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Community Resiliency, Conflict, and COVID-19

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The following is a reflection on community resiliency during the COVID-19 pandemic (the period from April 2020 – September 2020) through exploring examples from Nonviolent Peaceforce’s work in Myanmar, South Sudan, and Iraq. Each provides an illustration of unarmed civilian protection (UCP) in practice and resilient communities in action.

Nonviolent Peaceforce is a global civilian protection agency (NGO) based in humanitarian and international human rights law. Our mission is to protect civilians in violent conflicts through unarmed strategies, build peace side-by-side with local communities, and advocate for the wider adoption of these approaches to safeguard human lives and dignity. We use UCP, a methodology for the direct protection of civilians, localized violence reduction, and supporting local capacities for self-protection.

For the past 20 years, we have followed the invitation of people experiencing violent conflict and equipped unarmed protection teams to protect civilians and train them in addressing the root causes of violence. Our protection officers have increased the security for thousands of civilians living in areas experiencing violent conflict, such as South Sudan, Iraq, the Philippines, and Sri Lanka. In all of this, we hold the primacy of local actors and relationship-building at the center of our work. As one of our Protection Officers in South Sudan put it, “Nonviolent Peaceforce lives and breathes with communities; from living with communities, we build our relations, from those relations, comes trust. Without trust from the communities, without our connections, we cannot do our work.” Our approach is oriented around the existing strengths of the local community and harnesses them to address the roots of conflict and take ownership in building sustainable peace, an approach that has proven to be especially salient since the onset of the global pandemic.

The following case studies demonstrate how the ability to sustain relationships, and the resiliency they hold, has proven crucial to both the pandemic response and the continuation of peace processes. Peace Studies

scholars have long noted the importance of resiliency in the aftermath of violence and to peacebuilding processes. We suggest that resiliency allows civilians to do more than survive the compounding crises of violent conflict and COVID-19. The resiliency we explore equips communities with the relationships, communication and connections foundational to lasting peace.

What exactly do I mean by “resilient?”

As practitioners, we use “resiliency” in a variety of programmatic ways. But here, I want to focus on how John Paul Lederach, distinguished scholar of International Peacebuilding, reminds us that resiliency is all around us. He writes,

As a scientific term, resiliency comes to us from the language of biology, physics and metallurgy. In the latter, resiliency applies to a particular group of metals that, when placed under extreme heat, will lose shape, soften and meld, but when cooled have an amazing capacity to find their way back to their original forms. In the study of plants, the capacity for resiliency has been noted, particularly in crops or grasses which, when beaten down by winds or the weight of trampling feet, find their way back to their original form.

In short, “resiliency describes the quality needed to survive extreme conditions yet retain the capacity to find a way back to expressing the defining quality of *being* and the essence of *purpose*.” Lederach asserts that conflict, especially violent conflict, tests and challenges our very being. Resilient communities and connections to place, however, can serve as an anchor and encourage us to adapt, sustain hope and purpose, and forge ahead with new unities and relationships.

While the pandemic has stalled much of our in-person work and certainly tested local capacity, we have found that our model of relationship-building sets a strong and stable foundation for the resiliency such a situation requires. In what follows, I share several examples of the qualities of resiliency Lederach describes, and offer additional themes and lessons from the field.

“We could say the defining quality of resiliency is the capacity to stay in touch.” Lederach argues that finding voice through sustained communication is one crucial activity in building resilient individuals and resilient communities.

Consider one example of “staying in touch” in Myanmar. Though our partners and teams are working from home, they are not working alone. Held together by the relationships they have built over the past six years, many women from across the country who participate in our

Emerging Women Leaders (EWL) Program have decided to meet every Friday over Facebook video chats.

Though the emerging leaders come from states and ethnic groups all across Myanmar, they have not let distance or division separate them. Their weekly meetings have become an opportunity to share personal stories, air COVID-19–related concerns and strategize how to respond. Some of their communities have seen a decrease in fighting due to the pandemic, while others have seen violence and conflict heightened despite it. Either way, the call has become a time to discuss how to address the pandemic and how to work for peace going forward.

The EWLs have been advocating for human rights and women’s rights in their communities for years. Faced with the COVID-19 crisis, many look to them for leadership. “In time of crisis most children and women trust us more than others, as they understand why we were working before—to make our communities stronger,” said Swe (name changed). For example, with rumors spreading faster than the virus, fears and anxieties run high. “People are calling me and asking for updated information as rumors about COVID-19 are spreading.”

By staying connected, the EWLs are able to respond to rumors with the facts. The Nonviolent Peaceforce team developed guidelines for preventative COVID-19 measures and translated them into Burmese and local languages. Now, the EWLs are distributing the materials in their communities, along with soap and masks.

Swe feels empowered and proud that the people trust her and the other women leaders. But it is not just their neighbors who are putting their trust into the emerging women leaders—the local governments have also recognized how important the EWLs are to their communities. State and local governments as well as local health departments have reached out to our partners for help in raising awareness around COVID-19 with different communities and vulnerable groups.

Consider another example in South Sudan, where Nonviolent Peaceforce has been working with civilians and training women and youth protection teams to intervene in violent conflict, and prevent it in the first place. The coronavirus pandemic has raised concerns about the high incidents of gender-based violence and domestic violence cases. And, some of the most vulnerable women and girls in the camp were not registered to receive the two months’ food rations from humanitarian groups. One member of a Women’s Protection Team (WPT), Hannon worries about female-headed households and unaccompanied girls who were already more vulnerable to sexual exploitation—even more so now. Luckily, our trained peace teams are already organized and have been

able respond swiftly to gender-based violence and the coronavirus. Several members of various WPTs have taken on leadership roles in their local coronavirus task forces and have used existing networks and relationships to coordinate national virus prevention efforts on a regional scale. “It is very important for our community to accept the WHO standards of preventive measures and we as community leaders are trying to convince the IDPs [Internally Displaced Persons] to apply the recommended preventive measures,” Hannon emphasized.

Then, of course, we have to contend with the opposite of resiliency, which Lederach describes as “the quality of profound insignificance to the point of not existing, being lost and unconnected, living in a constant state of vigilance, driven and governed by isolation, mistrust and fear.” In the context of violent conflict and displacement, we know that civilians can create relationships and networks that counter the isolation, mistrust and constant state of vigilance such conditions inspire.

Accustomed to working physically side-by-side with displaced persons in the Jedd'ah camp in South Mosul, our Iraq team has had to adjust to working from home due to COVID-related lockdowns. But we aren't the only organization to be affected. Aid distributions from humanitarian groups—including food, water, and kerosene—have also slowed, leaving people uncertain about when some of their basic needs will be met. Prices in the camp have increased for even the most basic products. The travel restrictions have also made it difficult for civilians to leave the camp and seek medical attention, if needed.

“These days are some of the most difficult that we have faced since the Battle of Mosul,” shared Qasim (name changed), a community leader in the Jedd'ah camp for IDPs in South Mosul, where he now lives after fleeing violence in his hometown.

Although working from home, Nonviolent Peaceforce is still serving the community in the camp—from a distance via phone.

Qasim had been attending the camp's Community Security Forums hosted by Nonviolent Peaceforce before the pandemic began. When he found out that our teams were working from home, he realized our protection officers would no longer patrol the camp. Knowing the impact the patrols had on the safety in the camp, Qasim wanted to step up; and he felt empowered to conduct his own patrols to provide that protective physical presence for his neighbors.

On one patrol, Qasim came across two young girls by their tent and discovered they had not received their food rations. After talking to the mother of the two girls, it became clear to Qasim that they were a vulnerable family: a widow with two children.

Their mother expressed to Qasim, "we have been forgotten. No one knows our condition except God."

"That comment struck me. I offered her a ration of my food and small financial support for the children," shared Qasim. The food had been rationed to his section of the camp, but it appeared the distributions had never reached this family in another section. "I told her that she was not forgotten. I knew her condition, and I was going to tell others."

"After that, I left the widow's tent, and at that moment, I felt how important the presence of the humanitarian organizations is to us, and I remembered the value of NP [Nonviolent Peaceforce], and how their absence became a big gap for the whole camp."

Qasim has shown us the ripple effect of our work. We have been strengthening community ties in the camp for 2 years, and during that time, leaders like Qasim have become empowered and have gained tools of nonviolence. Not only do Qasim's regular patrols offer his presence, but his continued communication with our teams allows our teams to stay present, even if not physically.

The relationships Qasim has built provide the necessary resiliency to counter feelings of insignificance, isolation, mistrust and fear generated by violent conflict and displacement. Lederach describes that, "the single biggest challenge in the midst and aftermath of armed conflict is how to [rebuild trust in self, others and the lived social landscape, creating a feeling of at-homeness] while living in the presence of real and perceived enemies and continuing resurgent forms of violence." How, even in the midst of displacement and conflict, can civilians feel at-home and grounded in a social and physical landscape?

Quite literally, this can mean harnessing relationships to erect the material structures that fortify such feelings.

Join me, for just a moment, in a camp for internally displaced persons (IDPs) in South Mosul, Iraq. Last year, after working and living side-by-side in the camp, Zeinab, an elderly woman, became close to Sara, a trained peacebuilder from Egypt.

One day, Zeinab explained her situation to Sara over a cup of hot tea. After trying to return home to Western Mosul, Zeinab found her house and community destroyed and decided she had no option but to return to the IDP camp. Now, she was living with her 7 grandchildren in her son-in-law's tent, which housed more than 10 people. All Zeinab wanted was to live on her own with her grandchildren with a tent large enough for the 8 of them.

After hearing Zeinab's story over tea last winter, Sara knew that something more had to be done. Nonviolent Peaceforce has a strong

relationship with the people managing the camp, so Sara followed up on Zeinab's case, explaining Zeinab's exceptional situation to them as an elderly person facing extreme vulnerability.

As the outbreak grew, Sara temporarily moved back home to Cairo, but has maintained direct contact with the IDPs she lived and worked with in the camp. Sara reflects, "As a part of Nonviolent Peaceforce's Protection Team, working within these communities has led me to build strong relationships with those most affected by conflict and violence in Iraq in recent years: people like Zeinab."

Zeinab worried that "When the coronavirus started and later we were locked in the camp, I thought we would be forgotten by everyone. There were limited services and a lack of NGOs present, in addition to the general uncertainty we had."

But Sara did not forget. Continuing her work from Cairo, Sara followed up with the people managing the camp when she heard that Zeinab had still not received her tent.

In August, Sara received a follow-up video call from Zeinab's son-in-law. He shared that Zeinab had finally received her tent! Sara video called with the entire family, where Zeinab shared proudly "Sara, my darling, I have a tent now! A temporary house! Once you are back in Iraq, I am inviting you for lunch *at my own tent!* I hope this virus goes away. We miss you."

We are living in a time of compounding crises, as COVID-related deaths in the U.S. race past 500,000, the house and senate floors erupt in political battle and civilians around the country take to the streets to an end to institutional violence and state-sanctioned violence. In all of this, the importance of relationships has come into sharp view, as communities form mutual aid networks, plans to protect their neighborhoods without involving the police and reimagine public safety. It is these very relationships, and the resiliency residing in them, that become increasingly important as virus deaths continue to climb and the uprisings for racial justice continue.

And the question holds: how do we find our way back to our original forms? That question should not be conflated with dangerous rhetoric around a "return to normal." For civilians living through violent conflict, "normal" is steeped and violence, and perhaps the feelings of "profound insignificance, disconnection, constant vigilance, isolation, mistrust and fear" Lederach describes. The better question, is how we can harness our relationships, and the resiliency residing in them, to move further down the path toward peace? Perhaps Lederach does not go far enough. Perhaps resiliency and resilient relationships cultivate more than

elasticity, perhaps they are more than plants or metals that find their way back. The work of Nonviolent Peaceforce demonstrates that the very process of finding one's way back, of resiliency in action, is about more than surviving. In fact, it is about building and recovering the relationships, connections and trust to engage all stakeholders in choosing relationships over weapons and peace over violence.

While we may hope that with the vaccine, that government and civilian action will successfully curb the virus, and life as we know it will resume soon, we unfortunately cannot move with such certainty. If we embrace the uncertainty, and lean into community relationships and collective wellbeing, we have an opportunity to build networks of care that last into the future. Together, we can build sustaining peace.

RECOMMENDED READINGS

Lederach, John Paul and Angela Jill Lederach. 2010. *When Blood and Bones Cry out: Journeys through the Soundscape of Healing and Reconciliation*. Oxford: University of Oxford Press.

Tiffany Easthom has been with Nonviolent Peaceforce for 11 years. She started up and ran NP missions in Sri Lanka, South Sudan, and Lebanon before becoming the Executive Director in 2016. Prior to joining NP, Tiffany engaged in peace, conflict and development work in SE Asia and Latin America. E-mail: teasthom@nonviolentpeaceforce.org