

# EVAP Ep. 17: Tiffany Easthom

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## SPEAKERS

Tiffany Easthom, Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall

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### Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 00:12

Welcome to Expert Voices on Atrocity Prevention by the Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect. I'm Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall, Research Director at the Global Centre. This podcast features one-on-one conversations with practitioners from the fields of human rights, conflict prevention and atrocity prevention. These conversations will give us a glimpse of the personal and professional side of how practitioners approach human rights protection and atrocity prevention, allowing us to explore challenges, identify best practices, and share lessons learned on how we can protect populations more effectively. Today, I'm joined by Tiffany Easthom, Executive Director of Nonviolent Peaceforce. Thank you for joining us today, Tiffany.

### Tiffany Easthom 00:55

Hi, thanks for having me. Happy to be.

### Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 00:58

Just to get us started, I was wondering if you could tell us a little bit about your organization, Nonviolent Peaceforce and what type of work you do.

### Tiffany Easthom 01:05

Sure, so Nonviolent Peaceforce is an international nongovernmental organization, we identify as an organization that works on civilian protection. And what that means within sort of the scope of civilian protection is we work specifically utilizing an approach or a methodology called unarmed civilian protection. And that's really working on civilian led strategies, nonviolent strategies, that are intended to first and foremost, the first goal is to prevent violence from happening in the first place. And then secondarily, if violence is not preventable (we live in a

complex world and these are complex situations), that approach of using UCP and sort of the tools, actions, and strategies within, help civilians who are impacted by violence, be safer in that process to reduce harm, to save lives, to protect dignity, to protect from forced displacement.

**J** Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 02:00

And what does what does UCP look like in practice?

**T** Tiffany Easthom 02:04

Sure. So yeah, so that's the theory, that's the goal. In practice, so we can work in countries or in locations, where there's a situation that's deteriorating, tensions are rising, it looks like there might be an outbreak of some type of violence. And we would call that sort of working on the prevention side. We can be in an area where there's active conflict, we've seen this in our work in places like South Sudan and Iraq, currently in Ukraine, and be working in sort of active conflict locations. And then in some areas where sort of the thicker, the apex of conflict has passed, the situation is moving towards stabilization. Ultimately, a long term journey towards a sustainable peace process, but there's a lot of disruption and instability and fragility in that context. So that's my contextual perspective. And what we do in terms of the work that we do, it largely fits under broadly two categories. One is sort of the reactive and one is the proactive, and this is when it comes down to - how do we spend our days and what are our activities. So on the reactive side, which is just a way to help us all sort of visualize, you can imagine that the threat of something happening is quite imminent. So perhaps somebody, an activist or a group of people, are being targeted, threatened with violence, because there's armed groups fighting for control of the land that they're on; people are being targeted for violence, because of that identity, that they hold, they're women, an ethnic identity, something like that; or they're an activist, they're fighting for justice, and they've been targeted by some forces or some elements. What we will be doing, then how we'll be spending our days is really working on on what we call direct protection. So we will be doing things like providing protective accompaniment, strategic presence, proactive engagement, utilizing our relationships with the whole sort of panoply of stakeholders, to try and stop the violence from happening in the first place, and/or helping civilians under threat get to a safer space in the most dignified and safe way. And then the other piece of the work, which is that proactive engagement. So really looking at, this is the long term engagement, is really supporting communities and really starting from the perspective of working with, centering those most impacted by violence, on digging into what are the root causes. Most often in locations that we're working in, whatever the conflict is, is not new. We're often working in situations where there's violent conflict, armed conflict that is now entered multigenerational. And so then we're working on and really digging in on supporting, working on addressing what those root causes are supporting the strengthening and development of peace infrastructure, collectively. Globally, we're very good at investing in military structures, we put money, we put time, we put resources, we put policies, and we're very light and weak on doing the same thing for what is ostensibly a very hard job, which is building peace.

**J** Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 05:13

Absolutely. We always say that prevention costs less than reaction. And yet we don't invest nearly enough in prevention. Since you mentioned, utilizing all of the stakeholders, I'm curious,

how does your work and UCP interact with existing protection and prevention architecture? I know you mentioned South Sudan already, and I think I became most familiar with Nonviolent Peaceforce, when the Global Centre was working on peacekeeping issues. So how does your work interact with, you know, the other actors within a country like South Sudan? And how does it address gaps in what they're working on?

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Tiffany Easthom 05:55

Yeah, I mean, gaps is a great way to phrase it, that's our first starting point, even when no matter where we're going into, or whether it's into a new country or into a new location. In a country where we're already working, is the sort of ... one of our first questions we ask ourselves is what's already there, and what are the gaps? First and foremost, you know, there's plenty of work for everybody, there's a lot of need out there, we don't all need to be doing the same thing. And, there's a lot of gaps for all the same reasons. So we're looking at, across sort of the stakeholder landscape, with local civil society, first and foremost, local authorities, the duty bearers who do hold the legal and are given responsibility to protect within their within their own countries or territories, and then whatever else is there. And then that case, you mentioned the UN, the United Nations Mission, other humanitarian organizations, peace building organizations, so on and so forth. So it depends on I mean, first and foremost, coordination is really important. It's easy to say, hard to do, much harder to do in reality. But our job is really sort of, is to try and engage. We talk a lot about our work from a nonpartisan perspective, which is not an uncommon language used in the humanitarian field. And what our sort of rallying cry for ourselves is, it's not just a state of being, we can't just declare ourselves nonpartisan. And that's not just about being not political or not choosing a side, but it's really about building collaborative functional relationships across that stakeholder landscape. And this is a very long way to answer your question, which is that does include not only sort of the obvious, you know, local communities, local authorities, but it really means also, building constructive relationships with whatever version of the UN is there, whether it's a mission or agencies or some, a political mission, or a peacekeeping mission, the other responders, humanitarian, development and peacebuilding responders, and really importantly, local authorities and local communities. And we try and coordinate in as much as if there's a gap here, our job is to try to fill the gap to support to encourage, but not to take over if there's already something existing, particularly amongst the local infrastructure that is actually working.

J

Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 08:15

I like the way you framed that because sometimes it does feel like a very crowded space in some of these countries, and you're right that it isn't a competition, like there's a value to all of us.

T

Tiffany Easthom 08:29

And we can spread out. Often, I mean, for our work, we're quite forward-leaning. So we often find ourselves as sort of amongst the earliest responders when a crisis hits. And it's particularly if we're in a given location already, we can shift pretty quickly. South Sudan classic example, when the war started in December 2013, I was still there, I was Country Director at that time,

we were really well established in South Sudan so we were able to pivot quite quickly. And over that first sort of 12, 18, 24 months of the war, when everything was very dynamic and unfurling, we were able to shift quite quickly and get on frontlines very fast. And then as sort of the more sort of traditional material aid responding type of humanitarian response got stood up, then we often would just move out of the way and say, okay, if the if the conflict has diminished, and the fighting forces have moved off, and this is now largely our response to humanitarian material aid needs, we don't need to be here for the sake of flag-planting, let's move out of the way, leave space for them, and go and then we can use our resources to be somewhere else and try and open up that space for the material aid providers to come in behind us and do that as well. If the fighting continues, if it's still a really fragile area, of course, we'll stay and we'll work really on the protection thing. But I mean, as we all know, this, all of this costs money, all of that means we're all competing for funding, and that's where that competition piece comes in. And so it is a bit of a life reality, but we all do really, just really try to have to see past that and try really hard to get past that.

**J** Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 09:59

And I know that you've You know, in, in what you've been saying, so far, you've really emphasized sort of centering the populations. And that's a really big part of how we center them is by putting their needs first. Just to pivot slightly, I know that Nonviolent Peaceforce recently put out a brief on sort of unarmed civilian protection and R2P and atrocity prevention. So I'm curious what role you see UCP playing in the prevention of atrocity crimes?

**T** Tiffany Easthom 10:31

Yeah, it's a great question. That's something that we struggled with a lot internally about whether, how would we articulate that. On a day-to-day anecdotal basis, we can definitely, we've always felt confident about answering that question. But because there is so much scholarship, and there's a lot of policy around those particular topics, and resourcing around those topics, we've been very careful to figure out how we articulate our way into that space. And there's, of course, a political agenda and some political feelings, particularly around R2P. So we've been really careful. And I think, where we've settled in this paper, that was authored by my colleague, Felicity Gray, who runs, heads our advocacy work, and comes to UCP from scholarship, working on her PhD. It's really been around looking at R2P and atrocity prevention, like all the rest of sort of general humanitarian protection, there's no singular answer, there's no singular response that is going to fix it, that is going to stop a genocide, that is going to prevent an atrocity from happening. And what is sort of more commonly known and especially more to, I would say probably, the general public who are less familiar with the topic is looks like armed peacekeeping force protection. There's an armed force with weapons, so we send it in at first, weapons, to most people that feels like a very logical response, and why would you do anything else. There's been language use about that as the only way to move forward. But from what we see from our perspective is, if we look at UCP and R2P from a relationship-based perspective, rather than simply a state, or a structure center - so the traditional response mechanisms - that there's a lot of space for UCP kind of work. So unarmed civilian protection, the way and NP, Nonviolent Peaceforce works on it, because we are an NGO, it's quite, it's quite formal, it's quite constructed, we're very intentional, on the way we're doing that we have a lot of purpose. There's an element, as I said, there's that reactive piece, it's really about utilizing our role as an international organization. And with people on the ground, our teams on the

ground that are both international and local, to try and deescalate in the moment, what could be the start of something that could end up being or an element of a larger atrocity. So direct prevention and direct protection. So there's that piece of it really calling upon those relationships. And then the other other piece of it that, that I was referring to earlier around, sort of the more reactive side, is really helping local stakeholders draw on their own relational networks, and to move past, and to draw upon and to move past the, "we protect who's ours within our own identity group, and it's best for all of us, if we protect each other." It's safer for us - if I'm safe then you're safer, and if you're safe then I'm safer, and the tools and approaches and strategies of the actual day-to-day functioning of UCP work is really positioned to do that. You can have an approach to R2P that is, and you can even articulate it as relationship and relational, but without sort of that infused nonviolence, both the values of and the what can I do, the actual actions of non violence, it can easily be manipulated and articulated in the other way. So that's sort of the role that we really play is, is really sort of bringing those lived values and lived practice of nonviolent interventions, diffusion, without the use or threat of force.

J

Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 14:07

Excellent. I like how you frame that around the local stakeholders, and the idea of, you know, creating this relationship between groups. You know, one thing I really liked in the piece was that it quoted the late Ed Luck, the former UN Special Advisor on R2P, who said that "conventional understanding left no room for agency of those affected by atrocities, treating them as objects rather than actors." And so I'm curious, given how much you do with local populations in practice, in what ways does UCP provide that missing agency to vulnerable and affected populations?

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Tiffany Easthom 14:47

Yeah, I also really like that quote, and I think it really speaks to a lot of what we, it's still gives me shivers when I think about it. Even in the way, in sort of standard humanitarian language we get into a room and we're talking more coordination. In an effort to be efficient and to use a language we're all familiar with it can be inadvertently dehumanizing and objectifying. You know, rather than saying people who are experiencing heightened vulnerabilities, we're saying, "oh well the vulnerables here, and the vulnerables there," as if they're a thing. In terms of what you know, in terms of providing agency, even in our own evolution as an organization, we used to use the language "primacy of the local actors". And then it became really clear to us that "local actors" is also its own power structure, it means everybody within the local sphere, and who did we really mean, because we could inadvertently be supporting an unhealthy power imbalance that is actually allowing violence to continue. So as a first place to, as usual, long answer, to answer your question, is part of it is really looking at centering those most impacted by violence, first and foremost, and then working back from there. So when we're making a decision about, you know, where will we respond? How are we going to build relationships? Who are we going to speak to first? Who are we going to take guidance from? The idea is that we start with those most impacted by violence. Sometimes there's formalities, of course that you can't avoid, where you do need to get permissions, you need to do protocol visits, and all of that, so not to be too literal in that interpretation. But when we're getting down to the substance of the work, and the substance of the engagement, is when you enter to any community, there's a whole group of people, you could, there's a whole whole range of people you can be working with. So it's really putting our time and energy with those most impacted

by violence, helping them, should they articulate that this is what they want to do, to work on self protection strategies, to raise their own voices; rather than going to the local authorities and saying the women in this community are saying this, would rather be accompanying the women to the local authorities, if they don't feel comfortable - women, a group of women who may be identified that they want to say something - and then be there to give them confidence so that they can say their own story. And they can raise their own voices. Working with groups who are often left outside the peace and security agenda is really important for us. That often does mean women and girls, they're are not typically seen as leaders, and particularly when you add the word security. Or people, young people who are below technical fighting age, children and youth, and finding ways to help them build up their skill set around being able to demonstrate actively within their community that they have a voice, they have an opinion, and they actually have skills to give towards that community that will help deescalate and defuse violence and tensions. So it's really starting to work from that, from that perspective, when we think about having, whether we have international staff. And when I say international, that's not a default to a white face from a Global North country. I just mean anybody who was not from the immediate area, literally from a different country, so it could be right next door. But even still, like really thinking about being very careful, if we have an international person in a team, that there's a need and that there's a value added to having an outsider, a diverse group of team members that are in a team that is not inadvertently taking away and stepping on the voices of our local colleagues. And that the local colleagues in the team are not just assistants, they're not just translators, they're actually there to sort of, you know, do what they do best, which is say, you know, I can tell by the smell in the air, what's going on, the whispers in the wind, and following that and learning from them.

**J** Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 18:39

I really like the way you just frame that idea of locals has its own power structure. And because, you know, as organizations that operate multilaterally, and do a lot of advocacy around the UN, both in New York and Geneva, you know, we talk about the importance of having local voices, of having the voices of affected communities at the table. And it's a bit of a shorthand, and we know that but it's it's also like a well-intentioned shorthand. But you're right that it does, you know, once you get into a country, you have to break down what is meant by that, you can't just have you know, all populations are the locals or the affected, you know, particularly vulnerable populations. We have to break into what that means. You know, obviously, from our perspective, we're a bit biased and like to see that connection between atrocity prevention and the work that others are doing. And I know there is quite a bit of overlap between the countries Nonviolent Peaceforce works on and the countries the Global Centre analyzes from an atrocity prevention perspective. I was wondering if you could tell a little about where you operate, how you decide where you operate, and maybe give an example of where UCP has been effective recently.

**T** Tiffany Easthom 19:57

Sure, so we are operating in South Sudan and Sudan, I've got two programs there. Iraq, Myanmar, Philippines, Ukraine, and we are operating, we are doing direct programming in the US as well. We've been in other countries over the years and pulled back for various reasons. That's our current sort of active country programs and then we have some other other engagements and other locations around training and supporting civil society, but without a full

operational country program. So sort of referring back to something I had said earlier, across those countries, we see quite a diversity of stages of conflict, and it is not, as we know well, it's not a linear process. So within one country, they could be moving nicely along a trajectory towards stabilization and then slide back or within the same country. So that's where we're operational now. I mean, I spent five years in South Sudan so I tend to draw from experiences there, to be able to speak to it. And of course, in the paper you're referencing, you can see some references, some examples there, around atrocity prevention. I think it's because we've seen such a scope over the years, since the latest iteration of the civil war started in 2013, really significant, large scale violence against civilians. And to be able to have been, we have been able to see both in the moment direct protection activities that have changed the turn of events in the moment, that have been very directly life saving. As well as sort of, because we've been there so long now, the latitudinal and longitudinal look at sort of the strengthening of civil society mechanisms of being able to work on self protection. Like amongst the women, women's protection teams, that is sort of one of the big flagship programs that has really developed in there. So, you know, in South Sudan, for example, I mean we, you know, have had a situation when there's sort of territorial dispute happening in an area, this is in the center of the country around what was at that time a very heavily populated protection civilian site. And then to, you know, the government forces and the fighting forces were both advancing to an area just adjacent to the town and we knew what was going to happen it had been happening back and forth, for months about fighting for territorial control. Our team was inside the protection of civilians sites and were starting to receive messages from civilians who were trapped on the outside of the protection of civilians sites on the other side of a checkpoint, military checkpoint. And they were being held back, you know, we cannot, they were not stated intentions, but what seems like to help serve as human shields. So our team was trying to mobilize support within the protection of civilians sites to go out and pick people up for various reasons, various security concerns. There was a delay in additional support. At that time I was in Juba, I was Country Director, so I was on the phone with the team, we were talking back and forth. And sort of going, and this is really, I'm using this example because it really draws on what might have, from an outsider, seemed as a quick gut reaction, jump in the car and go get those people and hope for the best. What is not really evident to an observer is what's happening behind the scenes, is us figuring out what relationships do we have along the actual physical path that we can leverage to go as safely as possible, because we cannot go in the cowboy attitude that we're out here to human shield it and save the day. It's too dangerous for us, and therefore, for the people we're allegedly trying to help. And so we were mapping out who our relationships were in both the opposition forces and the government forces, leadership. But more importantly, who did we know who is actually working in those checkpoints? Because the team spent so much time in the community, they could recognize by face that this was a boy named James, and this was a boy named Neuer, Niall, or whatever, so on and so forth. And who was there that they had numbers, and they could call and say, we're coming, please don't shoot at us, this is why we're coming, we're coming to get those people. And so that was a really good example, it's a very heightened example of in the moment. I think sometimes those examples are really important to use because for people who are skeptical that applied nonviolence can be useful in a place where there's really active violence I think it's important to illustrate, it's not a panacea, it will not fix everything, it doesn't work in every circumstance. But really coordinated, intentional, thoughtful, and careful approaches to apply nonviolence can be life-saving in a really complicated, high violence situation.

**J** Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 24:53

I think that's a great example because it really highlights what I had wanted to ask you next,



which is, you mentioned that you've personally worked in South Sudan, during the civil war when it broke out. You've also mentioned that you're working on, or working in Ukraine at the moment. And so these are sort of very high conflict situations. And we've also witnessed decreasing civic space in countries throughout the world, which I imagine creates a different set of pressures on your ability to operate. So I'm curious how these challenges and dynamics create issues for ensuring UCP mechanisms operate effectively?

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Tiffany Easthom 25:37

Yeah, it's a great question. I mean, it's a real challenge. And I mean, part of it is, it becomes, that relationship, and that sort of space of building out acceptance becomes much more difficult. As even across civic space, the prevalence of identity issues, identity politics, the in-grouping that is happening across the world. And in some places more obviously, than others, civilian to civilian in and of itself, work that we're doing, which is relationship based, becomes much more difficult. That is then amplified by something like digital technology. So you know, in the old days, when we did rumor control work, and it really meant actually walking village to village to control a rumor, you know, now in the speed of light, communication has a much more different approach. And then the civic space as it relates to groups that are identified as things like human rights defenders. Where there is typically and historically, an imbalanced, at times, difficult relationship by those who are being accused by the human rights defenders of not respecting the rights of certain groups of people, and especially when those are governments, that, of course, becomes much more difficult because if we are perceived to be taking the side of a group that is making an accusation towards any group that's in power, whether they are in a democratically elected way or otherwise, that becomes much more difficult to work in. So our job is really to continue to ensure that, and I take us back to non partisanship, and this continues to be true as well, we may have personal opinions about a particular outcome. That's really, as an international non governmental organization, not our place to state - but we're not neutral on issues and the issue we're not neutral on is violence. And so that's the thing that we always can come back to, is that when the thing that we will stand for the thing that we are working towards, is to push back safer space for civilians, those most impacted by that violence, first and foremost, to live as normal a life as possible, as they possibly can, in the effect of decisions that are happening around them. And then if they so choose to be engaged in other ways, and work on building peace, or fighting for justice, or whatever, that is their choice to do so. And then our job is really to work on supporting them to protect the space around them, so they can do the things that they're making the choice to do. Much easier to be said from the safety of my desk in Geneva, than in reality, but it is, yeah, it's always a challenge.

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Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 28:22

So I have one final question for you, which is, I guess both about the communities you support as well as yourself. What steps should the international community be taking to effectively bolster UCP efforts and nonviolent efforts?

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Tiffany Easthom 28:40

Yeah, I think, thanks for that question. I think that, so we've spent the last about six years, so in addition to implementing where we are implementing and doing the work, it's time to really



explore good practices. Trying to find other organizations that do the similar kind of work, even if they don't use the same language as we do. Often, they're smaller, often their local indigenous community-based organizations or smaller groups that are working on doing what we would identify by watching their actions and the way that they're engaging unarmed civilian protection, accompaniment work, (some of them prefer that language), and learning, trying to bring together and learning from each other. And I say this in a way to answer your question because what has really come out strongly across the board in this reflection is that organizational culture, whether it's a formal organization or an informal organization, is critical to the efficacy of this kind of work. Because it really requires decentralized decision making and because it's relationship based, it really requires an actual embedding within communities where there are both those most impacted and those who are actually the threats against those who are most impacted and building that, those relationships. There is a real push at the high policy level, at the large scale organization level, at the donor level, (and this is not new, this has been true for a long time), to show a scale-up capacity. And so our mantra right now, it has been for a while, but we're articulating it is, what can we do is we can try and collectively push back on this pressure to scale up one thing to 10,000 times its current size, and rather look at supporting 10,000 things that are working, that don't need that much support, but to create space for them and to not layer over them. Ukraine is a great example, this is an actual functional example of what I'm talking about. The Ukrainian-led response, the frontline response, those taking the biggest risks and those who are working literally around the clock with no financial support are, it's led by Ukrainians. And as we move in, the humanitarian system moves in, our goal is to have that Ukrainian-led response flex and move towards the international humanitarian structure. You know, because that's what we know, it's taken years decades to build up, and we're confident in it. The unfortunate reality is what we need to be doing is bending towards them, because it takes them off of what they're already doing. And we recognize that it is locally-led, and the best possible thing we can be doing is flexing towards them and finding out what do they need and to support them accordingly. So if there's anything that, sort of, we could do a plea across the board is, and to recognize even from a paradigm shift perspective, is when we look at climate, when we look at the impact of patriarchy and capitalism and all of that, it all ties into pulling resources and power into small groups and not wanting to decentralize that. And it is true, we run that risk of just trying to replicate the systems, because of, under the name of efficiency that we see around us. You know, what we always say, empire loves efficiency, is to really resist that and to let go and to recognize that the best possible thing we can do is to to support what is happening, even if it doesn't look like what you think and what we've learned in the textbook, is the thing that you would want to do if that was you in that situation.



Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 32:15

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