

# Engaging with Armed Groups to Promote Social Cohesion and Reduce Violence in Communities



Photo: UCP Training with Soldiers/  
South Sudan, June 2020/NP"

Since 2016, NP has been working with communities in greater Mundri to strengthen the protection capacities of communities and reduce violence. With armed actors contributing to much of this violence, it has been pertinent to engage with armed groups to enable access to communities, provide insight into the security situation, build relationships, trust and influence their behavior to prevent further violence. Throughout the years, NP made several attempts to train soldiers on elements of unarmed civilian protection (UCP) however, while the relationship with armed groups was positive, NP was unable to get permission to train the soldiers themselves. In 2018, NP trained the wives of soldiers at Mundri Barracks in GBV prevention and response as well as hosted activities with the soldiers' wives and wives of community members that facilitated improved social cohesion after years of hostility. In 2019, NP received permission from the soldiers at Lui Barracks to train the soldiers' wives on GBV prevention and response. Then, in 2020, NP

finally built the requisite relationships to train armed actors in UCP in several locations throughout greater Mundri.

NP started by engaging local law enforcement such as through with a two-day GBV prevention and response training on June 29 and 30 for 14 law enforcement officers, prison wardens and fire-brigade officers from Mundri Town and Lui (3 men and 11 women). The training focused on an overview of what is GBV, the causes and consequences of GBV, and a discussion on current challenges faced by survivors when accessing the referral pathway. Solutions were also devised to mitigate the challenges faced by survivors. After the training, the director for gender at the police station said that the training participants will act as gender focal points in the locations they are stationed. The deputy director of the police then said, "I appreciate [NP] so much for the GBV prevention training you have given my people and I urge the participants today to take what has been taught. I also appreciate my colleagues for attending this and I request them practice what they have learnt. I believe Fire Brigade and Wildlife have benefited from this because we all work together. My sisters from NP, you are really working hard here in our community and may God bless you."

Then, on July 2, NP visited the Lui Barracks during a patrol to arrange for a UCP training. The soldiers in Lui have been partnering with IO soldiers to operate against NAS in Mundri East in the past months. On June 15, 2020, civilians in Lui were harassed when the soldiers searched every home looking for former IO soldiers. Some civilians were arrested and released after negotiations with women leaders, including members of NP's WPT, and other community leaders. In order to promote respect to civilians and improve social cohesion that could reduce future violence, the team arranged an introductory

training on UCP for soldiers in Lui. During NP's interactions with the soldiers during the patrol, the commanding officer said he was very happy about NP's plan to provide them with UCP training. He also said that NP's courtesy visits were a sign of peace. Finally, on July 6, NP conducted a UCP training for 15 soldiers at Lui Barracks. The recent context in Lui demonstrated the need for such a training to prevent and reduce the impacts of violence on the civilian population.

The first part of the training focused on human values. The participants were asked to sketch their faces on a piece of paper and post the sketches on a board. The participants said that while the sketches looked different from one another, they also looked the same because they are all human. They all value: life, respect, good relationships, common understanding, love, communication, water and food. However, conflict and death can disrupt everyone from realizing their values.

The participants agreed that it is possible to find ways that these values could be preserved and enjoyed by everyone because, after all, human values are interconnected, interrelated, interdependent and non-discriminatory. One way is to promote social cohesion. The team explained the value of the individual, communities, and institutions as components of social cohesion. The ingredients of social cohesion that bind the individual, community and institutions together are: connectedness, social relationships, orientation towards common good and equality. The team then explained that one way of promoting social cohesion is to support the ceasefire agreement between the signatory parties.

At the end of the training, the commanding officer said, "I appreciate NP for the training today, we have not received any training since the war stopped in 2005. We see NP as a doctor. Usually, a sick person comes to the doctor for consultation, but it is the other way around, the doctor reached out to the sick person. If everyone here picks up the message of this training, they will move towards one

direction and will help themselves in the future."

The commanding officer commented that they receive orders that do not respect social cohesion and the soldiers must support the implementation of social order in the community because the police are not strong enough to implement the law when there are criminalities occurring. The team responded that the commander can be an agent of change in the community by reaching out to the leadership in Lui and encouraging them to find nonviolent solutions to issues in the community. It was also agreed that the commander will link the team to his commander in Juba.

The team noticed the sincerity of the commanding officer when he acknowledged the atrocities soldiers have been committing. At the end of the training, he was worried about following orders that do not respect the values of social cohesion.

On July 16, NP also conducted a UCP training to soldiers at the Gullu barracks. This training came after three patrols in June and July 2020 which the team used as an opportunity to engage with the commanding officer who originally thought the team was monitoring the barracks. Instead, the team used the commanding officer's interest in the team to discuss their mutual common ground of civilian protection.

By building relationships, finding common ground, and promoting the protection of civilians, NP has been able to reach a demographic group at the grassroots level, in particular with the soldiers, which is crucial to build trust. This, in turn, amplifies NPs impact to reduce violence, protect civilians and improve the cohesion of communities.