NP
Core Competencies
Summary

Social Cohesion

2021

Nonviolent Peaceforce



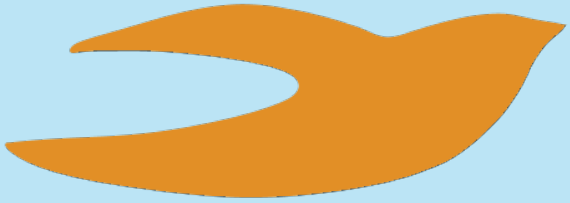
The alarming number of conflicts and associated civilian casualties worldwide emphasizes the need to find a solution through peaceful means. The many methods of Unarmed Civilian Protection (UCP) often prove successful in solving or calming conflicts with the long-term benefit of strengthening communities, infrastructure and ongoing dialogue that are needed to sustain hard-earned peace. Nonviolent Peaceforce (NP) is a global civilian protection agency, working in some of the world's most troubled zones to promote peace through civilian protection, reduction of community violence, and self-protection, as well as conflict prevention & management and capacity development. Currently, NP has approximately 300 protection officers deployed in our programs in Iraq, Myanmar, the Philippines, and South Sudan and we are collaborating with more than 50 implementing community organizations in 24 countries. To interrupt cycles of violence and facilitate sustainable peace, we work in 5 specific areas, one of which is social cohesion.

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This summary is based on the full version of the NP core competency program document "Social Cohesion" that contains additional examples of interventions, methods, and guidance as the basis of work in this field by NP, partners, and other collaborating bodies.

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Social Cohesion

Social cohesion is often described as the "glue" that unites a society in which individuals, groups and institutions having different beliefs or goals can co-exist in harmony. Good governance, respect for human rights, and individual responsibility are conducive to social cohesion, which in turn, promote peace.

When opportunities to participate in the life of a community, to have access to training and development, and to take initiative gain hold in a community, a sense of cohesion and belonging often results. This is true, for example, in communities in which women, youth, ethnic minorities and those who would normally be marginalized have these opportunities.

Key pillars of social cohesion include social relationships, connectedness, orientation towards the common good and equality1. These four pillars are strikingly aligned to the practice of UCP. While UCP is primarily focused on saving lives, its methods are designed to strengthen social relationships, connectedness, equality and an orientation towards the common good.

1. **Social relationships:** As a non-partisan third party, we build and foster relationships with all parties in a particular context of violent conflict, to prevent violence and protect civilians. Building relationships lies at the core of the UCP methodology.

2. **Conectedness:** We use our network of relationships to connect people. In particular, UCP seeks to connect populations and individuals most vulnerable to violence with individuals or institutions that have the largest influence to prevent violence or reduce its impact.

3. **Orientation towards the common good**: We use connections with and between local actors to promote and model nonviolent behaviour; dissuading potential perpetrators from harming civilians; reminding authorities of their responsibility to protect civilians; and/or assisting community members in becoming pro-active participants of peace and security processes.

4. **Equality:** By not taking sides, employing gender balanced and ethnically diverse teams, and standing with people that are excluded based on sexuality, race, or religious affiliation, we create an environment that is conducive to equality.

How social cohesion is provided in general

Social cohesion is a broad and emerging field of practice that has not yet been clearly defined. It is applied in the context of education, economics, urban planning, displacement, and societies emerging from violent conflict, among others. Typical activities in regard to the latter two contexts include following:

- Facilitating dialogue between conflicting groups
- Creating learning opportunities for marginalised or disadvantaged populations
- Building collaborative relationships between civil society and state or non-state authorities
- Creating mechanisms for conflict resolution
- Building alliances and coalitions across conflicting groups, clans or tribes
- Enhancing responsiveness of authorities towards its citizens
- Increasing trust in institutions of government
- Reducing stereotyping and discrimination on the basis of race, sexuality, gender, and/or religion
- Promoting messages of tolerance, and peaceful co-existence towards religious communities

"I had talked only to people in my own circle and never with people from ethnic minorities. Having the chance to sit down with the Karen women and hearing their struggles opened my eyes and made me realise my own privilege. It has changed my thoughts about what I want to do in my life."

(Dolly, intern with Nonviolent Peaceforce in Myanmar)

NP's niche in the field of social cohesion

The niche of Nonviolent Peaceforce in the field of social cohesion lies with its application of Unarmed Civilian Protection methods and its long-term presence at the community level, before, during and after crisis situations and humanitarian emergencies.

Fostering social cohesion in the midst of crises: Efforts to foster social cohesion are often postponed until environments are conducive for people to (re-)connect, though disconnection often perpetuates cycles of violence. Our unique approach to security allows it to start this process sooner. Our teams seek to reduce intimidation by bringing conflicting parties together, humanising 'enemies' , and increasing security by transforming 'enemies' into allies. Moreover, standing side by side with local communities in the midst of a conflict, creates unprecedented opportunities for connection and trust building.

Building bridges between communities and armed actors: Crises are a time when building relations and trust with armed actors is often easier. Fostering dialogue and trust between armed actors and communities is an essential part of our strategy for protecting civilians. This reduces hostility, fear and mistrust that so often characterises the relationship between civil society and police or military. These relations are seen as non-essential for effective post-conflict social cohesion efforts and NP aims to correct this.

Strengthening social mobility and self-empowerment among marginalised groups: We always involve those we serve in the protection process and assist them in strengthening their own security. This includes connecting them to decision makers, broadening their support networks, and reducing their isolation. In this way, we strengthen a sense of connection, belonging, social mobility and self-empowerment among the most marginalised of groups.

Enhancing nonviolent attitudes and behaviour within fragile communities: In many situations of protracted conflict violence, what appears as a cohesive society, may be a thin veneer held together by fear of oppression or violent reprisal. The end of military rule in post-conflict situations often brings underlying tensions within communities to the surface. We help communities face emerging threats and find a new balance in a rapidly changing environment. Our use of nonviolent methods shows communities that strengthening social relations, trust, and social responsibility can be both a method *and* outcome.



Third National South Sudan's Women's Conference, NPSS 2020

NP's work in the field

Nonviolent Peaceforce contributes to social cohesion both within its protection or violence prevention programming and as stand-alone social cohesion programming. Overarching strategies and activities include the following:

- Facilitating dialogue and information exchange between authorities and communities
- Facilitating dialogue between conflicting parties in horizontal and vertical conflicts
- Strengthening responsiveness of state and non-state armed actors to community needs
- Increasing trust in state or state-led initiatives (ceasefire architectures, humanitarian services)
- Training, coaching and modelling the use of nonviolent means for responding to conflict
- Creating learning opportunities for marginalised and isolated conflict communities
- Increasing social activism of communities and individuals
- Building alliances of communities or marginalised groups across ethnic and/or religious divisions
- Increasing participation of women and youth to peace and decision-making processes
- Strengthening conflict resolution mechanisms and processes in divided communities
- Strengthening resilience of human rights defenders and peace activists
- Reducing stereotyping and discrimination of marginalised groups (women, ethnic minorities)
- Facilitating timely access of isolated communities to information and basic services

"The village administrator and religious leaders noticed that there was religious tension between different religious groups. They came together to me and asked support as I am the village track leader and a monitor. I accepted their request to help and was able to solve the tensions successfully. I am really proud as a monitor to be able to solve it.

(Ceasefire monitor in Myanmar)

In regard to social cohesion, we focus on three specific areas:

Strengthening leadership capacities of women and youth: Whether we operate in a refugee camp or supports ceasefire monitoring networks, the marginalisation of women and youth is almost always an issue of concern. We often expand existing work by developing follow-up projects aimed at building leadership capacities of women and youth among groups with whom we are already working. In South Sudan and Myanmar, we have strengthened leadership skills of women across the country by helping them to initiate activities for peace and security. By bringing the various groups together across conflict divisions, we facilitated dialogue between the women groups and security forces as well as with women leaders at the national level.

Facilitating inter-communal and intra-communal dialogue: In South Sudan and Sri Lanka, we have played a role in informal grassroots level community peacemaking efforts. We may shuttle back and forth between community leaders and monitor the implementation of any agreements they may make. Rather than taking on a leading role as mediators, we identify local mediators and support or even physically accompany them. The idea of doing a lot of low-profile leg work instead of high-profile mediation work, is often an eye opener to 'disempowered' local actors that assume they must first become skilled mediators in order to do something. The involvement of authorities or representatives of political or customary institutions in the process of conflict resolution often further strengthens social cohesion.

Strengthening community resilience: We have observed "the capacity of local actors to forge solidarity, to sustain hope and purpose, and to adapt and negotiate creatively with the challenges presented" as a result of their application of UCP with local communities. Through the application of proactive engagement and other UCP methods, we have increased self-confidence among local actors, as well as safety and security, trust, local ownership, creativity, critical thinking, social engagement, and other factors associated with resilience. In Myanmar, we research the resilience of community leaders and simultaneously train them to conduct similar research within their communities. This phase is followed by direct action to strengthen the resilience of both community leaders and their communities based on the research outcomes.