



A Critical Approach to Collective Protection:

**Taking Stock of
Protection International's
Experience**





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Executive Summary

Defending human rights is an inherently collective endeavour, necessitating a collective approach to protecting human rights defenders (HRDs). However, existing protection mechanisms often focus on individual HRDs, potentially neglecting contextual factors and relations in which HRDs are immersed.

Collective protection redefines HRD protection, highlighting the collective impact of violence and rights abuses on communities and collectives. It redirects attention to the structural roots of violence against HRDs and advocates for systemic changes to eradicate such threats.

Collective protection measures for HRDs are aimed at compelling the respect for territorial rights, livelihoods, and cultural heritage of collectives. They seek to increase the agency of these collectives to resist systemic inequalities by strengthening their social fabric and their networks of support, instead of focusing solely on eliminating risks and threats to individual HRDs. Ultimately, collective protection reflects a broader understanding of protection rooted in the defence of collective rights and interests.

Recent years have seen efforts by protection actors and mechanisms to extend support beyond individual HRDs, but challenges persist in adequately addressing the needs of collectives engaged in defending human rights. In this paper, Protection International discusses the importance of a collective approach to protection, the main concepts and definitions linked to collective protection, examples of collective actions and results, and recommendations to HRDs, state authorities and key stakeholders.

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Introduction

Collective protection is central to Protection International's (PI) mission to ensure a [safe and enabling environment](#) for the right to defend human rights (RDHR) for everyone. Considering that the term human rights defenders (HRDs) includes both individuals and collectives who defend human rights, a collective approach to their protection is essential. The importance of collective protection is reflected in our conceptualisation of the [RDHR](#), which informs both our [past](#) and current¹ global strategy. Its core tenet is that **the defence of human rights is an inherently relational practice**, as defenders usually act in conjunction with other groups of HRDs, activists, and collectives. The exercise of the RDHR is therefore as much, if not more, collective in nature as it is individual. This is why it is key that states, who bear the duty to protect human rights, and other key stakeholders in the HRD protection ecosystem, adopt the concept of collective protection in both discourse and practice.

The vast majority of reflections, resources and studies on collective protection have originated in Latin America. They take root in the experience of communities resisting violence in the midst of armed conflicts, advocating for peace and human rights, and opposing damaging economic projects led by extractive industries. While collectives who defend rights in Africa and South-East Asia have also been using collective protection practices and actions for years, the concept of collective protection for HRDs has only started to take hold in these regions until recently. As this concept is being adopted across different contexts and by different types of collectives, an opportunity presents itself for collectives who defend rights in different regions to learn from each other.

Collective protection as a concept reframes the security and protection of HRDs by putting an emphasis on the **collective impact of violence and human rights violations**. It shifts the focus towards **structural causes of violence** against individual HRDs, their communities and collectives, and systemic changes that are necessary to end such violence. Finally, it highlights the **collective power of HRDs** and their collectives, communities and networks.

Collective protection has supported the discourse and practice of PI for the past decade, especially when working with communities defending their land, their rights, and the environment. There is a growing interest among practitioners and donors in the collective approach to protection. At the same time, it is important to bear in mind that an approach based on collective protection might not be possible in every context. Challenges might arise when working with rural communities, for example. This publication also aims to highlight these challenges as well as the conditions required for implementing a collective approach to protection of HRDs and their collectives.

¹ The Global Strategy Framework for 2024-2028 is currently an internal document, but will soon be published on our website. For more info, please contact ao@protectioninternational.org.

The majority of actors working on HRD protection remain focused on the protection of individuals. Most protection approaches and programmes, both at the international and national levels, concentrate on protection measures for individuals at risk because of their activities in the promotion and defence of human rights. Protection mechanisms devised by institutional donors (e.g. [Lifeline](#) and [ProtectDefenders.eu](#)) have made efforts to extend their support to civil society organisations although protecting informally constituted collectives remains a challenge. On the other hand, most of the national protection mechanisms led by state authorities are still very much focused on the protection of individual HRDs.

Similarly, emergency grants still tend to favour individual HRDs at risk. Some local and international NGOs, especially those working with HRDs defending the environment and their land, have increased their support to collectives, but this remains the exception rather than the rule. Finally, states must take step up their efforts to address the protection needs of collectives of HRDs if they want to be able to fulfil their duty and obligations to protect the right to defend human rights and HRDs.

This publication highlights the need for a collective approach to working with HRDs amongst civil society organisations and donors, both in relation to preventive and emergency protection actions. It sets out PI's understanding of collective protection, taking stock of lessons learned, and sharing PI's experience of working alongside HRDs through a collective approach. Section 2 discusses the importance of talking about collective protection and the definition of key concepts linked to collective protection. Section 3 include two key dimensions of collective protection: the spatial-territorial dimension and the interaction-networks dimension. Section 4 provides examples of collective actions and results. The final section of this publication sets out preliminary conclusions on collective protection and concrete policy recommendations for different stakeholders.

2.

Why Is It Important To Talk About Collective Protection?

2.1. Key elements in the international legal frameworks on human rights

The UN Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognised Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (also known as the [UN Declaration on HRDs](#)) clearly acknowledges the relevance of the collective dimension of the right to defend human rights. To start with, the declaration's title highlights groups as key actors and rightsholders in the promotion and protection of human rights. Furthermore, the first article states that the defence of rights is a collective endeavour, explaining that “[e]veryone has the right, **individually and in association with others**, to promote and to strive for the protection and realization of human rights and fundamental freedoms at the national and international levels”.

The [Commentary to the Declaration on HRDs](#) by the UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of HRDs further details this social and collective dimension. In the introduction to the document, the UN Special Rapporteur defines human rights defenders as “**individuals or groups who act to promote, protect or strive for the protection and realization of human rights**”. The commentary also establishes links with other UN covenants, such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights which guarantees collective rights such as the right of association (p. 27). It further highlights the risks that defenders, especially women, take when they participate in **collective public action** (p. 33). Finally, it emphasises the duty that states have to protect human rights that can be exercised collectively, such as the rights to freedom of assembly and association, and freedom of expression (p. 33).

Building on the UN Declaration on HRDs, other international instruments have sought to reaffirm the collective nature of the defence of human rights. The [UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People](#), adopted in 2007, addresses both individual and **collective rights**. The Inter American Commission on Human Rights, in response to the increasingly pressing need for the protection of environmental HRDs and communities, dedicated an entire section of its [2017 report](#) on comprehensive protection policies for HRDs to the protection of Indigenous peoples, afro-descendants, and rural communities.

Escazú Agreement: protecting collectives and communities that defend environmental rights

The Escazú Agreement is a good example of a policy that includes a collective approach to protection. Although the agreement does not mention collective protection as a concept per se, this agreement was developed with a clear concern for the environmental and human rights of collectives that defend rights, such as Indigenous peoples, and Afro and rural communities in Latin America. In 2018, countries of Latin America and the Caribbean expressed their support for the legally binding Regional Agreement on Access to Information, Public Participation and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters in Latin America and the Caribbean, more commonly known as the [Escazú Agreement](#). Ratified by 15 member states of the Organisation of American States (OAS), the Escazú Agreement entered into force on 22 April 2021. The agreement combines environmental protection with sustainable development. Furthermore, it is a regional treaty that anchors the protection of environmental rights to the protection of human rights, especially with the inclusion of provisions on the protection of environmental HRDs (Angel, 2021).

Current state parties to the Escazú Agreement are: Antigua and Barbuda, Argentina, Belize, Bolivia, Chile, Ecuador, Grenada, Guyana, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, and Uruguay.

The collective rights of Indigenous and rural communities defending environmental rights were reaffirmed in the [UN Framework Principles on Human Rights and the Environment](#), published in 2018. These principles state that “states should recognise the standing of Indigenous peoples and other communal landowners to bring claims for violations of their collective rights”. Principle 15 argues that “[s]tates should ensure that they comply with their obligations to Indigenous people and members of traditional communities”. Finally, in 2019, the United Nations Human Rights Council unanimously adopted a [resolution](#) to protect environmental HRDs, and the United Nations Environment Programme and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights announced the [signing of a partnership](#).

2.2. Collective action and the right to defend human rights

Defending human rights is eminently relational and in most cases the fruit of collective action. This is why PI, when talking about those who defend and promote human rights, always refers to both individuals and collectives who defend human rights as HRDs.

HRDs defend human rights in contexts historically affected by systemic and structural violence targeting individuals and collectives who defend human rights because of their gender, race, age, or socioeconomic status. Collective action seeks to challenge unequal and oppressive power structures and use collective strength in the context of unequal struggles. For example, collectives of defenders might oppose oppressive regimes or unite forces to defend the environment and livelihoods of communities against powerful extractive industries.

In PI, the notion of **collectives that defend and promote human rights** encompasses formally established civil society organisations and associations, and informal groups that engage in collective action for human rights. It refers to gatherings of individuals united by shared interests, goals, or purposes. These may take the form of **structured organisations**, such as NGOs, community associations, trade unions, etc. that are usually recognised as legal entities and formalised with defined roles and objectives. Alternatively, **collectives can emerge informally**, driven by common concerns, activities, or identities through more spontaneous, grassroots arrangements or online actions. The term “collective” can then refer to groups of activists, social and popular movements, women’s or community organisations, Indigenous or Afro-descendant communities, among many other groups. **In both cases, the essence of collectives lies in the collaborative synergy of individuals to achieve common rights-related objectives or address shared challenges.**

2.3. Reasons for a collective protection approach

Throughout our experience of almost two decades working with communities, we have witnessed the collective nature of the defence of human rights. We identified the following six main reasons for adopting a collective protection approach.

COLLECTIVE CAUSES



The struggles of HRDs are collective by nature, as they normally pursue rights that are relevant for groups, communities, and ultimately for society as a whole. Structural obstacles to improving the protection of collectives relate, among other things, to how they are perceived within their own societies, and to their personal social and political positions as discriminated groups within these societies.

COLLECTIVE RISKS



In the case of collectives of HRDs, the level of collective risk cannot be calculated as the sum of the risks that its individual members face. On the contrary, the collective must be kept at the centre of the analysis by identifying the vulnerabilities and capacities that are specific to the collective and may affect its existence. For instance, if a rural community has a weak social fabric and is divided, its exposure to risk will be higher than if members of the community are united.

COLLECTIVE WORK



HRDs rarely work as individuals but evolve as part of groups, i.e. communities, grassroots organisations, NGOs, or less structured and informal social movements. They pool efforts, resources and expertise to achieve common objectives or address shared challenges. This is why the concept of **network** is key to collective protection.

COLLECTIVE IMPACT OF VIOLENCE



In the case of violence against a collective of HRDs, there are two key elements to consider. First, even when the attacks are perpetrated against individual members of a collective, the aggressor's ultimate motivation is to weaken the collective and its social fabric. Second, the impact or damage generated when a collective is attacked surpasses the impact on individual people that make up the collective and affects their community as well. This community can be local, national, regional or even international.

COLLECTIVE STRENGTHS

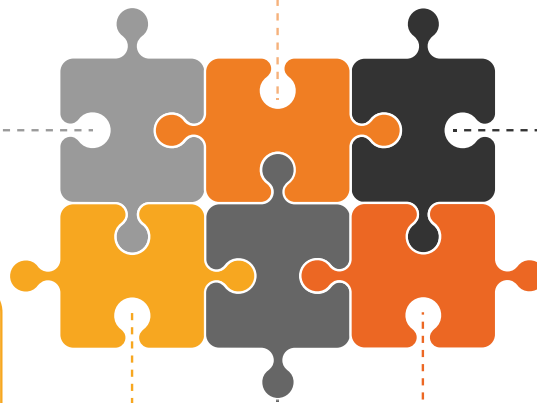


Because together means stronger, HRDs and collectives who defend human rights can better protect themselves by strengthening their social fabric and connecting with other individuals or groups. Strong social fabrics and social networks allow collectives to facilitate human rights work, improve the capacity of HRDs to respond to attacks and threats thanks to internal strengthening of collectives, solidarity and protection networks.

COLLECTIVE STRATEGIES



Collective protection not only implies the design of security plans for improving the security of all individual members of a collective, or the formulation of protection measures that aim to increase the political space for collectives and their members. In the case of collectives who defend the environment and their rights in rural contexts, it also involves designing measures that support them in exerting control over a geographical territory. For instance, economic, social and cultural activities and traditions carried out by rural communities in a territory should not be seen as subsidiary to their strategies for protection, but as part of and complementary to these strategies.



2.4. Collective dimension in state-led protection mechanisms

Collective protection is most often associated with rural, peasant or Indigenous communities who defend their lands and rights. Even those HRDs who work individually do so as part of a network of relationships composed of many different actors. Current protection mechanisms struggle to address this collective dimension.

The protection paradigm in both state and civil society mechanisms puts the emphasis on the protection of individual HRDs. While such mechanisms are greatly needed, they tend to cut HRDs from their families, communities, and networks. In addition, they are not always adapted to the needs of HRDs living in remote, rural areas.

As for state protection mechanisms, many of them still do not reflect the advances of international laws, norms and principles. To start with, these mechanisms rely on the centrality of state authority and their duty to protect human rights. However, states often have a limited presence or even remain entirely absent in areas where human rights violations are high. States are also sometimes the authors of these violations in many repressive contexts.

Some good practices exist, however, where authorities do implement a collective approach to the protection of HRDs. Examples include rulings by the Colombian Constitutional Court and a federal law for HRDs in Mexico.

Exceptions to the rule: Colombia & Mexico

Different rulings of the **Colombian** Constitutional Court (i.e. [025/2004](#), [200/2007](#) and [266/2009](#)) establish the obligation of the Colombian state to adopt collective protection measures for communities at extraordinary risk, with an emphasis on internally displaced populations, Indigenous and Afro-descendant communities, as part of its duty to guarantee the right to life and personal integrity. These measures have been incorporated in several government decrees, which establish the guidelines and procedures for the adoption of these measures by the National Protection Unit.²

In **Mexico**, the collective dimension to protection has been incorporated in recent updates to the [Federal Law for the protection of HRDs and journalists of 2012](#). Article 30 states that “preventive measures, protective measures, and emergency protective measures shall be appropriate, effective, temporary and minimise exposure to risk, and may be individual or collective [...]”. In its last statistical report, the protection mechanism shows that there have been 140 collective cases. However, neither the Law itself nor the subsequent regulations have developed a clear definition or approach of the collective dimension of protection.

² [Decree 4065 of 2011](#) creates the National Protection Unit (UNP); [Decrees 4633](#) and [4635](#) of 2011 defines a public policy of comprehensive care, protection, integral reparation and restitution of territorial rights for Indigenous peoples and Afro-Colombian communities; [Resolution 1085 in August 2015](#) establishes a “collective protection roadmap” (ruta de protección colectiva); [Decree 660 of 2018](#) adopts a Comprehensive Security and Protection Programme for Communities and Organisations in the Territories; [Decree 2137 of 2018](#) creates the Intersectorial Commission for the development of the Plan of Timely Action (PAO in Spanish) for Prevention and Individual and Collective Protection of the rights to life, liberty, integrity and security of HRDs, social leaders, community leaders, and journalists.

In addition, the protection measures adopted by state mechanisms focus on the **prevention of, and in reaction to, physical attacks**, such as providing HRDs with mobile phones with direct access to an emergency line, bullet-proof jackets, or armed bodyguards, while overlooking the structural causes of the aggressions against the HRDs and their collectives. Enforcing a more collective and preventive approach could result in a more effective and long-term protection of HRDs and their RDHR.

Our experience has shown us that violence against HRDs often has an impact on the people surrounding them, such as their family members, colleagues, or fellow community members. The focus on individual protection measures therefore tends to ignore the collective dimension and impact of violence against HRDs and their collectives. Risk analyses and security measures tend not to take into account that threats also affect the families and communities of the beneficiary HRDs. Protection systems tend to dilute the causes that these individual HRDs defend, and these causes are part of a collective effort. Finally, by focusing on the individual, and seeking to increase the cost of attacks by raising their profile in some protection responses, their daily lives and relationships with other members of the community may end up being affected (Angel, 2021).

As duty-bearers of rights, states bear the primary responsibility for the protection of human rights defenders and the right to defend human rights. As stated in the [Risk Analysis and Protection Plan Principles](#) published by PI with the inputs and feedback of over 65 HRDs and experts,

“ *[The risk analysis conducted by state protection mechanisms should] cover individual, organisational and collective dimensions, as needed. For individual cases, the analysis should be extended to family members, close associates and people directly linked to the work of the HRD, when those people can share the risk or be subjected to retaliation due to the HRDs' work. For cases concerning an organization or a community, the analysis should extend to the organizational and collective level when they might also share the risk.*

Principle 9, Risk Analysis and Protection Plan Principles

3.

Defining Collective Protection: Conceptual Basis

COLLECTIVE PROTECTION

- 🎯 We understand collective protection as a set of actions and social practices (organisational, cultural, community, economic and individual) aimed at increasing collective HRDs' capacity to act, and transforming the balance of power against the backdrop of threats, denial of rights, multiple violence and different systems of oppression (e.g. gender, race, class).
- 🎯 Another definition of collective protection is possible from a results-based perspective. In this regard, collective protection can be understood as the actions (and the results of those actions) intended to make others respect a collective's use of a territory because of property rights or other rights over the territory; dwelling and livelihoods needs; and environmental, cultural and religious reasons, among others.

Based on these two complementary definitions, collective protection can be approached from two different but interconnected dimensions:

- i) spatial-territorial, and
- ii) interactions-networks (internally and externally).

3.1. A spatial-territorial dimension to collective protection

The spatial-territorial dimension is part of Protection International's assumption that protection for collectives should be anchored in the territory and the spaces they use in order to advocate for their rights. This is because the territory is the essential space for their existence, livelihoods and worldviews. In addition, conflicts most often take place on a territory, and it is therefore in this territory that protection needs arise. It is also from this territory that a protection strategy can be drawn up with the active participation of HRDs and their collectives.

It is important to consider that the concept of territory goes far beyond the physical/geographical space. It is a place or space connected with the lives, culture and rites of collectives and with their action in defending human rights. For rural HRD collectives, land is the place where ways of life and relationships with the environment are inseparable from their advocacy work – in defence of life and territory (e.g. defence of water sources or land, or the claiming of the right to ancestral territories and their own forms of representation). For more urban HRD collectives, the territory is the space where they claim or enjoy their human rights.

An example of a spatial-territorial dimension: collective protection in urban spaces

Collective protection strategies can also be conceived for collectives who defend human rights in urban settings. This can be the case when a population has been living on a land for many years, has built homes and neighbourhoods, and then has to confront urban development investors who seek to evict them without prior consultation or by violent means.

Protection strategies should be embedded in collective practices. In the case of rural communities, this can be done, for instance, through the identification of existing practices within the community which can be turned into collective measures to protect the territory. This means safeguarding the community's assets, such as crops, schools and community buildings, while also creating safe spaces to ensure the group or community can meet and organise their activities - thus developing strategies to prevent attempts by aggressors to divide the community.

3.2. Interaction-networks dimension to collective protection

The interaction-network dimension implies that the collective is made of members who weave a dense fabric of interactions and relationships. This idea is central to building collective capacities, orienting actions towards strengthening these interactions as well as both internal relationships (inside the community or collective) and external relationships (with the outside world).

In this sense, an indicator that a collective is internally well-structured and has high levels of internal cohesion, is that its members meet frequently and maintain dynamics for sharing information and interacting with one another (i.e. presence of strong “bonding ties”). Externally, a collective should be capable of building instrumental relationships with other networks and institutions that are able to provide protection to its members (i.e. presence of “bridging ties”). This is why the cohesion and strong social fabric of collectives operate is crucial as well, both internally and externally.

Importance of internal strengthening and social fabric³

The vast majority of the inhabitants of village X are part of the community struggle against the construction of a hydroelectric dam that will flood part of their territory. However, another group within the same village appears to be in favour of the dam because the construction firm and local authorities have promised economic compensation for the sale of their farms, or even employment at the construction site for someone in their families.

Also, a group of women is concerned that only men have property titles for the farms and are demanding that they be recognised as owners. The leadership (men) asks them to postpone their claim so as not to “create more problems” when “there are already too many” and to “avoid dividing the community further”.

These different positions within the same community are often exploited by opposing actors to divide and weaken collective processes for the defence of rights. This is why these situations must be considered in risk analyses. In order to ensure the safety of the collective and HRDs within, it is crucial to address divisions within communities, seeking ways to ensure cohesion while also recognising and taking into account the interests and needs of each individual, including, in this case, women.

Establishing and maintaining bridging ties over time allows collectives in remote areas to break their isolation, receive social support and raise visibility of their struggles beyond their territories – at national and even international levels. Networks of external stakeholders can be used to disseminate alerts and complaints, provide support during emergencies, put pressure on the institutions with a duty for protection, facilitate information access and exchange, and give advice on topics such as legal assistance and political advocacy. For example, many grassroots civil society organisations and Indigenous farming communities in Colombia, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Thailand and Indonesia (amongst other countries) have sought the support and assistance of national and international NGOs in an attempt to achieve greater visibility for their human rights work.⁴

The mobilisation of different social actors within and outside HRD collectives can be understood as **protection networks**. Such networks aim at guaranteeing the security and protection of HRD collectives and securing their workspace.

In PI, we have found that collectives that have been able to strengthen their internal and external networks have shown a greater capacity to confront threats and generate safer environments for their actions. Not only have they been able to strengthen their internal organisational processes, but they have also built connections and widened their workspace beyond the local level to national and international levels. The actors that are part of their networks may provide support and show solidarity in cases of emergency. In this way, collectives can benefit from the presence of external observers, documentation of threats and aggressions (e.g. videos, photos and public statements) or advocacy (e.g. pressuring different authorities and national and international institutions to take action). Collectives can also receive legal accompaniment in cases of criminalisation, or temporary relocation in cases of displacement. They can also receive financial support for the development of their protection actions.

³ This example is based on true events faced by communities in Mesoamérica. The names of the community and HRDs have been anonymised, however. Other contextual details have also been changed for security reasons.

⁴ Some INGOs provide international observation and physical support to individual and collective HRDs, using the principle of “see and be seen” as a mechanism for dissuasion and political pressure. Such examples, to name but a few, are Peace Brigades International (PBI), the Swedish Fellowship of Reconciliation (SweFOR), Christian Peacemaker Teams (CPT), Peace Watch Switzerland (PWS) and International Action for Peace (IAP).

4.

Collective Protection Actions and Results

This section illustrates what collective protection actions and results of those actions could look like. The first part includes a table with collective protection actions, which are understood as pathways of action that build towards a collective approach to protection of HRDs. The second part of this section provides examples of results of collection protection actions, which can be used as concrete goals to aim for within protection practices and projects. The results are also divided according to the two key dimensions of collective protection as stipulated above.

4.1. Actions oriented to enhance collective protection

In the table below, types of actions and examples are categorised according to the two key dimensions identified in the previous section (spatial-territorial and interaction-networks). Within each dimension, examples of actions are listed that are based on a collective approach to building an enabling environment for the right to defend human rights. Linked to each action, an example is provided to illustrate how such collective protection actions can take shape in practice.

Dimension	Action	Example
Enhancing the influence of the collective on their territory (spatial-territorial dimension)	Develop capacity to stay put or to remain in/within the territory	A community takes action to stay up against an eviction order an eviction order they consider illegal
	Develop capacity to know what happens in and around the territory (information)	Community members regularly move within their territory to monitor the situation and learn about any action taken by strangers that might affect the territory
	Develop capacity to make joint decisions about what the best course of action (internal cohesion)	Collectives convene members in assemblies to enhance information sharing, participation and ownership of decisions made
	Develop capacity to establish contact with, create and mobilise external networks	Collectives start contacting other collectives and actors to gain their support
	Develop capacity to engage in public, non-violent actions in and around the territory	Demonstrations, sit-ins, etc.
The protection and enhancement of the social structure of the collective (interactions-networks dimension)	Create smaller networks inside the structure (subgroups, leadership, discriminated subgroups, etc.)	Assess the needs of the subgroups within a collective to tailor capacity-strengthening interventions
	Assess the social structure of a collective	Plan for empowering the social structure of the collective (psychosocial support and well-being) Formal recognition of the collective by authorities
	Plan for protecting key individuals, understood as part of the network (social structure).	Protection of key individuals in the collective (with a gendered and intersectional approach) Promote collective leadership (to avoid concentration of information and power in a handful of individuals)
	Interconnected networks beyond the collective (other actors and networks that may support the collective)	

4.2. A results-oriented approach to collective protection

The intertwined approaches of considering the social structure and the influence on territory are useful only as long as they allow us to define results of collective protection actions. To keep track of the impact of collective protection actions, the following (non-exhaustive) list of results below can be used as an example of possible outcomes.

Spatial-territorial dimension	Interactions-networks dimensions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We have information about what is happening in the territory (we go around the territory) • We have information on what is going to happen in the territory (access to information on plans) • We manage to know who comes and leaves, we detect strangers • We manage to document what happens in the territory • We manage to stay in a stable position in the territory 	<p style="text-align: center;">Internal</p>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We manage to keep the cohesion of the group; • We have the capacities to deal with internal conflicts and good conflict resolution practices • We have good psychosocial support practices within the collective • We have good communications practices within the collective
	<p style="text-align: center;">External</p>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We manage to have open meetings and joint decision-making as a collective actor • We have adequate access to authorities to make use of our rights in terms of territory (including the conduct of prior consultation) • We have access to / are part of networks involving authorities and other actors in the defense of the territory • We have adequate legal support for the exercise of our rights and the use of the justice system • We get a response from private groups or security companies who respect our rights (rights-based response) • We manage to carry out collective actions in/around the territory, or in other places, to demand the exercise of our rights • We get an adequate response from the state regarding our rights to property, work, health, development, etc., especially if this response helps us in our defense of our rights and territory

Dimensions of collective protection

Interaction-Network Internally

- Bonding ties and cohesion (social structures)
- Analysis and sharing of information related to protection (risk analysis – of the threats affecting the collective)
- Strengthening to social fabric of communities
- Organisational practices
- Addressing trauma: psychodrama, psychosocial support
- Promoting women leadership
- Supporting young generations



A spatial-territorial dimension to collective protection

- Protection needs arise in a given territory and protection strategies should then be drawn up from this territory.
- Territory as an essential space for the existence, livelihoods and worldviews of collectives who defend rights.
- Territory as a space that is connected with the life, culture and rites of collectives, and with their action in defence of human rights.
- For rural collectives: ways of life and relationships with the environment are inseparable from their advocacy work.
 - For urban collectives: territory as the space where they claim or enjoy their human rights.
 - Protection strategies should be embedded in collective practices, be they social, economic, political, or organisational.



Interaction-Network Externally

- Bridging ties
- Build dense relations and interactions with other actors (from the local, to national, to international level)
- Break their isolation and project their struggles beyond their territories
- Build the support to put pressure on authorities to fulfill their duty to protect and deter potential aggressors
- Connecting with and including women-lead organisations and collectives
- Connecting with and including young organisations and collectives

5.

Preliminary Conclusions

This publication lays out the conceptual basis for collective protection. The two key dimensions of collective protection, spatial-territorial and interaction-networks, contribute to protecting the many different spheres that influence and accommodate collectives that defend human rights - whether they are organisational, cultural, economic, and/or psychosocial. Collective protection implies working towards the development of these spheres through actions that aim to protect their spaces and territory, and mobilise internal and external networks for their support.

Collective protection is the result of joint and diverse actions in a given context that all converge and combine to protect a collective and its territory. Based on the spatial-territorial and interaction-networks dimensions, we have identified several key capacities that strengthen collectives:

- The capacity to remain in the territory: considering that territories are socially constructed, the community or collective should be capable of remaining in and resisting from the territory. This includes the capacity to confront the impacts of threats and attacks, and the capacity to work through their consequences and traumas.
- The capacity to know what is happening within and around the territory: this is linked to the capacity to physically watch over the territory. It includes having access to crucial information in order to maintain resistant, e.g. who enters and exits the territory and key information on (potential aggressors') plans for the territory. This facilitates the production of information to denounce what is happening within it.
- The capacity to take collective decisions about the best course of action: the aim here is to explore internal cohesion (bonding ties) and explicitly include measures on how to strengthen it.
- The capacity to create and mobilise external networks: these are key for increasing the agency of the collective (bridging ties). See below for specific methodologies on developing this capacity.
- The capacity to participate in non-violent public actions within and around the territory: the aim is to identify how capable the collective is of taking part in demonstrations, marches, and other types of non-violent collective actions in the territory and at places where political decision-makers meet, such as local or national government buildings.

The convergence of these actions and the strengthening of capacities could make way for the following changes:



This publication does not pretend to be a definite conceptualisation of the concept of collective protection. Many research gaps remain. For instance, there is a need for more cross-regional research about collective protection, highlighting the different applications of the concept across regions, and the challenges faced. More work is also needed on the limitations of the concept and the opportunities to work from a collective approach with collectives who defend human rights.

Finally, as much as collective protection is about defending the right of collectives who defend human rights, we should not forget that the duty to protect human rights, including collectives of HRDs and not only individuals, falls upon states primarily. States should make sure that the actions they take for the protection of human rights are adapted to the needs of collectives of HRDs to ensure a truly enabling environment for the right to defend human rights.

6.

Recommendations

To HRDs and their collectives

- ⚙️ Integrate the collective approach to your (self-) protection processes, including your actors mapping, risks assessments, protection plans and protection strategies.
- ⚙️ Carry out an analysis of your support network in order to determine how to strengthen it and identify those actors who can help you implement a collective approach to protection or how you can help other collectives.
- ⚙️ Carry out regular stakeholder analysis and power mapping exercises. Identify potential local, regional and international networks that could be instrumental to support your human rights defence work. Design a networking strategy that takes into account your capacity and resources but step up your efforts to engage meaningfully with at least one network per level. Be aware that being part of a network means having the time and resources to be active within that network, maintain connections with other members, and contribute in a meaningful way to the development of the network.
- ⚙️ Within your risk assessments and protection plans, analyse and discuss the psychosocial impacts of threats and violence on the collective – adding to the analysis of individual impacts – and reflect over the measures that could contribute to strengthening the social fabric of the collective (including material but also cultural and symbolic dimensions).
- ⚙️ As much as possible, design and implement a community mobilisation strategy which combines actions for:
 - raising awareness about the nature and importance of your struggle and building solidarity bonds across the community;
 - communicating strategically about the threats and protection measures needed to address them and about the importance of documenting violations; and
 - contributing to building a positive narrative around the collective defence or rights through the use of storytelling, community communicators or journalists present in the territory and a regular analysis and countering of misinformation or fake news disseminated about the collective.
- ⚙️ Be aware that putting the emphasis on individual and vertical leadership may contribute to increasing risks for individuals and collectives that defend human rights. It is therefore recommended to make efforts to diversify leadership.
- ⚙️ Be aware of your own role as part of a collective of HRDs: regularly assess whether you are inclusive in your networking practices and make concrete efforts to include different groups in your network. Ensure that your internal and external practices are inclusive and non-discriminatory.

To State authorities (duty-bearers)

- ⚙️ Adopt a collective approach to the protection HRDs and actively promote an enabling environment for the right to defend human rights.
- ⚙️ Study policy developments and experiences in other countries on collective protection and seek ways to incorporate substantive institutional adjustments into current, or future, HRD protection policies.
- ⚙️ Ensure the legal protection of collectives that defend human rights through the enactment of legislation and public policies that include both the individual and collective approaches to the right to defend human rights and allocate enough resources to implement both approaches.

- ⚙️ Step up efforts to investigate threats against collectives, as much as threats against individuals.
- ⚙️ Publicly recognise collectives that defend human rights at the local, national and international levels, with messages of zero tolerance against threats or attacks.
- ⚙️ Engage in dialogues with collectives that defend human rights about collective protection strategies that go beyond protecting physical integrity.
- ⚙️ Train civil servants and security forces on the UN Declaration on HRDs and the collective nature of HRDs and their right to defend human rights.
- ⚙️ Clearly recognise the rights of both formal and informal collectives that defend human rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly.
- ⚙️ Ratify your commitment to ending impunity, which is a key component for dissuading perpetrators from committing violations.
- ⚙️ Keep in contact with and make periodic visits (from both the national and local authorities) to at-risk groups and collectives that defend human rights.
- ⚙️ Ensure that national protection mechanisms are adapted to the needs of and challenges faced by collective that defend human rights.
- ⚙️ Step up efforts to improve social cohesion and protect community needs, especially in the case of environmental defenders or marginalised groups.

To key stakeholders (national and international NGOs, embassies, UN agencies, donors, etc.)

- ⚙️ Identify and give public visibility to high-profile cases of collectives that defend human rights.
- ⚙️ Prepare periodic reports on the situation of at-risk collectives that defend human rights.
- ⚙️ Keep in contact with and make periodic visits to at-risk collectives that defend human rights.
- ⚙️ Provide funding for, and support to, the collective defence of HR and protection networks. Ensure as much long-term and stabilised funding as possible.
- ⚙️ Engage with state authorities to promote the collective approach to protection and promote public policies that includes a collective approach to protection.
- ⚙️ Promote best practices and transnational/cross border cooperation and networks.
- ⚙️ Support collectives in strengthening their social fabric. Protecting collectives that defend human rights involves interventions at different levels that go beyond measures that aim to protect physical integrity only.
- ⚙️ Support collectives in strengthening their capacities to form strong internal and external networks, especially those formulated on the preliminary conclusions of this document.

7.

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