Empowering Afghan Civil Society and Communities on Civilian Protection: Key Takeaways
Cover photo: Members of the Baghlan Civilian Protection Working Group discuss civilian protection during a workshop organized by CIVIC in June 2017. CIVIC/Hadi Marifat
Empowering Afghan Civil Society and Communities on Civilian Protection:
Key Takeaways
Organizational Mission

The mission of Center for Civilians in Conflict (CIVIC) is to work with armed actors and civilians in conflict to develop and implement solutions to prevent, mitigate and respond to civilian harm. We call on and advise international organizations, government, militaries, and armed non-state actors to adopt and implement policies to prevent civilian harm. When civilians are harmed we advocate for the provision of amends and post-harm assistance. We bring the voices of civilians themselves to those making decisions affecting their lives.

This practice note was written by CIVIC’s Program Officer in Afghanistan Hadi Marifat and edited by Sahr Muhammedally, Director, MENA & South Asia. For further information about CIVIC’s work in Afghanistan please contact sahr@civiliansinconflict.org
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Glossary

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<td>AIHRC</td>
<td>Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission</td>
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Introduction

Over the past 16 years, armed conflict in Afghanistan has caused thousands of civilian deaths and injuries and has had a negative impact on the health and livelihoods of countless Afghans. The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) estimates that armed conflict in Afghanistan has killed 27,481 civilians and injured 50,726 since it began tracking incidents in 2009.1 Taliban and other armed opposition groups (AOG) are responsible for 64 percent of these casualties, according to UNAMA, whereas 20 percent of casualties are attributable to pro-government forces, including both Afghan and international forces.2 Given the challenges accessing areas controlled by armed opposition groups, these numbers may be even higher than reported. Reducing violence requires myriad stakeholders, including national and international organizations, and civilians and communities most effected by violence, to develop better approaches to influencing the behavior of armed actors.

The government of Afghanistan, its security forces, and supporting international forces must ensure their own conduct is in adherence with international humanitarian law (IHL) as well as good practices on civilian protection and harm mitigation. For more than a decade, a broad coalition of international and national actors has advocated civilian protection to armed actors in Afghanistan. For instance, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) deals with issues of detainees, medical assistance, and dialogue with armed actors on the conduct of hostilities. The UNAMA Human Rights Unit investigates and reports on civilian casualties, and the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) and other international organizations monitor and report on human rights violations.

Today, Afghan civil society is also strengthening its ability to engage with the government on civilian protection concerns. To this end, in 2015, Center for Civilians in Conflict (CIVIC) began working with Afghan civil society to develop capacities to engage on civilian protection including the creation of Civilian Protection Working Groups (CPWG) in Kabul, Baghlan, and Kandahar.3

While efforts to engage on civilian protection in urban areas are necessary, it is equally important to develop the capabilities of rural communities experiencing high levels of violence. In the face of violence, communities in conflict-affected areas often undertake measures to counter, mitigate, deter, or avoid a threat.4 Sometimes these measures are successful and sometimes they are not. In 2016, CIVIC undertook research in Kandahar, Baghlan, Nangarhar, and Kunduz provinces to understand how communities protect themselves and learn more about the measures these communities use to deter and mitigate violence.

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2 International forces as described in UNAMA report includes all foreign troops part of NATO led Resolute Train and Advise Mission (RS) (formerly International Security Assistance Force, ISAF) and other US Forces Afghanistan (including Operation Freedom’s Sentinel, which replaced Operation Enduring Freedom on 1 January 2015) who are under the Commander of Resolute Support (COM-RS), who is also Commander of the US Forces in Afghanistan. The term also includes Special Operations Forces and other foreign intelligence and security forces.
3 CIVIC has been working in Afghanistan since 2002 on civilian protection issues initially on ISAF policies on civilian casualty mitigation including amends (acknowledgements and assistance to conflict victims), and since 2012 on Afghan government and security forces policies and practices on civilian casualty mitigation.
In *Saving Ourselves: Security Transition and Impact on Civilian Protection*, we found that communities use several strategies to engage armed actors to increase their safety, and that these strategies have varying degrees of efficacy. First, they attempt to normalize relations with armed groups operating in the areas where government presence is weak or non-existent. Second, they position themselves as neutral, reducing their collaboration with the government to avoid retaliatory attacks for interacting with the government. Third, they craft agreements with armed opposition groups so that the groups do not engage in operations in their areas, and keep these agreements secret in order to prevent counterattacks from Afghan security forces. And, finally, communities undertake voluntary self-displacement.

Rural districts have also acquired the status of swing areas where control shifts between the Taliban and government forces. The withdrawal of most international forces from these areas since NATO’s International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) ended in December 2014 and lack of ANDSF capacity to pursue armed opposition groups in rural areas has allowed for expanded control by AOGs. According to US Forces Afghanistan (USFOR-A), as reported in the Special Inspector General’s Afghanistan Report (SIGAR), as of August 2017, 231 out of 407 districts were under government control or influence, whereas 54 districts were under control or influence of armed opposition groups. Even in state-controlled areas, state presence has declined to defensive military outposts without the ability to exercise authority over the population. Under these difficult circumstances, a local mechanism of community self-protection is necessary and practical.

In 2017, we created and piloted Civilian Community Protection Councils (CCPC) led by respected community leaders from Baghlan and Kandahar to better identify the most urgent protection needs of civilians in areas experiencing armed conflict and to build their capacity to engage on protection with both pro- and anti-government forces.

This practice note describes how the CPWGs and CCPCs were created, their terms of reference, their sustainability, and their impact on the civilian protection landscape in the provinces of Baghlan, Kandahar, and Kabul.

The CCPCs are gender inclusive self-protection structures, made up of volunteers from the community such as tribal elders, religious leaders, and civil society actors who aim to influence parties to the conflict to reduce violence. They have the potential to be effective protection advocates at the grassroots level to deter threats from armed actors, but the success of these groups will depend on how the groups are organized, and on mentorship and trainings they receive.

For instance, in both Baghlan and Kandahar, ethnic and tribal dynamics were put aside to work together on the stated goal of protection. However, more technical support and mentorship by Afghan civil society groups and international counterparts is needed to continue building capacity. The work of the CCPCs is not risk free; they operate in AOG controlled areas and thus could be targeted, but members agreed to remain neutral in their engagement with parties to the conflict.

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5 CIVIC, *Saving Ourselves*, p. 3.
6 Ibid.
7 CIVIC, *Saving Ourselves*, p. 2.
9 CIVIC, *Saving Ourselves*, p. 3.
In September 2017, President Ashraf Ghani approved the country’s first ever Civilian Casualty Mitigation and Prevention Policy, developed by the National Security Council (NSC). This is an important step as it commits the government to take steps to mitigate civilian harm and provides a strategic framework for different government agencies. How this policy is translated into action is critical. The CCPCs and Afghan civil society can play an important role in ensuring that the stated goal of the policy is implemented and that a more comprehensive approach to reducing violence and protecting civilians in Afghanistan can be achieved.

**Civilian Protection Working Group**

A Civilian Protection Working Group was first established by the Liaison Office (TLO), an Afghan NGO, and other Afghan civil society organizations in Kabul in 2014, with the aim of advocating for human security and protection of the environment. But after a year, the project’s funding ended and the group was unable to sustain itself. In late 2015, CIVIC began working with TLO to narrow the group’s focus to protection of civilians and increased membership to include a coalition of civil society organizations that had networks in all 34 provinces.

The Kabul CPWG now consists of 20 organizations active in the areas of human rights promotion, civilian protection, advocacy, and training, and functions as an advocacy body. Following the expansion of the Kabul CPWG, CIVIC organized a capacity building workshop for the group in September 2016. This workshop included seminars on international humanitarian law (IHL) and Islamic law, and on civilian harm mitigation, and advocacy. The working group’s knowledge on the subject matter is growing both from the workshops, but also as they respond, engage, and advocate protection issues through the media and with the Afghan government.

The working group holds monthly coordination meetings and meets as necessary in response to protection related developments such as large-scale attacks on civilians or the release of UNAMA quarterly reports. In its advocacy function, the group issues statements with recommendations on reducing civilian harm, which furthers its institutional development. Two years after its establishment, the Kabul CPWG now collects data from 34 provinces using its NGO and journalist networks. In August 2017, members of the Kabul CPWG visited Helmand province in southern Afghanistan to investigate incidents of civilian harm. The group spent three days in Helmand, met with civilians, civil society activists, journalists, and held a press conference in Lashkargah, the provincial capital, to share their findings. The assessment found that in August 2017, indirect fire by Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) and the Taliban in Helmand province killed 20 civilians and injured 70. The group asked ANDSF and the Taliban to refrain from using artillery and mortars during ground engagements in populated areas.

In 2017, CIVIC conducted outreach in Kandahar and Baghlan and created similar CPWGs to empower local civil society organizations on civilian protection issues and to build their capacity to engage at the provincial level with government and security actors. The Kandahar CPWG is a 24-member group, including eight women, and the Baghlan CPWG has 30 members, including 18 women. CIVIC provided capacity-building workshops on civilian protection and advocacy for these groups, modeled on the workshop with the Kabul CPWG.

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In the first half of 2017, the Kabul CPWG issued six press releases in response to increased violence and attacks on civilians, calling on the Afghan government and the armed opposition groups to respect the laws of war and for Taliban to refrain from deliberate attacks on civilians. Since June 2017, the Kabul CPWG has issued monthly statistics on civilian casualties reported by local media and gathered by the other CPWGs. These reports are shared with UNAMA and AIHRC to ensure these larger institutions have as much information from local sources as possible for their investigations into civilian harm.

Notably, the Kabul CPWG has also engaged with the National Security Council and provided input on the National Policy on Civilian Casualty Mitigation and Prevention policy approved by President Ghani in September 2017.

Although CIVIC has provided the CPWGs with basic knowledge on IHL, Islamic law, civilian harm mitigation, and advocacy, further capacity building is needed. The groups will benefit from additional courses on previous subjects as well as ongoing mentoring on investigations and advocacy at the provincial and national government levels and with the Afghan security forces. Similarly, while the NSC received comments on the national policy by the Kabul CPWG, this engagement can be strengthened as the group matures and there is more dialogue between Afghan civil society and the government on policy implementation.

**Community Civilian Protection Councils**

During CIVIC’s research in 2016, we identified community concerns for more and better engagement with Afghan security forces and government officials so that community members have a means to voice their concerns on protection to those in power. Additionally, the research showed that participants are eager to learn about new ways to frame their arguments—i.e. from a religious, legal, or strategic lens—in order to engage with the Taliban and other armed opposition groups to reduce violence in their communities.

To address this need, CIVIC identified respected community leaders—both men and women—and worked with them to create Community Civilian Protection Councils in Baghlan and Kandahar. These Councils follow the model of Afghan shuras (council of respected leaders) that come together to address concerns within a given community. Afghanistan’s complex social, tribal, and ethnic structures and divide between urban and rural areas require in-depth understanding and sensitivity in bringing together inclusive leaders who represent their community and are committed to improving the safety of civilians.

The CCPCs ensure participation of influential actors at the district level, who represent the full tribal and ethnic composition of the district. Depending on the context, certain segments of local members of society may be more important than others. For example, in Kandahar, tribal structures are stronger, and as such tribal elders play greater roles than others in driving the local protection initiative. In Baghlan, where communities are structured more along pronounced ethnic lines, individuals with greater ethnic community recognition are more effective.

The Kandahar CCPC is made up of 22 members, including five women, who represent diverse districts such as Maruf, Arghanistan, Dand, Zheray, Panjwayi, Arghandab, Registan, Shah Wali Kut, and Mianeshin. The representation of these districts in the nascent Kandahar CCPC and inclusion

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of women in conservative Kandahar is indicative of the commitment of the community to focus on solutions to protection issues.

The Baghlan Community Protection Council consists of 22 members, including seven women, representing districts such as Baghlan-e Markazi, Dandi Ghor, Dandi Shabuddin, Tala Wa Barfak, Dahana-e Ghor, Andarab, Nahrin, and Dushi. Baghlan’s ethnic composition, which is Pashtun, Tajik, Hazara and Uzbek, has led to divisions within communities, but the CCPC has brought such people together to understand and share concerns on civilian protection across ethnic boundaries. CCPC members have also put aside their differences and views about various armed actors. This is not only an institutional effort to reduce retaliation against CCPC members, but also to help build inter-community reconciliation.

CIVIC organized workshops with both groups on IHL, Islamic law, and advocacy. If sustained and supported, these bodies have the potential to be a turning point in community protection in these two provinces.

**Function and Safety Mitigation Measures of Civilian Community Protection Councils**

The CCPCs’ key functions include: engaging with both armed opposition groups and Afghan security officials on civilian protection concerns, collecting data from communities experiencing violence, assessing how to share that information to provincial based CPWGs for advocacy, and improving public awareness in their home districts on civilian protection from an Islamic and international legal lens, as well as Afghan cultural practices.

**Engagement with Communities**

The primary responsibility of the CCPCs is to keep abreast of all protection-related concerns in their provinces and to hold discussions within the community in order to sensitize and educate their constituencies on protection issues. For instance, in cases where the Taliban use civilian homes or plants IEDs, the CCPC liaise with the community to collect such information and use it in a dialogue with armed actors.

**Engagement with Armed Actors**

To address protection concerns, the CCPCs have to engage with both armed opposition groups and government forces on a regular basis. That means the CCPCs aggregate key community protection concerns and demands, communicate them with the various armed actors, and try to convince them to consider how their tactics are affecting civilians. The CCPCs will use religious, cultural, and legal arguments to eventually change behavior to reduce violence.

Government security actors lack institutional linkage with communities on protection issues. At best, the security actors forge ad hoc contacts with communities based on short-term military operational needs. This transactional nature of engagement needs to be changed so government forces are effectively addressing communities’ protection concerns. To remedy this, the CCPCs establish linkage with security actors on protection issues by regularly attending the provincial and district security meetings, and by feeding protection concerns into the planning and conduct of operations.

In mid-2017, CIVIC facilitated the Baghlan and Kandahar CCPCs to hold conferences on civilian protection concerns with provincial government and security officials. For the first time, a diverse group of civil society and community members in the form of the CCPCs, CPWGs, provincial authorities, and members of the ANDSF gathered in August in Baghlan and in September in Kandahar to discuss civilian protection concerns and how to improve civilian-military cooperation on the issue of protection. This exchange was a major development in Afghanistan in bringing
civilian protection community concerns directly to government and security actors. More work remains to ensure that these kinds of dialogues continue and that the measures identified to increase security and improve protection are implemented.

The CCPCs can improve their access to government forces by regularly attending the provincial military council meetings held by the government’s key security and military actors. This forum would allow CCPC members to provide updates on protection concerns and potentially influence the decision-making processes of the Afghan security bodies when they conduct operations in order to reduce impact on civilians.

In September 2017 during a civilian protection conference, organized by CIVIC, where provincial authorities and members of CCPC were present, the Kandahar provincial governor and head of Kandahar military council, which convenes all security actors on weekly basis to exchange information and plan their forthcoming activities, agreed to let the Kandahar CCPC attend their meeting regularly. The same sort of partnership is expected to take place between the Baghlan CCPC and the Baghlan provincial security and military officials. This partnership is promising for possible reduction of violence in the two provinces, but effectiveness depends on cooperation in order to see results.

The CCPCs were established only in mid-2017, thus more mentoring and preparation for engaging with armed opposition groups is critical to mitigate threats from such groups and reduce violence in Baghlan and Kandahar.

Since CCPCs are leading members of their community advocating on behalf of civilians at the district levels, the hope is that both government forces and Taliban respect their neutrality.

**Safety Mitigation Measures**

Efforts to increase civilian protection in armed conflict zones is not a risk-free enterprise. CIVIC and the CCPCs identified three working measures to reduce risk of harm to CCPC members. First, the neutrality of a CCPC as an institution and its members is essential. The more that a CCPC is seen as acting through a neutral lens, the more that risk of harm could be mitigated. The CCPCs are concerned about protecting civilians, irrespective of who loses or wins battles in local areas or the conflict as a whole. Any perceived bias or support of CCPCs with either party to the conflict will change their nature from local, neutral protection actor to actors aligned with specific groups in the conflict. This may subject a CCPC or its members to harassment by pro-government forces or direct attacks by armed opposition groups. As such, ensuring the principle of neutrality in the conflict between ANDSF and armed opposition groups can we hope ensure both the protection and success of the CCPCs.

Second, the CCPC represents a community in which violence is taking place. Any threat to CCPC members by parties to the conflict—be they government or opposition forces—is perceived as a threat to the entire community. Depending on how the communities unite along ethnic or tribal lines, any targeting of CCPC members could engender community rejection towards that actor. Community legitimacy and support is crucial to both the government and armed opposition groups, such as the Taliban.

The Taliban, for instance, are dependent on food from the community, while ANDSF conduct operations in areas based on intelligence tips. At least in rhetoric, the Taliban recognizes the
significance of not protecting civilians because it undercuts their local support. In practice, however, the Taliban continue to be responsible for over 60 percent of civilian harm as reported by UNAMA.

Third, CCPC members will maintain robust communication with civil society groups, human rights organizations, and the media. Attacks on members will lead to public criticism of those responsible and could potentially deter future threats to CCPC members.

Despite these risk mitigation tactics, we are aware that this not an ironclad mechanism and more analysis on mitigation measures is needed, especially as dialogue with armed opposition groups commences.

**Challenges and the Future of CCPC**

Due to CCPC structure, a potential challenge to the councils’ success, if such efforts are replicated in other provinces of Afghanistan, may be the region’s ethnic or tribal diversity. Indeed, in regions with more ethnic and tribal differences it is more difficult to come to consensus on a given topic.

Another possible impediment to the CCPC’s success is the relationship between Afghan forces and the local government and community. For example, CIVIC observed a more productive relationship between the local government and the ANDSF in areas such as Arghandab and Panjwaï in Kandahar, which could lead to greater influence and effectiveness of the CCPC. In other areas, such as Dand-e-Ghori in Baghlan, this relationship was not as strong and, in fact, local community members distrust the police and intelligence officials. Khair Mohammad Omari, CCP member from Dand-e-Ghori of Baghlan explained:

Unfortunately, ALP [Afghan Local Police] and NDS [National Directorate of Security] see all Pashtuns of Dand-e-Ghori as Taliban. Because of their prejudice, they do not have good relationship with my community. The success and failure of my civilian protection work in this area depends on how these forces improve their relationship with us and change their perception towards my community.

Ideological empathy of the local community and local community actors is another important issue. Our research in 2016 found that certain communities and local actors are more conservative and sympathetic towards the Taliban, either due to shared ideology, fear, or a combination of the two. This creates distrust and chronic suspicion between ANDSF and local government and the community, ultimately weakening cooperation between the two sides, which is essential for operation of the CCPCs. In certain other contexts, local communities view the ANDSF or the local government as biased actors, ostensibly lacking firm commitment to fully defeat armed opposition groups and protect civilians.

Finally, the ANDSF and local governments’ engagement with communities and civil society thus far has been tactical and ad hoc at best, driven by operational need to gather intelligence rather than to protect civilians from harm and address their safety concerns. This creates disincentives from

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14 Center for Civilians in Conflict conversations with community members. See also CIVIC, Saving Ourselves, describing civilian views towards police and intelligence forces in Baghlan).
16 Ibid.
communities to cooperate with the government when the government is not seen as an effective body to protect them from harm.\textsuperscript{17}

The establishment of the CCPCs has created hope for improving protection. CCPC member, Mohammad Zamani from Pulikhumri, Baghlan, said in August 2017: “It [CCPC] is a glitter of hope at the end of a dark tunnel of constant violation for the civilians.” Sayeed Mohammad Naim, another CCPC member from Kandahar, in July 2017 said:

It is good to mobilize people. I think protesting and criticizing government and ANDSF is not always the answer. That is [where] creating a local mechanism like CCPC comes in so we can be part of the solution. We have a lot of hopes for this institution as it’s ours and designed for the very community [in which] we live.\textsuperscript{18}

The feedback from members of the CCPC reflects a commitment and aspiration that such a locally based mechanism, if resourced and mentored effectively, could potentially reduce violence in their communities. Due to the relatively new nature of the CCPC, created in June 2017, it is not yet practical to measure their impact. To demonstrate results, the CCPC need to be supported and mentored—especially in their dialogues with AOG.

Below are some interventions that would allow the CCPC to test their locally-based efforts to advocate on protection.

**Technical Support and Mentoring**
Members of CCPC are diverse individuals from local communities. While they have good communication skills, they lack technical, legal, and administrative skills. Their understanding of civilian protection within the IHL framework is poor. Their local and Islamic understanding of protection is quite general. Therefore, for the two CCPCs to develop better understanding of protection, they need sustained technical training and mentoring. They also need trainings on collecting incident reports of civilian harm and on how to engage in dialogue with armed actors in a safe and practical way. The overall mentoring requires a longer-term partnership between established protection advocates such as CIVIC, UNAMA, AIHRC, ICRC, and nascent CCPCs.

**Sustainability**
CCPC members are engaging the community, beginning to collect incident reports of civilian harm, and talking with different actors, but this is not sustainable. A stipend to cover basic costs such as travel and administration is necessary to help members better perform their duties and develop institutional capabilities to deliver on behalf of communities.

**Conclusion**
Battles are being fought in rural areas, some of which are under control of armed opposition groups, but accessing these areas is difficult to learn what happened. Moreover, control of areas in rural districts changes quickly. This makes it challenging for non-local protection actors to track the changes and help civilians caught between warring parties. In such difficult settings, establishing Civilian Community Protection Councils in these rural areas is a novel approach to try and gather information and how to use information in effective advocacy to reduce violence. As local entities with genuine representation and legitimacy, the CCPC can track the fast-developing changes in

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., p. 3.

\textsuperscript{18} CIVIC interviews in Baghlan and Kandahar, July and August 2017.
conflict, engage with local armed actors, and interact with local government and non-government bodies to change polices and behavior to reduce violence.

Likewise, the revival and expansion of the Civilian Protection Working Group in Kabul in 2015 and the establishment of similar bodies in Kandahar and Baghlan in 2017 is a new development. If provided with requisite technical support and mentorship, these CPWG can be effective protection advocates with national and provincial government officials. They can also take information on protection concerns from the two CCPCs to Kabul for effective government response or assistance.

The survival and success of the CCPCs and CPWG very much depends on their recognition by government and non-government protection actors as legitimate local protection bodies, and technical support by protection and human rights NGOs to be effective in their mandates.

The increasing toll on civilians in Afghanistan requires creative solutions to assess how violence can be reduced. CIVIC is exploring new ways and working with Afghan civil society and at the community level to build capacity of these groups to be key players in contributing to solutions to reducing violence.
About Center for Civilians in Conflict
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About this Practice Note
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