Nonviolent Peaceforce



Daily Briefings, Philippines ©NP 2017

Case Study

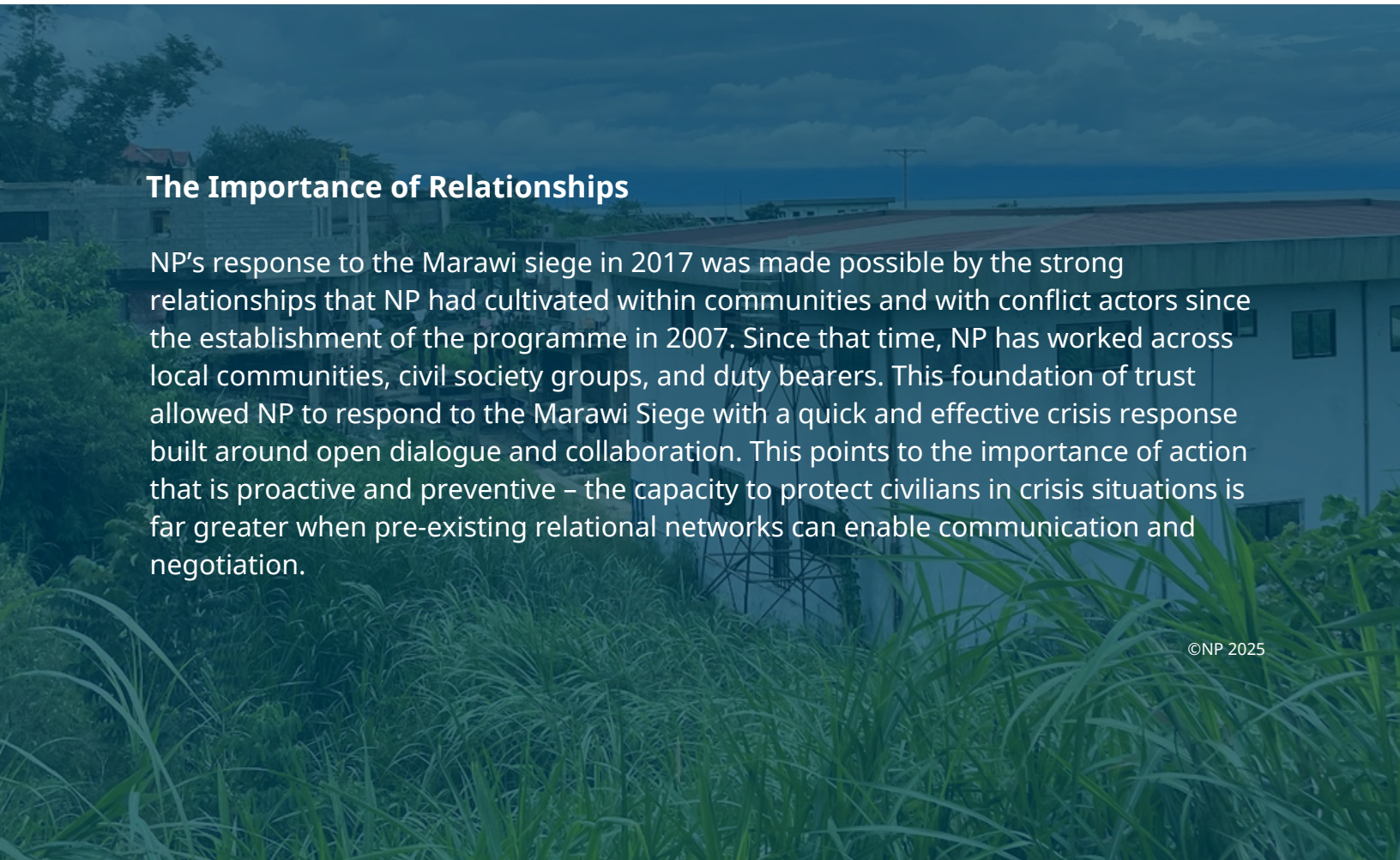
Interrupting Conflict: Eight Years On, Lessons Learned from the Marawi Siege

Philippines

I. Learning from the Marawi Siege

The Marawi Siege, which unfolded between May and October 2017, marked one of the most devastating urban conflicts in the Philippines's modern history and highlighted the significant threats posed by armed insurgency in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (BARMM). During and after the siege, NP implemented unarmed civilian protection responses to protect civilians, connect and coordinate with local civil society, and negotiate with duty bearers.

This case study explores NP's engagement during the Marawi Siege and explores lessons learned for the protection of civilians, the engagement of armed actors, and how nonviolence can be used to de-escalate violence and threats to civilians: It demonstrates how local ownership by civilians and duty bearers, pre-existing relationships and trust building, and a sustained presence in the post-siege period have been essential to securing the sustained protection of civilians and successful implementation of the peace agreement.



The Importance of Relationships

NP's response to the Marawi siege in 2017 was made possible by the strong relationships that NP had cultivated within communities and with conflict actors since the establishment of the programme in 2007. Since that time, NP has worked across local communities, civil society groups, and duty bearers. This foundation of trust allowed NP to respond to the Marawi Siege with a quick and effective crisis response built around open dialogue and collaboration. This points to the importance of action that is proactive and preventive – the capacity to protect civilians in crisis situations is far greater when pre-existing relational networks can enable communication and negotiation.

©NP 2025

II. 2017: Rapid Response for Civilians Under Fire

The Marawi Siege began on 23 May 2017, when Islamic State (IS) affiliated groups, primarily the Maute Group and elements of Abu Sayyaf, launched an attack on Marawi City in an attempt to establish a regional stronghold for IS. In response, the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) conducted a five-month military operation utilising both airstrikes and ground operations to target the group's stronghold and regain control of the city. This battle led to widespread destruction, the displacement of 360,000 people, a humanitarian crisis, and deepened mistrust among affected communities.

As active fighting began, almost the entire population of the city attempted to evacuate. Exodus from Marawi City to Iligan City or other areas on the periphery of Marawi City was so overwhelming that there was no movement on the road. Police and military chokepoints filtering those going to Iligan City and beyond further slowed evacuation and created a risk of harassment for many fleeing the city.

On the second day of the conflict, the NP team became trapped in traffic alongside fleeing civilians while attempting to reach their office in Iligan City. Utilising existing relationships and positive standing with local officials, NP negotiated with police and special action force members to allow a convoy of 20+ vehicles to pass the chokepoint and travel with NP on an alternative route to Iligan City. By the third day of the conflict, a full-scale war had broken out with the IS-affiliated group taking full control of the city centre and three major bridges entering Marawi City. Many civilians remained trapped inside the city. Marawi City had never previously become a battlefield despite decades of armed conflict in the region, and many believed that the conflict would pass quickly.



NP's Response Amid Conflict

Initial Response

- NP focused on protective accompaniment leveraging relationships with the military to advocate against harassment at checkpoints and train military officials on protection of civilian responsibilities.
- Pre-existing Early Warning Early Response (EWER) networks activated to share information about routes, best practices to avoid being detained at IS-affiliated checkpoints, and how to help hostages when attempting to leave the city.
- Utilising existing relationships and positive standing with local officials, NP negotiated with police and special action force members to allow a convoy of 20+ vehicles to pass the chokepoint and travel with NP on an alternative route to Iligan City.

Coordinating Role

- At the time of the siege, NP and the World Food Programme were the only international organisations with offices in nearby Iligan City.
- As other organisations came to the region to support relief efforts, NP provided them with security briefings and used their offices as a space for local and international civil society actors to meet and coordinate.
- NP also employed existing relationships with government officials to advocate for access on behalf of humanitarian partners, often accompanying them through checkpoints to ensure that aid reached its intended target.

Sustained Presence

- NP was the only NGO involved in the JCMAC, and NP staff were often the only women involved.
- Negotiating their role in light of this restriction, NP staff were designated to receive rescued civilians a few metres from one of the bridges.
- With limited staff, NP relied heavily on local volunteer EWER monitors for participation in Peace Corridor activities. These monitors, deeply familiar with the local context, played a vital role by accompanying JCMAC authorities to deliver food supplies to residents in municipalities around the lake, offering interpretation services and helping to identify community-specific needs.
- Despite the challenging security environment, NP maintained a constructive and cooperative relationship with the military throughout the siege. NP's presence and coordination helped maintain the integrity and neutrality of the corridor.
- NP also worked to address the many protection concerns facing the large displaced population in temporary camps around the region

©NP 2025

In the first days of the conflict, NP focused on protective accompaniment (through both physical and digital means) for those fleeing the city. This included leveraging relationships with the military to advocate against harassment at checkpoints and train military officials on protection of civilian responsibilities. Pre-existing Early Warning Early Response (EWER) networks activated to share information about routes, best practices to avoid being detained at IS-affiliated checkpoints, and how to help hostages when attempting to leave the city. For example, many Moro Muslim community members shared Muslim dress and taught non-Muslim neighbors to answer questions about the Quran.

By June 4th, evacuations became more regulated with the establishment of the Joint Coordination and Monitoring Action Center (JCMAC), a negotiated rescue zone facilitating safe passage for civilians. NP was the only NGO involved in the JCMAC, and NP staff were often the only women involved. They were not allowed by the MILF or AFP to enter ground zero. Negotiating their role in light of this restriction, NP staff were designated to receive rescued civilians a few metres from one of the bridges. Despite the challenges of evacuation, JCMAC successfully rescued 217 men, women, children, and elderly individuals in June 2017.

During the siege, the AFP implemented strict access control to Marawi City, blocking most entrances to prevent IS reinforcements from entering. Consequently, communities around Lake Lanao were cut off from essential supplies, unable to access markets or humanitarian assistance. The Peace Corridor, a humanitarian platform through which specialty rice and other food packages were delivered to the municipalities around the lake, emerged as a vital lifeline for civilians to access essential supplies. With limited staff, NP relied heavily on local volunteer EWER monitors for participation in Peace Corridor activities. These monitors, deeply familiar with the local context, played a vital role by accompanying JCMAC authorities to deliver food supplies to residents in municipalities around the lake, offering interpretation services and helping to identify community-specific needs.

> *"After we crossed the bridge and the trapped civilians saw us coming, they felt safe, and we saw how relieved they were."*
>
> – A JCMAC volunteer

Despite the challenging security environment, NP maintained a constructive and cooperative relationship with the military throughout the siege. The AFP respected the independence of the Peace Corridor, ensuring that NP's monitors could operate freely. NP's presence and coordination helped maintain the integrity and neutrality of the corridor. This unique access, coupled with NP's knowledge of the local dynamics, helped recover civilian trust, a critical factor in ensuring the success of the Peace Corridor.

Beyond involvement in the immediate evacuation of civilians and safe distribution of humanitarian supplies, NP also worked to address the many protection concerns facing the large displaced population in temporary camps around the region. Issues of gender-based violence (GBV) and child protection became increasingly prevalent as the conflict dragged on, and NP shifted its focus to ensuring that humanitarian actors and government officials were prepared to recognize and respond to these issues. Towards the end of the conflict when a successful rescue mission led to the release of more than 60 hostages that had been previously held by the IS-affiliated group, NP stepped in to assist with efforts to reunite hostage survivors with their families and ensure that they had access to Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) services and educational assistance for minors who had missed schooling during captivity.

Another key contribution by NP during the siege was facilitating communication and coordination between government actors, international civil society and local civil society organisations. At the time of the siege, NP and the World Food Programme were the only international organisations with offices in nearby Iligan City. As other organisations came to the region to support relief efforts, NP provided them with security briefings and used their offices as a space for local and international civil society actors to meet and coordinate. NP also employed existing relationships with government officials to advocate for access on behalf of humanitarian partners, often accompanying them through checkpoints to ensure that aid reached its intended target. By acting as a trusted intermediary, NP helped bridge the gap between military forces, international groups, and affected communities – fostering a humanitarian response that more effectively addressed the concerns of civilians most affected by the conflict.

III. 2017 - Present: Sustaining Civilian Protection in Recovery

During the Marawi Siege the Government of the Philippines, led by the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP), focused on the immediate military recapture of the city. During subsequent recovery efforts, the "Task Force Bangon Marawi" initiative was launched to address the urgent needs of displaced populations and facilitate the rebuilding of the city. However, the challenges of restoring Marawi City have been significant, compounded by extensive damage, the presence of explosive ordnance, and the difficulties of rebuilding amidst entrenched social and political divides.

The process of compensation and rebuilding has been painfully slow, with fewer than 1% of the 17,793 displaced households having had their homes rebuilt as of 2023. At the same time, large infrastructure projects, such as the reconstruction of government buildings and road networks, have moved forward, leading to accusations of misplaced priorities. The slow pace of rebuilding and the persistent social and economic challenges have left many displaced families in a state of prolonged uncertainty. The lack of adequate housing, delays in financial compensation, and unresolved tensions among affected communities have highlighted the limitations of a top-down reconstruction approach.

Beyond the physical devastation, the siege exposed long-standing poverty, exclusion, and historical injustices that exacerbated disillusionment with state authorities. At the request of the City Social Welfare and Development Office (CSWDO), NP played a key role in securing accommodations for survivors in Iligan City. NP's advocacy has also led to improved support for survivors through livelihood assistance, cash assistance, and key referrals to appropriate government agencies for sustained support. NP continues to support efforts to address immediate humanitarian needs in Marawi, while also highlighting the need to foster social cohesion and promote lasting peace in the region.

Recognising the profound trauma experienced by survivors, NP provided essential psychosocial support, ensuring survivors' voices are heard, facilitating healing, and reuniting families. This includes the reunification of children with their families, follow-up services for survivors of sexual violence, and assistance in returning survivors to their place of origin. Additionally, NP has maintained an active protective presence in internally displaced persons (IDP) camps – conducting regular needs assessments and security evaluations, identifying emerging risks and protection gaps, providing

protective presence, and offering community-driven solutions through EWER mechanisms. NP has also assisted in establishing internal monitoring systems within IDP camps, empowering residents with the tools to evaluate safety, report incidents, and coordinate responses. When issues arise that cannot be resolved within the group, NP serves as a liaison with camp management and other stakeholders to ensure coordinated responses.

EWER mechanisms have played a pivotal role in preventing violence and maintaining stability in post-conflict Marawi City. By establishing strong local trust networks, NP supports community members in identifying potential threats and responding proactively before tensions escalate. Regular engagement with local leaders strengthened information-sharing channels, allowing for swift, nonviolent interventions. As a result, disputes that once had the potential to reignite violence are now being addressed through dialogue and mediation. This proactive approach not only enhances community safety but also fosters a culture of collaboration and resilience, ensuring long-term violence prevention. EWER strategies have continued to be an essential element of civilian safety in the post-siege era – for example, mass displacement of an entire village was prevented through EWER actions in barnagay Gakap in September 2019 in the wake of a military operation targeted an IS-affiliated group.

IV. Building and sustaining peace in Marawi: Looking to the future

While significant progress has been made in addressing immediate needs and short-term peace, several challenges remain that must be confronted to ensure lasting stability and social cohesion in Marawi City. The divisions created by the Marawi Siege continue to hinder long-term peace efforts, with continued displacement standing out as one of the most persistent and complex issues.

Many people who were forced to flee during the siege have yet to return home, and this prolonged displacement has deepened mistrust and strained efforts to rebuild a cohesive society. Many continue to live in housing that was designed to be temporary, now being charged rent for these shelters while they continue to be denied assistance in rebuilding their homes. Several barangays have also been taken over by the government for public projects with no compensation to the private property owners, making it even more difficult for those displaced by the siege to obtain permanent



making it even more difficult for those displaced by the siege to obtain permanent housing for their families. With most humanitarian organizations leaving the area shortly after the siege ended and government offices unresponsive to pleas for support, the outlook for those displaced by the siege remains bleak.

In this context, restoring trust will require sustained dialogue, the creation of shared spaces for reconciliation, dedicated resources to support those displaced by the conflict, and the meaningful involvement of marginalized communities in rebuilding efforts. Women and girls face heightened risks of sexual abuse, exploitation, early or forced marriage, and trafficking. while displaced youth often lack access to education, vocational training, and employment. Without targeted efforts to address these challenges, the path to lasting peace and stability in Marawi City will remain obstructed, with at-risk populations unable to fully contribute to the recovery and growth of their community. Ensuring that diverse voices, including women, youth, and minority groups, are actively involved in shaping Marawi City's future is not only essential to preventing further alienation but also key to fostering a resilient and inclusive post-conflict society.

V. Key Lessons Learned

To meet these needs – not only in Marawi City and the Philippines, but for situations globally that echo these challenges of violent conflict – it is critical that we take time to reflect, analyse, and adapt approaches to peace and protection. NP's response to the Marawi Siege is a window into key ingredients that can support effective civilian protection, recovery, and peacebuilding strategies and offers important lessons for future conflict and post-conflict contexts. These experiences highlight the importance of community-led approaches, trusted relationships, and long-term engagement in achieving sustainable peace.

Lesson 1: Civilians can and do protect themselves, and their engagement enhances the credibility and effectiveness of protection efforts

The civilian-led protection response in Marawi City demonstrates how peacebuilding and protection efforts are most effective when local communities take ownership of their own safety and security. Empowering civilians to actively engage in nonviolent strategies to protect themselves and others builds resilience and ensures that protection efforts are sustainable and contextually relevant. This participatory approach also enhances the credibility of the protection efforts, as local involvement ensures that initiatives are aligned with the values, priorities, and experiences of the people they are designed to support. Overall, involving community members as key actors in their own protection and peace efforts contributes to long-term resilience and sustainable outcomes.

Lesson 2: Investing in relationships saves lives

NP's success in navigating complex dynamics like those presented during the Marawi Siege is largely driven by its established, sustained relationships with local leaders and duty bearers. These relationships, cultivated since 2007, were the foundations on which the Marawi Siege crisis response was enabled. These connections strengthen coordination, enhance safety, and increase opportunities for negotiated and successful civilian protection outcomes. Though nonviolent actions can still be taken in crisis without these connections, the relational network creates opportunities for negotiation and violence interruption that may not be possible otherwise. In the aftermath of the Marawi Siege, successful protection continues to hinge on local trust networks that facilitate communication and collaboration. Building relationships, especially among displaced families,

returnees, and former combatants, is key to alleviating tensions and fostering reconciliation. Cultivating trust among community leaders, local organisations, and displaced individuals lays the groundwork for sustained peace and recovery.

Lesson 3: Sustainable peace requires sustained investment

Short-term interventions are not sufficient. Long-term commitment to recovery, rehabilitation, and social healing is crucial for lasting peace. NP's work didn't end with immediate crisis response during the Marawi Siege but continued through post-conflict recovery efforts and psychosocial support, which were vital to rebuilding affected communities. For protection to be truly effective, it must go beyond emergency response, incorporating long-term strategies for recovery and community resilience.



Daily Briefings, Philippines ©NP 2017