, I think it is fair to say that this goal should be addressed much more systematically. Even aid NGOs have a lot more listening and learning to do in regard to civilians' self-protection strategies.

One proposal for a more systematic approach has been put forward by The Cuny Center. It is called Preparedness Support (copies of a paper on this subject are available). Preparedness Support consists of "advisory moduless"—menus really—for talking with local beneficiaries, staff and partners about getting safety, sustenance, and services onto a crisis footing before it may become too late.

As you wonder what this might look like, don't imagine formal training or prefabricated programs with western faces in the lead. Instead, imagine "word-of-mouth" approaches perhaps using warden-based networks that follow the local social architecture of self-protection. And imagine *discreet*, training-of-trainer approaches based on mutual *listening* & *sharing* of protection methods.

Such *discretion*—such a support role rather than today's "center stage" role in protection—may be a welcome development in terms of buffering aid NGOs' *neutrality* and restraining their mission creep.

The second area of big potential that I mentioned (Support mutual two-way awareness/understand between local and outside protection efforts) is more difficult to envision. (I apologize for the terrible generalization I make with the words "locals" and "outsiders – it just serves as shorthand in a short talk.) I feel there is often a big disconnect between how locals in the path of danger, and how we outsiders, perceive protection. Maybe you feel there's a disconnect too? I am much less confident of this part of my talk—and will need your help. Let me think out loud and ask questions rather than try to make points about things, like early warning, on which I am no authority.

A question: ***Who*** is the outsider's warning wired to? Is it wired to governmental offices or civil society institutions? Such entities are very valuable—but when mass violence arrives, they're often polarized or paralyzed; they often become ineffectual or cease to function. (This raises serious questions about where we outsiders prefer to focus our capacity-building efforts.) Is it wired to "locals" actually in harm's way? Not every host "national" can be considered a "local". Those who partner with our programs, systems, and technologies are often relatively cosmopolitan. They are not necessarily seen as "belonging" to the

[3] *NGOs and the Prevention of Mass Atrocities Crimes: A Practical Workshop for NGOs to Develop and Share Strategies to Implement the Responsibility to Protect in the Asia-Pacific Region*, 23-24 November 2009, Outcome Document prepared by Phoebe Wynn-Pope for Oxfam Australia, 16 March 2010; p. 4.

affected communities. Even if they do belong, they aren't necessarily the ones whom others will trust and follow on crucial decisions like getting out of harm's way, should it become required.

And more questions: ***What*** is the outsider's warning plugged into? A response for resolving conflict? That's a Plan A Resp. What if it fails? A response for sending in rescuers? How often does that really happen? A response for triggering rapid public use of SMS and other information technologies? OK—but is that action tied to any pre-existing plans for action? A response for helping civilians *get themselves* out of harm's way? Better—but outsiders very rarely contemplate this.

And there are questions for local leadership: **What** outside protection efforts are locals aware of, or availing of? Are they joined up with outside efforts to raise an alarm, or advocacy? Are they synced up with peacekeepers? This will sound controversial, and I am not necessarily advocating it, but listen: When peacekeeping missions are chronically hamstrung by caveats about protecting civilians *if* facing "imminent threat" *if* "in the area of operation" and *if* the "resources available" allow, then a local population may be able to help its protectors—help its "protectors"—with the *strategic arithmetic*! Peacekeepers almost *always* lack capacity. But local capacity like community policing, awareness, warning, and temporary flight that's wired to peacekeepers and perhaps joined up with peacekeepers' tactical response could save lives. Clearly, this would need to be weighed against the possible risks of affiliating with a peacekeepers mission and inviting retaliation.

Well, if there is interest in seeing inside and outside protection efforts better *harmonized*, then the ground needs be prepared. So I often compare warning to an "air supply drop". If the drop zone is not well-prepared… If the reception party is not organized… If the distribution of goods and other considerations downstream are not planned—then the result can be diminished, dysfunctional, and even dangerous. There simply needs to be social organization and contingency planning on the ground if an ICT platform—like an airdrop—is to be effective.

We live in an evermore-connected world. But this process of inside-out / outside-in *mutual awareness* needs last-mile connectivity! As you well know, early warning not just a matter of transmission (whether of cellphone calls, text messages, or Google Earth images). The "plug-in" is not just a matter of good organizational coordination and technological prowess. No—it's psychological too.

It requires not just proofs, but persuasion. It is *unnatural* for people to prepare to uproot their families and assets. It is unnatural for people to heed warnings of the worst. Families and communities face the same warning paradox that institutions and nations do: the earlier the warning, the harder it is to believe and invest in. For this very reason, the mindset (the mental readiness to act) is just as important as any skill set or technology attached to warning!

As threats grow, some civilians will be skeptical and under react. Other civilians will be scared and overreact. Both frames of mind can be dangerous. So early warning needs to be nuanced and channeled to something constructive. These are circumstances for which the responsibility-to-protect advocate or early warning expert probably need an interpreter; a *downward* "adapter". And these are circumstances for which local leaders may well need an interpreter; a *upward* "adapter". So again I come back to the aid NGO, whether indigenous or expatriate, at the "pivot" or "swing role" on the ground.

I don't want to make this sound easy. Yes, aid organizations have some comparative advantages. But they can have limitations too. Not all aid NGOs are grounded enough, accepted enough, in a given locality to play this role. This limitation can apply not only to expatriate agencies, but to indigenous ones as well. They don't always have the requisite awareness, trust, contacts among the affected populations. Not all aid NGOs have adequate organizational strength. And—not all aid NGOs *want* to get down in the dirt and support the physical/tactical aspects of civilian self-protection. (We can talk about this later.)

Finally, few aid NGOs can do the things that an international responsibility-to-protect coalition or an early warning group can. So they might be well advised not to try to reinvent the wheel, and instead partner with such groups. "Partner" might be too strong a word. There are sensitivities involved. Many in the world still associate responsibility-to-protect doctrine with political and military intervention—despite the fact that there are these other basic elements to it, such as prevention and warning.

But I think your three "communities" have core goals in common and already do have a track record of collaboration. By that I refer to aid NGOs having done *discreet* monitoring and *confidential* reporting on a huge scale of political instability and human rights abuses. Though that reporting has not typically been wired to locals in harm's way, it has been wired upward in ways that helped early warning practitioners and responsibility to protect advocates. Given that foundation, that I think it is plausible for you to push further on collaboration. I think it is advisable that you pay even greater attention to each others' comparative advantages.

Of course, the community that often has the *most vital* comparative advantages in regard to protection is the local community itself. *All of us* need to find better methods for mutual listening and sharing with them.

Local self-protection is *not a panacea*—but as I said, of all the possible protections, *self*-protection will be the last one standing because it rests on the abilities of the very people who are left standing alone as violence shuts world out.

This should be next frontier in protection work. The next steps should be to give aid NGOs (1) more documentation of locals' capacity to survive and serve others amid violence, and then (2) the guidance and financial support to try this; to *pilot this*.

Thank you very much.