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Protection By Presence: What is Protection by Presence?

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What is protection by presence

Introduction

According to the ICRC's *The Roots of Restraint in War*, armed actors do not operate in a vacuum. Their behaviour is shaped not only by formal and informal rules and command structures but also by social and environmental influences, including those involving consistent interaction of credible actors. Protection by Presence leverages this dynamic. By maintaining a visible, sustained presence in conflict-affected areas, human rights defenders and humanitarian actors can influence the conduct of armed groups, reinforce humanitarian norms, and promote restraint in the use of violence. Although it does not provide material goods or services, this form of protection has proven to be a valuable tool in shaping the operational environment and reducing risks to civilians.

Establishing a clear and definitive definition of Protection by Presence can be a challenging task, due to the complex and context-dependent nature of the concept. Protection, in this sense, involves human activities, social behaviours, political relationships, and power dynamics. This specific form of protection is particularly sensitive to the unique socio-political dynamics of each context in which it is applied.

This section aims to provide a general definition of Protection by Presence that is broad enough to be adapted to diverse operational environments, while still retaining the essential characteristics that every such intervention must include.

Before offering a definition, it is important to clarify two key points:

- Beyond Physical Presence: despite what the name might suggest, Protection by Presence is not achieved solely through the physical presence of actors in the field. Rather, it is the result of a strategic combination of actions conducted on multiple levels, such as field presence, advocacy, context analysis, risk and needs assessments, and community-based protection strategies. The effectiveness of these actions depends not only on their implementation but also on how they are perceived and integrated within the broader social and political environment.
- The Relationship with International Accompaniment: the term Protection by Presence is closely linked to the concept of International Accompaniment. This type of intervention originated in the 1970s, emerging from the international solidarity movement and traditions of nonviolent activism. Initially known as International Accompaniment, the approach later evolved, becoming more structured and professionalized, into what is now more commonly referred to as Protection by Presence. In this manual, International Accompaniment is considered one methodology through which Protection by Presence can be implemented. The two are closely related: when discussing International Accompaniment, we are also referring to Protection by Presence, but the reverse is not always true. For example, a UN peacekeeping mission

may implement Protection by Presence, but it does not constitute International Accompaniment.

Definition

> ***Protection by presence is a strategy aimed at safeguarding the lives and civic space of communities, civil society organizations, and activists. By means of an intentionally designed visible presence dissuades or deters external actors from committing acts of violence and provides moral support, solidarity and encouragement.***

The strategy may take advantage of privileges and the 'protected status'[1] that certain identities carry with them to protect the lives and action space of communities, civil society organizations or activists by using their visible, intentional engaged physical presence to prevent, dissuade or deter abusers from attacking civilians. Protected status refers to people or organizations who because of their identity (national, international, religious, social, professional, economic) experience has shown tend to suffer a lower level of attack or threat from the actors who are hurting other civilians. Given this general definition, the following paragraphs further explain each of the concepts involved.

Protection by Presence is a strategy, and its implementation in the specific context can be characterized as the methodology, as in the case of international accompaniment. This strategy, on one hand, involves multiple approaches such physical presence, advocacy and networking, and on the other hand, it is closely interconnected with other kind of activities or interventions such us workshops to strength self-protection practices and security systems, strategic communications, psychosocial and legal support, among others. The combined use of these multiple approaches and the interconnection with other activities is key to enhancing the effectiveness and sustainability of Protection by Presence. Usually, the more interventions are successfully engaged in, the greater the protection effect could be.

The PbyP strategy is directed to individuals, organisations or communities who experience risks due to the perception that their actions being negatively affect the interests of those in power (e.g. as social leaders, human rights defenders, journalists, etc.) or because of the dynamics of the armed conflict, they are targeted by some or all of the parties (e.g. foreign military occupation, guerrillas, paramilitaries, police or military intelligence, etc.). In that sense, the at-risk individuals are civilians, victim of IHL or HRL violations. Identifying those with specific protection needs is a process that involves the local community along with other relevant actors, such as civil society groups, local authorities, or service providers. Depending on the context, it may be possible to design a protection strategy directed to individuals who have a special role in their communities and might have higher risk levels (e.g. community or religious

[1] It is important to clarify that this terminology does not imply any specific protection measures under International Humanitarian Law. Rather, it refers to a form of protection arising from other factors related to the identity of the individual or organization.

leaders, youth leaders, etc.) while creating a broader protection for the whole community. In other contexts, the target participants can be the individuals in their daily activities.
This **visible presence has a dissuasive and deterrent aspect**: presence is a type of advocacy-without-words that increases the anticipated political consequences[2] of violent actions and/or induce a reduction of potential benefits of such actions, creating a need in the mind of the potential aggressor to recalculate the balance of cost and benefit. Visible presence can be effective because decisions to commit violence are rarely made in a vacuum, choices are always influenced by context and perception. Whether or not potential perpetrators act rationally[3], experience shows that it is often possible to find leverage to influence their behaviour and prevent or stop human rights violations.

When the perpetrator is a rational actor with political objectives, decisions are shaped by calculations and perceptions, whether at the individual level or within a complex decision-making hierarchy. Just as violence is used to achieve political goals, it may be avoided when the costs outweigh the benefits. For example, the presence of external observers can increase the political and social cost of violence. Making violence more visible, especially in diplomatic forums or through public discourse, can result in in negative publicity or international sanctions, which perpetrators may seek to avoid. They know that their behaviour will no longer remain hidden. The presence therefore essentially constrains the political space available to perpetrators, increasing the cost of abusive actions and altering their calculations regarding the use of violence and the methods used to carry it out. It is important to emphasize that violence can take various forms in both execution and impact on civilians. In response to a visible presence, potential aggressors may adapt their behaviour by shifting to more covert or indirect methods of violence, which are often harder to detect and address, or reducing the severity of violence, passing from immediate assassination to imposing other restrictions. While this does not represent a straightforward reduction in violence, it does not diminish the value of the PbyP strategy. On the contrary, a change in the aggressor's *modus operandi* is evidence that the strategy is having an impact and influencing their behaviour.

In cases where violence is not clearly driven by rational logic, other strategies are needed. Here, behaviour may be shaped by social constructs such as religion, community dynamics, or economic pressures. This is particularly relevant in interactions with lower-ranking members of armed groups, where violence may appear irrational or disconnected from political gain. In such contexts, alternative forms of leverage, such as appealing to religious beliefs, local moral codes, or traditional norms, can prove more effective than invoking international humanitarian law or formal political mechanisms.

[2] Political consequences or political cost refer to the potential damage a perpetrator risks incurring by engaging in harmful actions under the observation of outsiders. In this context, the term *political* does not refer strictly to formal politics but broadly encompasses all consequences that, in one way or another, impact the perpetrator's internal decision-making process. Therefore, it does not necessarily imply political ambition on the part of the aggressors, but may also involve social, religious, or other forms of impact or harm. For more information, consult the glossary section.

[3] Defining what rationality is and what it implies being a rational aggressor go behind of the purpose of this section. The objective here is to identify the pattern behind the effect of a Protection by Presence Intervention, and explain how this protection strategy can effectively work in both situations.

A visible presence on the ground affects different levels of the decision-making hierarchy within potential aggressor's groups, including the chain of command of armed organizations. Lower-level commanders or officials may seek to avoid punitive responses from their superiors for actions that attract unwanted attention from actors with political influence. For example, with a visible presence and the proper advocacy strategy, the impact of public pressure can be transmitted even within loosely organized or decentralized groups. The PbyP approach remains effective when adapted to the specific characteristics of the context and the aggressor. As highlighted in the ICRC's *Roots of Restraint in War*, it is possible to influence, and therefore dissuade or deter, decentralized armed actors by analysing and understanding their internal structure, motivations, and the external sources of pressure to which they may be sensitive.

In addition to this deterrent effect on the armed actor, protective presence can also have a positive persuasive effect on government actors responsible for protection. The government will make a greater effort to demonstrate compliance with International Humanitarian and Human Rights Law for its population when it knows that other entities with political leverage are observing it.

Intentionality is a distinguishing factor in determining whether an organization's intervention qualifies as Protection by Presence or another form of protection[4]. While many humanitarian organizations, regardless of their mandates, may generate protective effects during field missions, not all such outcomes can be categorized as PbyP. In instances where protection outcomes[5] occur without a deliberate, structured approach, these effects are more accurately described as Protective Presence. Protective Presence can still play a critical role in the work of humanitarian and human rights organizations, encompassing a broad spectrum of potential impacts. These impacts vary based on factors such as the organization's operational focus, level of national or international legitimacy, and the context in which it operates. An intervention can be identified as Protection by Presence when intentionality is integrated throughout all phases of planning and implementation. This requires a clearly defined approach supported by appropriate internal systems, protocols, and operational frameworks. Without such intentional design, interventions may not achieve the specific outcomes associated with a deliberate PbyP strategy.

In order to define an intervention as intentional, this intentionality must be reflected across four fundamental aspects of project implementation:

- **Preparation:** The preparation phase is a fundamental step in making the intentionality of a PbyP intervention clear and operational. It is during this phase that the specific PbyP objectives of the field mission must be defined and integrated into the overall mission planning. While the mission may include other objectives, such as the delivery of assistance or essential goods, it is essential that PbyP-related goals are explicitly

[4] This distinction is intended to guide organizations and entities that carry out various types of humanitarian interventions and may have objectives and mandates that extend beyond Protection by Presence. For organizations specializing in this approach, intentionality is inherent to their mandate.

[5] It is important to emphasize that the protection outcomes referred to here are specifically linked to the organization's physical presence in the field, not to other protection activities such as GBV prevention, Child Protection, or Case Management, which humanitarian organizations commonly implement. The focus is not on the impact of those activities, but rather on the impact generated solely by the organization's presence on the ground.

articulated. To achieve the intended protective impact, particularly through deterrent and dissuasive effects, it is crucial that field staff are properly trained. This includes not only understanding the PbyP methodology but also learning how to apply it in practice: how to communicate key messages on the ground, how to analyse the context and protection risks, and how to respond effectively to emerging threats or incidents. This level of preparation and training is what distinguishes PbyP personnel from staff involved in other types of field missions. Their presence is not only physical: it is strategic, informed, and purposeful, designed to influence behaviours, reduce risks, and contribute to greater protection for affected populations.

- **Implementation:** The implementation phase must ensure that the presence of the field team goes beyond the execution of operational tasks, with the specific aim of achieving the protection objectives and advancing the PbyP strategy. In practice, this means that PbyP activities should have their own independent timeline, budget, and operational logic, and should not be subordinated to other components of the mission, such as the delivery of goods or services. If the Protection by Presence is strictly tied to the schedule of another activity, for example, a distribution, it is likely that the full protective impact will not be achieved. To illustrate this, consider a mission delivering health supplies to a community where a large community assembly is also taking place. While the delivery may be completed on the first day, the PbyP team may decide to remain in the community for the duration of the assembly to provide a protective presence throughout the event. This extended presence, though no longer tied to the delivery activity, is central to the protection objective. For this reason, it is essential that the PbyP component has a dedicated budget and that central planning structures recognize and accommodate the time required for protection-specific activities. This time is not secondary or expendable: it is a critical element of the mission's overall protection impact.
- **Expected Impact:** A well-designed PbyP intervention aims to influence the behaviour of potential aggressors through a visible and strategic presence that creates a deterrent and dissuasive effect. This presence also seeks to change how key actors perceive the protected communities, reinforcing their legitimacy and reducing their vulnerability. In addition, the intervention contributes to expanding civic space by allowing communities to act, express themselves, and claim their rights in a safer and more supportive environment.
- **Project's framework:** For a PbyP intervention to be effective and recognized, it must be fully integrated into the project's framework. This means explicitly including PbyP objectives and activities in the project's results matrix, budget, monitoring tools, and evaluation criteria. If the intervention is not reflected in these core planning and accountability structures, it risks being overlooked, under-resourced, or excluded from strategic decision-making, essentially rendering it invisible. Embedding PbyP within the formal project framework ensures that its protective purpose is both operational and measurable.

Threats come from external actors. The root causes of threats often stem from the interests, control, and violent use of power by actors external to the community. While communities are not closed systems and often have complex internal dynamics, including instances where

certain individuals or groups may collaborate with these external actors, it remains crucial that the community leadership, representing the broader population, takes a clear stance against those responsible for threats or aggression[6]. Such a position is essential; without it, there is a risk that parts of the community may be seen as complicit or supportive of the perpetrators. In these situations, the PbyP approach faces serious limitations. Without a clear stance against the aggressor, the intervention cannot generate a meaningful deterrent or dissuasive effect. This is also because the implementing organization and the local community may not share the same goals or objectives in relation to the aggressor. Worse still, it may become counterproductive, potentially intensifying internal divisions and conflict within the community. The threatening actors could be local or foreign armed groups, state forces from a military occupation or invasion, state officials, private companies, etc.

Presence also offers important **solidarity and encouragement**, which plays a crucial role in reinforcing the agency and resilience of communities facing protection risks. Rather than acting as external saviours, those who accompany communities contribute to a shared space of support, where confidence can be rebuilt and fear countered through collective effort. This relational approach helps reduce isolation and creates conditions that enable communities to recover from internalized inhibitions caused by prolonged exposure to violence and control. Also, Protection by Presence expands the space for action of communities through an increased perception of security. It strengthens organizational processes, generating confidence so that local leaders can organize, engage in safe dialogues, develop and implement activities to claim their rights, enhance existing capacities, elaborate and sustain their own protection strategies and find alternatives to solve protection challenges in their communities. It can support their plans and strategies, their physical and cultural survival, as well as their ability to remain safely and permanently in their territories. When local communities' population sense solidarity and emotional accompaniment it can increase their motivation and agency. It also increases the legitimacy of grassroots processes and can significantly contribute to the social cohesion of communities, as external presence helps create conditions for the recovery of everyday life, the continuation of cultural practices, and the pursuit of social, political, and community struggles. In some cases, this can generate a multiplier effect: nearby communities, observing these changes, may become interested in exploring similar forms of protection. However, these ripple effects are not uniform; in other contexts, protective presence may be met with hesitation or even concern, especially where its implications are not well understood or where communities weigh the risks of being visibly associated with external actors. This underscores the importance of context-sensitive approaches and sustained dialogue with all stakeholders.

Protection by presence is implemented based on well-grounded theoretical and empirical evidence about how the presence of external actors in conflict or high-risk zones can modify the behaviour of armed actors towards the civilian population and reduce the level of violence against communities. Although there is still a need for more systematic research to explore the

[6] Taking a clear stance does not always mean making a public statement. Of course, when the position is also public, it tends to be stronger and can lead to better and more effective coordination with the implementing organization. However, it is important to recognize that in some contexts, public exposure can significantly increase risks for the community itself and may have a counterproductive effect.

underlying theories of change and assess the effectiveness of PbyP across diverse contexts, practice-based studies do exist. These studies have documented protection carried out by United Nations and other multilateral monitoring, human rights or humanitarian missions, non-governmental organizations, as well as the International Committee of the Red Cross. Similar dynamics of protection have also been achieved by churches and religious leaders, such as priests, pastors, and imams, as well as by journalists.[7]

In the case of religious leaders, it is clear that the practice of Protection by Presence has been widely used, particularly by those who are deeply rooted in conflict-affected territories and has often produced positive results. This effectiveness can be attributed to several factors. First, the authority and respect typically associated with religious figures grant them a strong degree of protected status. This often allows them greater access and the ability to engage with a range of actors, both armed and unarmed. As a result, religious leaders generally have more freedom to establish communication channels, deliver key messages, and influence the behaviour of different stakeholders. Second, religious leaders not only have the potential to generate a political cost on those who violate human rights or international humanitarian law, by drawing attention to these violations and their consequences, but they can also appeal to moral and religious principles. As previously discussed, these appeals can have a significant impact, particularly in situations where other approaches may not be effective. As a result of this and thanks to the commitment of many religious actors, numerous accompaniment and Protection by Presence programmes have been developed, such as the Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel - EAPPI, Community Peacemaker Teams (formerly known as Christian Peacemakers Teams) - CPT, Swedish Fellowship of Reconciliation – SweFOR.

Protection by Presence limitations

There are contexts and circumstances where a PbyP may not render the expected results. The concepts introduced in the definition serve as key criteria for implementation, and the elements detailed below also describe some of the strategy's limitations.

Impossible to create a deterrent or dissuasion effect. It is through formal or informal communication channels that the implementing organization develops a kind of relationship with the violent actor that enables the creation of leverage. Deterrence and dissuasion occur when the violent actor is induced by the PbyP strategy to recalculate the perceived benefit of perpetrating an attack and its potential political cost. If, given the nature of the actor, a specific context, or other particular socio-political dynamic (such as how presence of the implementing organization is perceived and its credibility of follow-up actions), it is not possible to establish the informal relationship needed to induce that calculation, then the deterrent effect cannot be created and the PbyP strategy cannot provide safer spaces during the field visits. However, during a transitional period, when it is determined that presence in the field is not feasible due

[7] For example, Proactive Presence: Field Strategies for Civilian Protection, Liam Mahony, Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, 2006.

to the absence of the deterrent or dissuasive effect but with the intention to resume it in the future, PbyP can involve other actions such as high-level advocacy, self-protection workshops, and other additional actions that continue to support the community.

Intense armed clashed, including bombings. When the situation has escalated to this point, there is little that the physical presence can achieve. During open conflicts and bombing, the conditions necessary to generate deterrence or dissuasion are no longer present. Bombs and weapons do not calculate political cost, nor can they choose whom to affect. Even when the armed actors intend to avoid targeting civilians, there is always the risk of stray bullets or explosives, and unfortunately, history is full of such tragic examples. Places like UN compounds, churches and mosques, health centres, and schools, despite being protected under International Humanitarian Law and often play a significant role in PbyP strategies due to their strong protective effect, are not immune in these situations. Moreover, there are examples where these sites have been deliberately targeted in order to inflict maximum harm on the civilian population. This does not mean they cease to offer any form of protection; they continue to serve as important safer spaces for civilians. Finally, field visits will not bring safer spaces, but the high-level advocacy, visibility and promoting other interventions (e.g. humanitarian assistance) may still contribute to civilian protection.

When IHL, HRL and other legal frameworks cannot be leveraged, alternative approaches must be considered. As explained before, actors take their decisions based on a series of calculations, costs and benefits. When the local or international legal frameworks are irrelevant to the actor, then it is important to further study what their interests are, what their values are (moral, territorial, religious, etc) and redefine the protection strategy accordingly, identifying new pressure points. Political cost can, in fact, be generated by leveraging various factors, not only with international and national legal norms, which are the most commonly used. Appealing to religious beliefs, local moral codes, or traditional norms, can be highly effective in some context. In this case, religious and other influential other figures can help establish a direct communication with the aggressor, potentially creating conditions for deterrence.