Supporting Self-Protection
A guidance note for protection volunteers and other protection actors

By Ricardo Fal-Dutra Santos, Community-based Protection Mentor at Oxfam from March 2020 to March 2021

Introduction
People affected by humanitarian crises are most often the first responders to their own needs. This includes implementing their own protection responses often without any support from humanitarian organizations. However, supporting their self-protection efforts is a central pillar of community-based protection (CBP), as seen in the protection guidance.

This document seeks to provide tools with which community members, especially members of community protection structures (CPSs) along with the staff of supporting humanitarian organizations, can identify self-protection strategies and capacities, as well as ways of supporting them. It can be used to inform protection analyses as well as guide trainings.

What is self-protection?
Self-protection refers to what people do to ensure their own protection from violence, coercion and deliberate deprivation. It can occur at individual, community, household and other subgroup levels. For instance, an individual who negotiates passage at a checkpoint, a family who hides when weapon bearers approach their village, or an entire community that decides to flee in order to avoid conflict are all adopting self-protection strategies.

Self-protection strategies make up only part of survival strategies, which also include coping mechanisms against other threats – such as hunger or poverty (see Figure 1). For instance, in order to cope with harsh economic conditions, people may resort to survival strategies such as transactional sex or unenrolling children from school. Families may also resort to skipping meals to cope with a lack of food.

The examples above illustrate how survival strategies (including self-protection) can have a negative impact, such as exposing people to sexual exploitation or limiting children’s education.
How does self-protection relate to community-based protection?

However, communities adopt self-protection strategies regardless of the presence and/or support of humanitarian actors. This clarifies the distinction between the two terms: while CBP refers to the role of humanitarian actors in supporting self-protection, self-protection refers to communities’ independent role in their own protection.

Identifying self-protection strategies

Even though categorizing people’s self-protection strategies risks distorting their experiences, such exercises help navigate the variety of strategies people adopt to ensure their own protection.1 Existing literature suggests that self-protection strategies can be categorized according to their:

1. effect on threats;
2. level of engagement with perpetrators and/or primary duty bearers; and
3. impact on the community.

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Effect on threats

In their efforts to ensure their own protection, individuals, households and communities may adopt strategies aimed at preventing, avoiding, mitigating or ending a threat. These can be categorized as:

- **Prevention strategies** entail deterring the (actual or potential) perpetrators of a threat, thus preventing it from occurring.
- **Avoidance strategies** are those that allow for individuals and communities not to be exposed to a threat. The threat itself still occurs, but it is avoided.
- **Mitigation strategies** entail reducing the severity of a threat, or the range of people who may be affected by it.
- **Cessation strategies** are those that bring an end to an ongoing threat.

**Box 1: Example of types of strategy in a scenario**

The scenario below illustrates different examples of prevention, avoidance, mitigation and cessation strategies in response to the threat of extortion by soldiers at a checkpoint.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scenario</th>
<th>Self-protection strategy</th>
<th>Type of strategy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A person wishes to go to the market. However, the fastest route is known to be targeted by soldiers extorting lone travellers along this route.</td>
<td>The person decides to travel in a large group, hoping that this will dissuade the soldiers.</td>
<td>Prevention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The person decides to take an alternative route, even if not as fast, thus avoiding the risk of being victim of extortion.</td>
<td>Avoidance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The person hides some of their money and mobile phone, but reserves some money to give to the soldiers, in the hope that they will be satisfied with the money and not demand more.</td>
<td>Mitigation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The person mobilizes the community, and together they pressure the authorities to arrest the soldiers.</td>
<td>Cessation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Self-protection strategies are often based on assumptions. For instance, the prevention strategy above depends on whether travelling in groups can indeed deter the thief; the mitigation strategy depends on the thief being satisfied with the money they are given. If these assumptions are wrong, these strategies can fail, and those at risk may have no option but to submit to the perpetrator.

Nonetheless, ‘submission’ should not be interpreted as a category of self-protection. Rather, it is a failure to ensure protection against the threat. However, submitting to a certain threat may be a way of avoiding or mitigating other threats. For instance, if in the scenario above the only alternative route involves crossing an open field exposed to sniper fire, choosing the route with the soldier, even though amounting to ‘submission’ to the threat of extortion, is an avoidance strategy against the threat posed by the snipers. Similarly, even though giving some money to a thief may seem like ‘submission’, it is also a mitigation strategy that allows the person at risk to keep some of their belongings.

Type of engagement with key actors

Self-protection strategies involve different types of engagement with actors who may influence the protection of a community or its members. These can include actual or potential perpetrators, primary duty bearers, humanitarian actors and/or service providers. They can be categorized as:

- **Non-engagement strategies** are those that do not require any interaction with these actors.
- **Non-violent engagement strategies** entail interactions with these actors without resorting to violence or the threat of violence.
- **Violent engagement strategies** are those that make use of violence or threat of violence.

Note: all forms of violent engagement are considered negative self-protection strategies. Violent engagement may trigger violent responses against not only the individuals involved, but also the larger community. Therefore, it causes harm to other individuals and exacerbate the level of violence – two of the elements that render self-protection strategies ‘negative’. Moreover, violence is itself a protection threat.

**Efforts to address negative self-protection strategies must be particularly careful when the strategy in place is one of violent engagement, as challenging such practices may put community members and humanitarian actors at risk. Impact on the community (positive or negative)**

Self-protection strategies can be categorized as ‘positive’ or ‘negative’ according to their impact on the community or some of its members – these terms are not used to describe the effectiveness or failure of a strategy. Thus, regardless of how successful a self-protection strategy is, it is considered a negative strategy when it has the potential to:

- cause any type of harm to any individual;
- infringe other people’s rights;
- increase the vulnerability of any individual;
- reduce self-protection capacities;
- exclude others in need of protection;
- worsen the level of violence; and/or
- exacerbate power dynamics and inequalities.

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3 For a self-protection typology that includes submission as a category, see for example, Andrew Bonwick, above note 2, p. 275.

Box 2: Failed self-protection strategies and their negative impact

Unsuccessful self-protection strategies may cause harm, as they fail to prevent, avoid, mitigate or put an end to a threat. However, even in such cases, such strategies may not necessarily be considered ‘negative’, as the harm caused is not inflicted by the strategy itself, but by the perpetrators.

Conversely, certain strategies may be successful but still be considered negative. This is the case, for instance, when community members limit their movements at night. This strategy may be successful in avoiding a threat; yet, it has a negative impact on people’s freedom of movement.

Using the typologies to identify self-protection strategies in practice

The three typologies above reflect the wide range of self-protection strategies that may be adopted by individuals, households and communities. They may help guide workshops with communities to identify their own self-protection strategies. For instance, if workshop facilitators notice that community members are only sharing practices that amount to avoidance strategies, they can probe further by asking questions about prevention, mitigation or cessation strategies – without necessarily using these labels. Similarly, if they notice the community has only shared non-engagement strategies, they may enquire into engagement ones.

Annex 1 contains a table of examples of self-protection strategies, organized according to their categories, and demonstrating how the typologies overlap. The table can be used by protection volunteers and other protection actors as an analytical tool (e.g., during workshops with communities) and/or as a training tool.

The different categorizations of self-protection strategies discussed in this section are not mutually exclusive. People may adopt multiple self-protection strategies against a same threat, and this may include a mix of:

- prevention, avoidance, mitigation and cessation strategies;
- non-engagement, non-violent engagement and violent engagement strategies; and
- positive and negative strategies.

The categorization of self-protection strategies is not an end in itself. Rather, the typologies outlined above are only useful to the extent they can inform analytical tools and processes. This means that humanitarian protection actors do not need to know how to perfectly categorize a strategy; rather, they must keep in mind the wide range of types of strategies possible, in order to know the necessary questions to be asked during protection analysis activities, and fully uncover communities’ self-protection strategies.
Identifying self-protection capacities

The term ‘self-protection capacities’ refers to the ability of a community, group or individual to prevent, avoid, mitigate or end protection threats. Self-protection capacities are the extent to which they are able to implement their self-protection strategies.

Despite the variety of factors that can influence a community’s self-protection capacities, they can generally be grouped along four pillars:

- Knowledge;
- Resources;
- Solidarity; and
- Engagement.

In short, the more knowledgeable, resourceful, unified and engaging a community is, the more likely its self-protection strategies are to succeed.

The self-protection capacity framework may help guide workshops with communities to identify their own capacities. For example, if the workshop facilitators notice that community members are only sharing capacities related to Knowledge and Resources, they may enquire about the communities’ Solidarity and Engagement capacities – without necessarily using these labels.

The self-protection capacity framework is an analytical tool aimed at supporting a better understanding of self-protection analyses, not guiding categorization exercises. This means that humanitarian protection actors do not need to know how to perfectly categorise a self-protection capacity; rather, they must keep in mind the types of capacities possible in order to know the necessary questions to be asked during analysis activities, in order to fully uncover communities’ self-protection capacities.

Furthermore, the distinction between the different pillars of self-protection capacities is not necessarily important, because of their complementarity. For instance, communities’ capacity to engage duty bearers (Engagement) may depend on their negotiation skills (Knowledge). Another example would be the use of mobile phones (Resources) for the purposes of sharing information among community members, a Solidarity practice that contributes to strengthening Knowledge. The Resources and Solidarity pillars may also be mutually reinforcing: greater solidarity ties may facilitate resource sharing, while an increase in resources may ease tensions among community members. Finally, mobilizing a community leader may depend on both Solidarity and Engagement capacities.

The difference between the Solidarity and Engagement pillars lies in the nature of the actors to be engaged – either internal or external to the community. However, this distinction may not be clear in certain cases. For example, a community leader may be seen as both part of the community and a duty bearer with primary protection responsibilities. In this case, engaging such leader may be interpreted as a Solidarity effort and/or an Engagement strategy.

Regardless, the distinction between pillars is not important due to their complementarity, and in view of the analytical intention of the framework.

**Figure 3: Self-protection capacity framework**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Knowledge</th>
<th>Resources</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Knowledge pillar relates to what communities know. This encompasses:</td>
<td>The Resource pillar refers to what communities have: the material resources necessary to the implementation of self-protection strategies. For example, solar- or generator-powered lights may contribute to prevention strategies aimed at deterring perpetrators during night-time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Information, e.g., on incoming threats, the whereabouts of perpetrators, or the location of services and resources.</td>
<td>In a broader sense, material resources can strengthen communities’ overall resilience, as their capacity to survive violence is closely linked to their capacity for economic survival.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Awareness, e.g., of their rights, successful self-protection strategies implemented elsewhere, or the behaviour of perpetrators.</td>
<td>The sharing of resources can also be a form of self-protection strategy.</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Skills, such as negotiation.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Community members may share information, knowledge and skills among themselves as a way of being better prepared to face various protection threats. This can be the case, for instance, through early warning mechanisms.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Solidarity</th>
<th>Engagement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Solidarity pillar concerns the level of support community members provide to one another: within families, and between friends, neighbours or other community members.</td>
<td>The Engagement pillar relates to a community’s ability to engage key actors outside the community who can contribute to reducing protection risks or alleviating their consequences. Such actors may include:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This pillar is closely linked to social cohesion within communities, as greater solidarity implies wider social networks to seek support from, built on various shared values, experiences or characteristics. For instance, women heads of household may come together to tackle an issue particularly affecting women and girls, such as human trafficking.</td>
<td>- Primary duty bearers, e.g. who may be able to ensure the community’s protection, for example through police patrolling or escorting.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This pillar is also linked to social cohesion between different communities, such as displaced and host communities.</td>
<td>- Perpetrators of threats, e.g., with whom community members may negotiate in order to mitigate or put an end to a threat.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conversely, weaker solidarity ties may be the source of tensions, or even violence, within or between communities.</td>
<td>- Humanitarian organizations, e.g., which may provide support for self-protection strategies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Service providers, e.g., which provide services essential to alleviating the consequences of protection threats.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
The protection risk equation

The self-protection capacity framework complements the risk equation, discussed in the protection guidance, by detailing the several factors that determine the ‘capacity’ variable.

Figure 4: Risk equation with self-protection capacities

\[ \downarrow \text{Risk} = \downarrow \text{Threat} + \downarrow \text{Vulnerability} \times (\text{Time}) \uparrow \text{Capacity} \]

- of rights holders
- of duty bearers

Knowledge

Solidarity

Resources

Engagement

Supporting self-protection

The self-protection capacity framework outlines key factors that contribute to communities’ ability to ensure their own protection. By doing so, the framework also sheds light, and serves as guidance, on the different ways in which communities’ self-protection capacities can be supported. Protection actors and other actors may facilitate access to, or directly provide, information (Knowledge pillar) or material resources (Resources pillar), while indirectly contributing to the Solidarity and Engagement pillars.

The example below illustrates how the self-capacity framework can be used to help identify potential actions by humanitarian actors in support of CSP. It also testifies to the flexibility of the pillars as analytical categories, as certain forms of support appear repeated under different pillars.
### Knowledge
- Training sessions on protection-related themes (e.g. gender-based violence or child protection) or technical protection activities (e.g. referrals or protection monitoring).
- Supporting the identification of potential self-protection strategies.
- Sensitization activities on various issues.

### Resources
- Provision of cell phones, internet connectivity, vouchers or equipment for CPSs.
- Grants to finance community initiatives aimed at reducing protection risks.
- Income-generating activities targeting survivors of violence, which may enable them to put an end to the risks they were facing.

### Solidarity
- Activities promoting peaceful coexistence between communities.
- Activities that mobilize communities around protection issues, including those initiated by communities themselves, such as, listening clubs or the creation of CPSs themselves.

### Engagement
- Training sessions on advocacy or negotiation.
- Facilitating access to duty bearers and services providers.
- Supporting mobilization efforts at various levels for advocacy purposes.

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**Power dynamics**

Communities are not homogeneous. Community members may have different levels of knowledge, resources, solidarity ties or engagement with key actors – and therefore, different self-protection capacities.

The same power dynamics that influence a person’s level of exposure to a threat (vulnerability) also influence their capacity to prevent, avoid, mitigate or put an end to a threat (self-protection capacity). These power dynamics are based on factors that include, but are not limited to: gender; sexual orientation; gender identities; sex characteristics; age; disability; ethnicity; legal status; political power; social status and wealth.

Support to self-protection capacities must take into consideration, and seek to balance out, these factors – and the power dynamics they create. This requires having a good understanding of such power dynamics, and undertaking active efforts to empower those marginalized and/or oppressed. This is in line with the transformational impact that CBP is supposed to aim for. It is also in line with safe programming considerations, include the need for humanitarian activities to avoid empowering abusive leaders.

Therefore, empowerment appears as an additional consideration when conceptualizing programmes in support of CSP, cutting across the four pillars of the self-protection capacity framework – as illustrated in the diagram below.
Sustainability

All support to self-protection strategies must be sustainable. This means that the support of humanitarian organisations, although punctual, must create lasting changes in communities’ capacities, and not create dependency. This may be particularly relevant to support through material resources, which cannot be provided continuously, and which may wear out or run out over time.

Working with communities to identify self-protection strategies and ways for humanitarian actors to support those must include discussions on how to ensure the sustainability of such support. This may call for commitments by community members to, for example, spread information, maintain equipment, stay in contact with key actors or give continuity to community unity or solidarity activities.

Addressing negative self-protection strategies

Support to community self-protection also requires addressing negative self-protection strategies and other survival strategies being adopted by community members.

Often, negative self-protection strategies and other negative survival strategies reflect, build on and help perpetuate cultural values and practices, which renders it even more difficult to address them. Nonetheless, a few considerations may help pave the way towards shifting harmful behaviour.

1. **Raising awareness of harmful effects**
   Raising awareness of the harmful consequences of negative strategies can begin the process of turning people away from them. For instance, in order to tackle child marriage, it may be helpful to sensitize community members to the negative impacts that the practice has on a girl’s education.

2. **Targeting motivations**
   Eradicating negative survival strategies may require targeting the specific motivations behind it. For example, in the case of child marriage, a father may want to arrange for his daughter to marry because of the dowry the family would receive. In this case, the motivation is economic, and the argument for a girl’s education alone may not be successful in changing this practice. In this context, a more powerful argument would require linking girls’ education to economic gains, perhaps by emphasizing that educated girls will be able to work and provide for their families continuously, which is more valuable in the long term than a one-off dowry.

3. **Identifying and raising awareness of cases of positive deviance**
   Even in communities where a harmful practice is widespread, there may be members who adopt different practices that are beneficial to them. These are cases of ‘positive deviance’.
The practices of these individuals deviate from the norm, but bring better results. Such cases may help protection actors to demonstrate alternatives to negative self-protection or other survival strategies.

For example, in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Oxfam learned about the case of a girl from a community who had been able to go to school and was later considered more ‘valuable’ as a bride, married into a better family and was able to take on a job, thus being able to support her family financially. Oxfam shared this case with a different community in its efforts to advocate for the importance of girls’ education.6

4. Identifying and supporting allies

Even when cases of positive deviance may not exist or be identified, this does not mean that well-established cultural practices are consensual. Within a community where child marriage is predominant, there may still be community members who oppose it, and who may be allies in efforts to eradicate it, even if they do not adopt deviant practices themselves. Identifying and working with these allies may be fundamental in shifting a community’s negative survival strategy, given their understanding of their community, the practice itself, the reasons behind it and ways to advocate against it. They may also contribute to change directly by putting pressure on their own communities; however, their role in shifting such practices must be assessed carefully in light of potential risks to which such efforts may expose them.

Efforts to address the negative self-protection strategies must be particularly careful when the strategy in place is one of violent engagement, as challenging such practices may put community members and humanitarian actors at risk.

This may also be the case when tackling particularly sensitive issues, such as discrimination against LGBTQ people, which may trigger violence against those who speak out.

The four pillars of the self-protection capacity framework may also help identify different ways of addressing negative self-survival strategies. For instance, awareness-raising activities contribute to strengthening communities’ knowledge of the harmful effects of a practice (Knowledge pillar). Under this same pillar are also efforts to share examples of positive strategies that may replace the negative ones.

Material resources (Resource pillar) may be necessary to ensure a self-protection strategy is positive, for example by ensuring it is safe (i.e. does not cause harm) and inclusive (i.e. does not exclude others). For instance, in South Sudan, Oxfam provides vouchers for using canoe taxi services across rivers. This ensures that even those who cannot swim can adopt self-protection strategies that involve crossing rivers. Material resources may also be essential to abandoning certain survival strategies, especially those triggered by lack of resources, such as skipping meals.

While access to relevant people is essential to non-violent engagement strategies, some community members or groups may be excluded from such exchanges. Humanitarian actors can play a role in facilitating access to key actors by some specific groups – e.g. women or people with disabilities – in order to make such dialogues more inclusive (Engagement pillar).

Finally, strengthening intracommunity ties (Solidarity pillar) is essential to addressing negative self-protection strategies, especially those that exclude some community members in need of protection. For example, if women and people with disabilities are not part of negotiations with primary duty bearers, this can be improved not only by facilitating their access to such actors, but also by strengthening the role of women and people with disabilities in decision making within the community – thus, making the community more united.

### Annex 1: Example self-protection strategies identification exercise

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positive strategies</th>
<th>Negative strategies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Prevention</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Avoidance</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mitigation</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cessation</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Non-engagement

- Sleeping or moving around in groups, particularly in dangerous areas or at dangerous times.
- Flight/displacement.\(^7\)
- Hiding from armed actors.\(^8\)
- Keeping girls out of school in order to protect them from sexual abuse.
- Choosing to expose women to the risk of sexual abuse and assault instead of exposing men to the risk of torture or murder.\(^9\)
- Running away from captivity.

#### Non-violent engagement

- Convincing weapon bearers not to occupy a school.
- Providing information to, or otherwise cooperating with, weapon bearers in order not to be targeted during attacks.
- Providing false information to authorities, such as the number of households in a community, to alleviate the burden of taxes.
- Paying bribes – for example, to avoid being arrested.
- Community members negotiating with weapon bearers the release of children that they had recruited.

#### Violent engagement

- Forming a group of armed civilians to patrol the community.
- Sending family members to fight with a warring party as a way of ‘purchasing’ protection for the entire household.\(^10\)
- Beating a husband accused of beating his wife.

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\(^7\) See, e.g., Betcy Jose and Peace A. Medie, above note 4, p. 525.

\(^8\) See, e.g., E. Baines and E. Paddon, above note 2, pp. 236–39.


\(^10\) Ashley South, Malin Perhult, and Nils Carstensen, above note 1, pp. 25–6.