Nonviolent Peaceforce

Community is the Answer

Unarmed Civilian Protection in Practice 2024

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Cover: Najah Untong is a teacher, EWER monitor, and years-long participant of NP projects, She regularly facilitates workshops on peacebuilding and conflict resolution, advocates for education, and acknowledges the risks of early child marriage. Mindanao, Philippines, 2024. Denise Rafaeli Cadorniga/NP
Above: Najah with one of her students.

Above: Gender Champions and NP meet with a community member. Pibor, South Sudan, March 2024. © NP

List of Acronyms

ATRC	Aceh Truth and Reconciliation Commission
BARMM	Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao
CPT	Community Protection Team*
IS	Islamic State or Da'esh
EWER	Early warning early response
HRD	Human rights defenders
IDP	Internally displaced person(s)
INGO	International non-governmental organisation
MILF	Moro Islamic Liberation Front
NP	Nonviolent Peaceforce
UCP	Unarmed Civilian Protection
UN	United Nations
UNAMID	African Union-United Nations Hybrid Operation in Darfur
WPT	Women Protection Team*
YPT	Youth Protection Team*

**Note, in Iraq, the "P" in CPT, WPT, and YPT stands for "Peace," rather than "Protection"*

Peace amidst emergency, protection throughout peacebuilding. Top: EWER Committee doing children's facepainting and offering psychosocial first aid. Abu Shuok camp, North Darfur, Sudan, 4 December 2024. © NP
Below: NP staff (red vest) provide protective accompaniment of hate crime survivor, Vilma Kari, during her testimony. New York City, U.S., 21 February 2024. © NP

FOREWORD

Violence against civilians continues to soar around the world. In 2024—the year upon which this publication reflects—civilian deaths in conflict surged by 40 per cent, as reported by OHCHR.† Since that time, insecurity has continued rapidly apace. Escalating violence, combined with deep cuts to humanitarian and peacebuilding resources and capacity, is fomenting a deeply unsafe world for everyone. Whether directly in the line of fire or not, the insecurities that we are grappling with as a global community have widespread impacts and leave us all less safe.

To reflect on these troubling trends has the potential for despair and paralysis—neither of which can we afford to dictate our actions at this time. The antidote is action that is driven in community, in pursuit of peace and protection, realised through connection with one another. Knowing how to do this in practice—what it can look like, how to navigate the twists, barriers and disappointments, how to sustain the wins—can feel like an insurmountable challenge.

This publication is a window into what these actions can look like in practice, exploring the ways that Nonviolent Peaceforce and the local communities we work alongside used nonviolent strategy and practice to prevent, reduce, and respond to violence over the course of 2024. Spanning a range of different places and communities—Sudan, Ukraine, Myanmar, the Philippines, South Sudan, Iraq, Indonesia, and the United States—the examples aim to demonstrate the challenges, opportunities, and tensions that practitioners of Unarmed Civilian Protection hold as they go about their work. Amid the struggle of this work—the slow burn of relationship and trust-building, the challenges of finding entry points for protection in settings of active, brutal violence—the cases illuminate possibilities of nonviolence and the different ways it can be used to keep people safe. These reflections are first and foremost intended for those who want to explore nonviolent actions for protection and peace in practice—whether seasoned practitioners looking for grounding from different contexts, humanitarians seeking to integrate civilian-led nonviolent actions into their programmes, or those with a desire to engage in nonviolent safety in their communities who may need inspiration to know how to begin.

The cases share several characteristics, despite the diverse contexts they explore. One is that the possibility of nonviolent action endures even in the face of active violence. From Ukraine, humanitarian responders on the frontlines in Kherson share how the establishment of a Volunteer Hub enabled them to better coordinate and sustain their work serving civilians on the frontlines of the war. In El Fasher, Darfur—like Kherson, subject to ongoing assaults, shelling and attacks on civilians—the NP team shares how they support communities to protect one another through the work of Community Protection Teams, and how they have used advocacy as a tool for protection.

The examples from Myanmar and the Philippines both speak to the power of prevention to save lives. In Myanmar, NP is supporting communities to implement Early Warning Early Response mechanisms that have proved to be life-saving measures, providing civilians with the skills, strategies, and the time they need to respond to violence before it happens: "When I arrived in [village], I found out that all the people I informed about EWER had safely evacuated along with their families," shared one volunteer from Myanmar. In the Philippines, teams explain how they are implementing preventive measures in post-conflict Mindanao in the form of gun-free or gun-safe zones. NP has worked with local stakeholders to establish and maintain over 36 zones (as of 2025), reducing the presence of small arms and light weapons in these areas and providing communities with alternative, unarmed safety mechanisms.

The cases from South Sudan, Iraq and Indonesia demonstrate the role of nonviolence in the shifting of mindsets and culture in the aftermath of war. In South Sudan, the example explains how over 100 Community Protection teams, human rights defenders, and other stakeholders came together to establish a formalised Community of Practice to support long-term, sustainable change in South Sudan. Communities are also working in concert for protection in Iraq, with the example provided exploring how Women Peace Teams (WPTs) are a vehicle to overcome prejudice and hate against those returnees rejected due to perceptions of affiliation with IS. Shared one woman who had returned to Iraq and found healing and community through participation in a WPT: "We worked, trained, cried, and understood each other's feelings, and we showed empathy toward each other. We started doing activities together and visiting each other's homes." In Indonesia, NP has also worked in support of community-led conflict transformation by supporting six civil society organisations to facilitate shared strategies, restore mutual trust, and promote collective action. Similarly, in the United States, NP has focused on creating spaces of safety for young people at risk of engaging in violence so that they can explore safety through connection with their peers. All these examples speak to the long-term vision of nonviolence, and the slow but necessary process of repairing relationships and the legacies of violent harm.

Amidst escalating violence against civilians, it is critical that we recognise examples of possibility and hope. This publication contains testimonies of fortitude, of lives saved, of relationships repaired—always amidst difficulty and violence, but pursued nevertheless. We hope these actions and insights remind us that prevention, protection, and repair are possible, of the importance of investing in peace and protection to save lives, and as inspiration for future action.

— Dr. Felicity Gray, Global Head of Policy and Advocacy, Nonviolent Peaceforce

† https://news.un.org/en/story/2025/06/1164541

Sudan

APPEALING DECISION MAKERS TO PREVENT ATROCITIES IN DARFUR

The largest displacement crisis in the world

NP established its protection programming on the ground in Darfur in 2022 with encouragement of the UN Security Council resolution 2579 (2021), endorsing the application of UCP to mitigate the protection gap left by the withdrawal of UNAMID force in the post-conflict context. A year later (April 2023), a power struggle between military leaders erupted into full-scale war. Since then, Sudan has been devastated by the estimated 12 million people who have fled the country (often those best educated or wealthiest), and half of those remaining are impacted by food insecurity. In 2024 it was considered the largest displacement crisis in the world.[1] El Fasher, the capital of North Darfur and NP's main base of operation throughout 2024, served as a site of refuge for many fleeing from surrounding areas but was under siege since May 2024 with no UN convoys able to reach the city in nearly a year. A famine was officially declared in Zamzam,[2] the camp that conservatively houses an estimated half a million IDPs and refugees on the outskirts of El Fasher, and the home of NP's first Women Protection Team (WPT) in Sudan.

Above: Early Warning Early Response Committee in North Darfur. 2023. © NP
Quote: Nic Pyatt, "The Peace Issue," Meditation Magazine, July 2024.

"Even if we're helping a few individuals to keep themselves safer, it provides hope and motivation for everybody."

Adapting to a rapidly escalating context

In 2024, NP was one of the five INGOs remaining physically present in El Fasher and the neighbouring IDP camp, Zamzam. Maintaining its presence in the country required swift reorientation of resources and capacity to shift from a post-conflict and peacebuilding intervention to a high-intensity and high-risk humanitarian emergency response. When levels of violence grew rapidly in intensity and scale and El Fasher came under siege, it became hard for the small NP team to sustain its direct protection efforts or, at least, apply them to deter primary threats coming from warring forces. To a large extent, the team reoriented its strategy towards mitigating the consequences of this violence, for example, enhancing community preparedness and self-protection capacities or coordinating humanitarian assistance. When the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), a paramilitary force, took control of El Fasher's water sources west of the city in October and November of 2023, the civilian population of El Fasher (rapidly expanding due to displacement) was left with dangerously low access to water for drinking and basic hygiene. Water tanker drivers were not prepared to move due to security risks, and families could not access additional water points outside the city safely. In response, NP, in coordination with local groups, identified and mobilised volunteer water engineers to fix or increase the capacity of existing water points within safe areas of the city.

Local groups stepping up as humanitarian agencies withdraw

In the gap left by the withdrawal of international humanitarian agencies from Darfur, communities scaled up their own local initiatives, such as first aid collectives. As one of the few international humanitarian organisations remaining in El Fasher, NP increased its support of existing and emerging local "mutual aid groups." It worked together with these groups to coordinate lifesaving assistance, enhanced their capacities in providing Psychosocial First Aid, and supported them in integrating safety and security into their humanitarian response efforts. NP also contributed indirectly to the mobilisation of mutual aid collectives. WPTs and early warning early response (EWER) committees that NP had established before the war shifted their focus to facilitate and provide emergency response. When newly displaced people were arriving in Zamzam throughout the latter end of 2023 and on into 2024, humanitarian services and government support were not available. In response, the WPTs and EWER committees led camp-based response efforts to address protection risks of new arrivals. They shared information about camp life, identified vulnerable households and ensured that they were situated within safe areas of the camp. They also gathered donations from existing camp residents and shared them with those who most needed them. During the last quarter of 2024, EWER committees and other volunteer collectives continued their efforts in the most impacted neighbourhood of El Fasher, Abu Shok. As daily shelling persisted, they refused to give up and kept organising response efforts, connecting injured civilians to medical aid providers.

Changing attitudes about the role of women through direct action

In addition to responding to the humanitarian emergency, WPTs in Zamzam camp and elsewhere have played a vital role in addressing ongoing protection concerns such as domestic violence and intercommunal conflicts. Their involvement in identifying emerging risks and supporting households increased as they have gained trust within their community. Their mobility and communication networks enabled the rapid transmission of early warning signs to camp leadership. Camp leaders have increasingly relied on WPTs to address violence at the household level, interrupting harmful cycles. This is a significant achievement, indicating a deep shift in attitudes since NP first began its engagement in Darfur in 2022, when women were largely left out of leadership and protection roles. Despite being a patriarchal society, male community leaders have increasingly recognised the importance of WPTs in enhancing community security and have become more open to discussing sexual and gender-based violence. WPT efforts in organising water and firewood collection have been linked to a decrease

in reported rape cases, as recognised by medical agencies and community leaders. Their role in fostering public dialogue about domestic violence has contributed to reducing incidents.

Advocacy as a primary protection strategy

With the encirclement of El Fasher by armed forces and continuing siege, the risk of a large-scale atrocity occurring became significant and intimidating. It became apparent that NP's usual entry points and pathways of leveraging influence at local levels to address civilian protection concerns were of limited impact and insufficient. Consequently, NP increased its efforts to engage in high-level advocacy to contribute to stopping or minimising the impact of an impending catastrophe.

Through urgent alerts, private briefings and public engagements, NP utilised its connections to draw attention to the situation unfolding in Darfur. Actively monitoring the conflict situation through the work of the team on the ground in El Fasher provided real-time, detailed insights on changes to context and civilian protection needs. This was a critical component of the team's advocacy strategy and essential for the legitimacy and trust needed to get the attention of stakeholders inside the UN, the European Union, and member states. NP data analysis, triangulated with that of other actors, including Yale Conflict Observatory satellite imagery, suggested that within a possible timeline of two to three weeks, there was a risk that a minimum of 600,000 civilians would be impacted by severe clashes between the warring forces. Despite the magnitude of risk, few stakeholders had been sufficiently engaged or vocal regarding the situation in North Darfur and advocacy energy was largely directed toward a peace operation for Sudan writ large.

NP was one of the first actors to raise the alarm about the atrocity risk, catalysing other actors to follow suit. The accumulated impact of NP's advocacy on the situation during August and September is substantial; it has contributed to multiple high-level statements from other actors, specifically on the situation in El Fasher and Zamzam, a notable focus on Sudan during UN General Assembly High Level Week, and tangible action from states in the form of individual sanctions.

The situation in El Fasher remains catastrophic and critical, and the extent to which attention can shape actions from conflict parties on the ground is uncertain. Still, it is important to continue to draw attention to the needs of civilians and the impact of ongoing violence, and to raise the political and social stakes for warring parties in their decision making on the use of violence in North Darfur. NP's role as one of the few partners still implementing on the ground through 2024 offered important real-time contextual updates and enabled NP's senior staff to speak with authority on the situation as it evolved. Collaborating with a smaller group of core actors also supported the success of the advocacy campaign by enabling decisions, amendments, and actions to be taken promptly as the situation quickly evolved whilst remaining closely coordinated and in communication with each other to ensure confident and unified messaging. The effective application of programme-based advocacy in Darfur in 2024 has not only allowed NP's Sudan programme to survive but also boosted the organisational capacity of NP across countries to apply advocacy as an integral method of UCP.

[1] 50,000 people experienced catastrophic levels of food insecurity with 25.6 million people in crisis levels of hunger. WFP, June 2024, https://www.wfp.org/news/sudan-facing-unprecedented-hunger-catastrophe-say-un-agency-chiefs

[2] https://press.un.org/en/2024/sc15784.doc.htm

Left: In Zamzam. North Darfur, Sudan, 2023.
© NP

Ukraine

REST AND RECOVERY IN THE EYE OF THE STORM

"With constant participation in the Hub, we managed to establish cooperation with many organisations, which allowed us to strengthen humanitarian support and expand opportunities to help the population."
- Oleg, frontline responder, Kherson

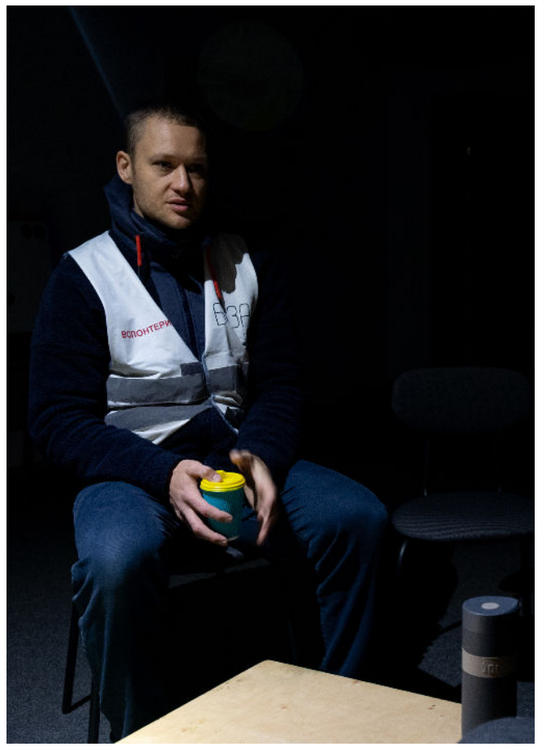
Exhaustion and insecurity among frontline responders

Since the early days of the war in Ukraine, local frontline responders have been the vanguard of humanitarian response efforts. Due to active fighting, frequent frontline shifts, relentless drone strikes and shelling, many international organisations are reluctant or unable to accept the risks of directly operating near the frontlines. Yet, the needs of civilians in these locations and beyond remain urgent and immense. This leaves many national non-governmental organisations and self-organised volunteer collectives alone to assist civilians—all while they themselves are impacted by war, and often in need of similar services. Despite partnerships with larger INGOs and an increasing recognition of duty of care obligations, asymmetrical relationships between INGOs and local frontline responders often lead to the outsourcing of risk to local partners without adequate physical, technical, and psychosocial protection support.

Establishing volunteer hubs for rest and recovery

NP has leaned into risk and found ways of going beyond duty of care standards to proactively enhance the safety and security of frontline volunteers, and to work toward a response infrastructure that is more sustainable. In the process, it has strengthened the centrality of these local humanitarians within broader emergency response efforts. One initiative that NP piloted in 2024 is volunteer hubs. Civilians volunteering on the frontlines usually do not have access to facilities and opportunities to come together and discuss their challenges and needs, despite

Right: Volunteer Hub. Ukraine, 2024. © NP



Top & Left: Volunteer hub with no light. Discussion with partner, BASE UA. Hub officially launched in January 2025. Kramatorsk, Ukraine, 12 November 2024. © NP
Right: Volunteer hub under renovations. Kramatorsk, Ukraine, 11 November 2024. © NP

facing hardship conditions and extreme situations on a daily basis. As local civilians, they also lack the privilege of being able to regularly leave the conflict-affected context for a short break away (as most international staff do) to help them cope with the challenging work environment. This leads to stress accumulation and burnout. Moreover, exhaustion makes it harder for people to appropriately assess their own security risk.

Furthermore, the lack of presence of international organisations and traditional coordination mechanisms in frontline regions resulted in a coordination gap with local organisations directly responding on the ground. Consequently, civilian responders struggled to respond to the overwhelming needs with limited coordination amongst themselves and with remote international partners. This was not only leading to confusion, misunderstandings and duplication of efforts, but the constant strain was compromising the physical and mental wellbeing of civilian responders. It undermined their ability to protect themselves while assisting others, which increased the risk of harm and burnout.

In response, NP proposed the establishment of a volunteer hub in Kherson as a flexible, safe space that frontline responders could use to refresh, recharge, and utilise for coordination or other needs. During a visioning workshop with approximately twenty local partners, NP facilitated a discussion about the concept of a volunteer hub. Local groups shared their needs, priorities and challenges, before collectively determining how they would set up and utilise the hub. It included details such as having shower facilities and access to video games so that volunteers could mentally detach themselves from the war.

NP proceeded by setting up the space in line with the interests and requests expressed by the local groups. To encourage connection, NP began hosting weekly hub meetings so that the fifteen different groups could have a set time and space to engage with each other, share needs, challenges and improve their coordination and collaboration. While the idea looked simple on paper, the organisation of the hub meetings proved to be more challenging than expected. The collectives were spread over five different thematic areas: child protection, distribution, rehabilitation response, gender-based violence and evacuation. Rather than encouraging the growth of positive relationships, these hub meetings often became tense and difficult sessions, used by frontline responders to release pent-up frustrations and resentments, sometimes towards other collectives. Instead of backing off, NP leaned into these tensions, gave it time and space to surface and managed to address some of it with creative thinking.

Efforts to build a network of *positive* relations were central to the establishment of a functioning volunteer hub. When NP had to relocate the hub in Kherson during spring 2024, due to increased security risks at the original venue, this became an opportunity to revise the structure of the coordination meetings to create a more conducive set-up for relationship building. As opposed to having one weekly meeting with all partner groups together, partners began attending separate thematic meetings according to their programming focus. A focal point was appointed for each thematic area, who chaired and organised the meetings on a regular basis. The outcomes from these thematic meetings then fed into a weekly cross-thematic meeting attended by NP and all the thematic focal points, during which information, needs and challenges would be shared to facilitate knowledge-sharing and coordination across all thematic areas. The information from the weekly cross-thematic meetings would then be disseminated through the thematic meetings to all the local groups. This structure led to reduced tensions as local volunteers were empowered to take control over the meetings and smaller groups were able to spend more meeting time focusing on the issues relevant to their thematic programming. This provided space for positive relationships to grow.

At the time of writing, local coordination has improved dramatically as the volunteer hub has become a lively and communal space where volunteers from different collectives can easily connect with others and find collaborators for tasks such as aid distributions. “We finally stopped playing solo and we are now making small steps towards a fruitful cooperation,” says Alina, Co-Director of locally-led organisation Spravzhni, Kherson. It is also fostering greater individual resilience as volunteers connect to, contribute to, and are comforted by the common purpose and sense of community that being part of the volunteer hub has created, which promotes their psychological well-being.

International community adapts to local coordination efforts

The revitalised local coordination structure has encouraged international organisations to adapt their own systems to fit what is working locally on the ground. Previously, international organisations would meet in Mykolaiv, which is nearly 70 kilometres away from Kherson and the frontline. Due to the distance and their overwhelming workload, local organisations would not attend these meetings. This left a large coordination gap. In response, NP advocated and engaged with other international organisations to find a way to better integrate the frontline local responders into the wider international coordination mechanisms. These efforts were acknowledged and addressed by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), which piloted an Area Based Coordination platform in Kherson. The volunteer hub’s partners became a part of this platform, along with several INGOs and other national organisations, which has strengthened the connection between the local and international response.

In conclusion, the pilot volunteer hub in Kherson has demonstrated how locally driven humanitarian spaces can build positive connections and nurture collaboration at the local level as well as foster synergy between local and international organisations, despite different risk tolerances. If we are serious about sustainable, locally-led responses to crisis, we have to prioritise nurturing the spaces in which this can be strategised and strengthened. It also shows the importance of creating safe spaces for respite, mental wellbeing and community in the face of extremely difficult circumstances.

NP envisions that the volunteer hub in Kherson will enable further cooperation and exchanges of resources and skills between partners. In addition, the hub in Kherson and other hubs elsewhere can become spaces where frontline communities explore their own vision of future ceasefires or transitional sociopolitical or security arrangements, and their own role in shaping them. The hub exemplifies how one seed can grow into a larger tree, as other actors take on the lessons learned and utilise their own entry points and resources to advance the centrality of local actors in humanitarian and peacebuilding response.
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Myanmar

EARLY WARNING EARLY RESPONSE IN A FORGOTTEN CONFLICT

"The day before the firefight, I noticed armed men in our village. I immediately informed the village leader and shared risk management strategies and digital hygiene practices with a neighbour. I also verified the information about the impending attack by speaking with one of the armed group members. He confirmed that the rumour was true and that the attack would occur in two days, and he urged the villagers to evacuate. I then informed another EWER volunteer and updated the village leader. It was indeed an advantage to know what to do in this situation. During the training, I thought the task might be too big for me, but now that I have saved lives, I am inspired to continue working and making a difference."
- EWER volunteer

By late 2024, in the wake of multiple armed conflicts, coups, and military rule, more than three million people in Myanmar were estimated to be displaced.[3] As the safety and security of civilians rapidly decreased, and humanitarian needs increased, the ability for international organisations to address the situation has been drastically reduced.[4] With chronic underfunding, and unexpected cuts to aid, support often fails to reach civilians in need. For example, over one million IDPs are residing in Chin and Sagaing but humanitarian assistance has only reached 20 per cent of the displaced population.[5] By and large, communities across Myanmar are left to fend for themselves; a scenario that is increasingly common and likely to grow in the future considering decreasing levels of humanitarian assistance and compounding crises.

Locally-led early warning early response networks

In response to this situation, NP has made efforts to establish and support locally led early warning early response (EWER) networks across Rakhine, Chin, and Sagaing States. These networks are unique in that they focus on communities themselves, enhancing their own preparedness and responses to conflict, and

include a strong focus on self-protection without the use of weapons. It involves the strengthening of community-based mechanisms of analysis, communication and response. This contrasts with other types of early warning systems established by INGOs, which focus on collecting information from communities for the sake of a timely response by international actors. This is particularly relevant in a context, as Myanmar, where local communities are left to fend for themselves, and external support is limited or unreliable.

The EWER networks in Rakhine, Chin and Sagaing states engage communities to identify context-specific early warning indicators as well as different alert levels, and appropriate early responses. When, for example, reports of burning neighbouring villages were identified or there was an increase in checkpoints or military patrols by trucks, some networks identified this as a sign that warranted a higher level of alertness. In response, they can take precautionary actions—for example, move to pre-identified safe houses, contact EWER networks in neighbouring areas, or ensure people carry emergency bags with them. The networks also coordinate with community and religious leaders about the division of responsibilities for emergency response or rapid aid. Preparation may include entire communities. Children need to know what to do or where to go in case of a sudden emergency, especially when they are outside of their own homes. Persons with physical or mental challenges may need support from others in case of a sudden evacuation. Some EWER mechanisms are multi-layered and may connect actors horizontally, across different sides of the conflict, as well as vertically, from the grassroots to the middle and top levels. However, they need to remain simple and functional. Unless the entire community understands how to respond, an early warning alarm system will not be very effective.

Early response can vary vastly depending on the situation networks are responding to, and is not limited to large-scale military operations or attacks on villages. It has included the facilitation of dialogues in

Rakhine to address conflicts within and between communities after animals have been stolen, or the facilitation of the release of individuals held in detention in Sagaing by conducting remote and online shuttle diplomacy, or providing cash assistance. Whatever response strategies have been applied by the EWER networks, the establishment of good relationships between different actors has been critical to all of them.

The process and NP's role

NP plays a facilitative and supportive role, ensuring that the EWER groups remain functional, have technical support when needed, and, when additional support is needed to facilitate access or support efforts on the ground. Several of the EWER networks have been established by former ceasefire monitoring groups that NP helped to establish between 2012 and 2018 in support of Myanmar's peace process. Others have emerged since the military coup in 2021. NP has helped the various EWER networks to get organised and build their capacity. NP staff also remain in communication with EWER volunteers, receiving on average 30 messages a day, more when attacks escalate. EWER Volunteers have access to comprehensive training sessions covering topics that include UCP, EWER strategies, and digital security protocols. These have been delivered through a mixture of theoretical discussions as well as practical exercises, which enabled volunteers to identify early warning signs relevant to their local contexts and appropriate response strategies.

EWER volunteers demonstrate time and again the value, effectiveness and utility of their work. For example, when fighting broke out in a village in May 2024, EWER volunteers rescued more than 5,000 civilians and provided protective accompaniment to safer locations. Throughout this period, NP supported EWER volunteers through six regular online meetings to help mentor the volunteers in analysing the early warning patterns based on their reports and how to develop appropriate responses. NP has also facilitated connections between churches, civil society organisations, and local leaders, and supported these different actors with training to enhance their coordination and their capacity to provide one another with psychosocial support. NP has also held stakeholder meetings with EWER volunteers, protection actors and humanitarian service providers to enable more actors to participate in the EWER mechanism. Over time, this has become a safe space for different stakeholders to find ways to address the needs of IDPs.

Even when there are no acute conflicts or emergencies, EWER volunteers continue to actively engage in EWER by spreading their knowledge through awareness-raising sessions in their communities. This can have a critical multiplier effect for protection when conflicts do break out suddenly. In a local city, a battle broke out the day after an awareness-raising session was delivered by EWER volunteers. One EWER volunteer recalled how she was one of the last civilians to flee the city. "When I arrived in [village], I found out that all the people I informed about EWER had safely evacuated along with their families. Due to this, EWER volunteers are more enthusiastic to reach more people."[6]

Through this deep engagement with EWER, many volunteers have identified nonpartisanship to be a critical component of their efforts. It has both opened up pathways for leveraging support for civilians and it has strengthened their sense of security. Creativity has also been mentioned as an essential component of EWER. Volunteers have recounted that they had to remain innovative in the face of challenges with internet, electricity cuts, and relationships with different actors in the conflict area. It is a testimony to the power and nimbleness of locally driven protection responses. As the international aid system is increasingly less responsive and the climate crisis exacerbates risks to communities globally, decision-makers and leaders can learn much from how communities like EWER networks in Myanmar are finding spaces to protect themselves and one another.

[3]https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/myanmar/myanmar-humanitarian-update-no-41-10-october-2024

[4] The stop-work order from the US administration in January 2025, followed by the cancellation of nearly 90% of USAID programmes, stripped away remaining strongholds for vital support. A project of Nonviolent Peaceforce (NP) was among the casualties.

[5] Internal NP document, "Civilian Protection Concerns: Northern & Western Regions, Myanmar. May – June 2024."

[6] Supporting to Establish EWER Network in Northern Chin State, Nonviolent Peaceforce, OTI/CRP. Final Milestone Report. 30 July 2024.

The Philippines

COMMUNITY-DRIVEN SMALL ARMS AND LIGHT WEAPONS CONTROL

"I have the courage to take steps to explain and help understand all the right and wrong ways of doing things. The resolve to fight for what is right got even stronger when I met one of NP's staff. They helped orient all our youths in all sectors. There was even an EWER and an ordinance that were created to prohibit unauthorized persons from carrying firearms in our community."
- Chairman Halim Saharin, Lower Sinangkapan[7]

All eyes and ears were on Chairman Halim as he recounted the tale of countless unlawful possessions and utilisations of small arms and light weapons (SALW), which resulted in the deaths of hundreds of individuals throughout their village. His speech was an hour and a half—community members remarked that that same amount of time had been all it took for an armed group to rampage the entire village just months earlier. It was here that the village of Lower Sinangkapan was formally recognised as the first gun-free zone and peace-centred community in Basilan—an impressive accomplishment for a region long troubled by gun violence.

The problem of firearms in Mindanao

Since autonomy was granted in 2019, the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) has steadily progressed on the trajectory from war to peace. However, challenges to peace and security remain. Tens of thousands of firearms remain unaccounted for. Many of these firearms are held by private armed groups, families, and individuals. The accumulation, illicit transfer, and misuse of small arms and light weapons (SALWs) have numerous consequences, including fear, the increase of trafficking, and the likelihood that firearms come into the hands of extremist groups or are used in community conflicts (*rido*).

Firearms loom large in Filipino history, linked to resistance against colonialism and as a means of self-determination and self-protection. It contributes to an emotional

Right: Signing the public declaration of a gun-free and peace centered community. Lower Sinangkapan, Mindanao, Philippines, 13 February 2024. © Denise Rafaeli Cadorniga/NP

Left: Residents voluntarily surrendered a cache of illicit SALW to authorities in observance of the municipality's proclamation as a gun-free zone and peace-oriented community. Lower Sinangkapan, Mindanao, Philippines, 13 February 2024. © Denise Rafaeli Cadorniga/NP

attachment to guns and makes firearms challenging to regulate. Many families and clans that have experienced *rido* are reluctant to lay down their arms, fearing it will compromise their safety and security. The availability of firearms and unresolved issues of conflict have the potential to undermine the stability and security achieved through peace agreements, revive historical animosities, and trigger new cycles of violence in Mindanao.

Establishing gun-safe zones

Recognising the influential and historical role that guns play in Mindanao, widespread resistance to top-down disarmament, and the limited impact of transactional buy-back efforts, NP has made an effort in the Philippines to support community-led small arms and light weapons (SALW) control through the establishment of gun-free or gun-safe zones.[8] NP began these efforts with a series of consultations with local stakeholders to ensure there is collective commitment to creating a peaceful environment through the control and reduction of firearms. Next, NP worked with the communities, police and military actors to put in place a system of monitoring and coordination around shared agreements and definitions.

The concept of gun-safe zones was built on the model of peace zones that were established across Mindanao during the time of armed conflict. By actively involving local communities in the development of ordinance regulations and decision-making processes with authorities, NP made sure that specific needs and concerns of communities were addressed. This has led to a variety of gun-safe zones, each with their own

unique policy and definitions. For example, in Basilan, SALW control focuses on restricting the movement of firearms and managing loose firearms through measures such as stencilling (a form of marking) as an alternative registration system for guns. Benefit packages like tailored livelihood programmes are also provided in exchange for loose firearms handed in. However, levels of engagement and cooperation vary, especially in areas with high levels of intercommunal conflicts.

While many actors expressed scepticism at first, the popularity of gun-safe zones has spread with multiple municipalities implementing similar zones. After NP established the first gun-safe zone in Sulu in 2023, 25 were established in 2024, and an additional 10 in 2025, in Sulu, Basilan, and Lanao. Communities have been keen to turn the page on a violent past, questioning the need to continue to rely on guns for their security. Mayors and community leaders have seen in gun-safe zones an opportunity to change the conflict-affected status of their villages, hoping that development actors and other service providers would feel safe enough to operate in their towns. The community-led arms control efforts have increased dialogue between communities and security forces and reduced tensions caused by prompt arrests of people who failed to register their weapons. They have also helped to address issues that caused misunderstandings and harm, such as traditional toy guns, airsoft guns and replica firearms. Moreover, the use of UCP methods in gun-safe zones has provided communities with an alternative pathway for conflict mitigation and self-protection.

The gun-safe zones have become part of the ongoing normalisation programme of the Government of the Philippines and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), with support from local officials. As NP is a longstanding partner in the Mindanao peace process, it is able to connect community-led arms control efforts to policies and processes of the BARMM. The endorsement by state and non-state armed actors demonstrates a remarkable shift in perspectives of what enhanced safety and security for everyone, regardless of their status, can look like. For example, when an accidental weapon firing led to a MILF combatant killing a fellow combatant during a community patrol in Poblacion, the situation threatened to spiral into a violent feud.[9] Shuttle diplomacy and dialogue by NP and local early warning networks enabled a settlement to be reached between the affected families without further violence. To prevent similar incidents in the future, a gun-safe zone status was reinstated in surrounding areas with everyone's agreement.

To maximise support for gun-safe zones and other SALW control initiatives, advocacy and education initiatives have been instrumental. NP has, for example, organised radio broadcasts and an art contest in the BARMM region in collaboration with local partners, which enabled people to share their personal experience and perspectives on the impact of small arms proliferation and control on the normalisation process. These activities have enhanced awareness and understanding of small arms issues at the community level. Seventy per cent of people interviewed considered this to be an effective initiative to reduce small arms.

Connecting arms control with early warning early response

NP's work on gun-safe zones in Mindanao does not stand in isolation but is integrated in a broader strategy to interrupt cycles of violence and enhance nonviolent responses to conflict in Mindanao. A key component of this strategy is the alignment of gun-safe zones with established EWER structures. Many of these EWER structures were established by NP a decade ago to support ceasefire monitoring. They have continuously adapted themselves to changing contexts, retaining their relevance as a point of reference for issues related to civilian protection. NP has made sure that wherever a gun-safe zone is established, there is a local EWER structure to support it. It has trained and supported them to play a role in monitoring and de-escalating conflicts related to SALW. NP has also assisted many of the EWER structures to obtain some form of legal status that allows them to gain access to funding or become stakeholders in development partnerships. Legal recognition has also enhanced the legitimacy and status of these structures at the local barangay level, as well as at the municipal level, such as in Lanao. This increased their access to law enforcement and allowed them to be seen as spokespersons for the community.

As additional requests for the establishment of gun-safe zones are being addressed to NP in 2025, the Joint Normalisation Committee of the Mindanao peace process is considering adopting the community-based SALW framework as a formal part of its SALW programme. NP has recently collaborated with the Ministry of the Interior and local government to develop a Peace and Order and Public Safety Plan in which both SALW control and EWER have been integrated into the draft. In this way, NP fosters an integral approach to civilian protection, connecting formal and informal protection infrastructures, and lays the groundwork for its own withdrawal.

[7]https://nonviolentpeaceforce.org/surrendering-to-change-how-a-village-in-basilan-is-moving-towards-peace/

[8] The zones were initially called "gun-free-zones" but due to the complex dynamics around gun-ownership and resistance against full-blown disarmament, they are increasingly called "gun-safe zones."

[9]https://nonviolentpeaceforce.org/tomawis-story-how-nonviolence-can-break-the-cycle-of-vengeance/

South Sudan

FOSTERING A UCP COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE IN SOUTH SUDAN

"There is a need to change attitudes, change mindsets. It is time that the country realises that it is independent and stops fighting. It is time to build cohesion and accept one another. The country needs to stop believing in force."
- Participant at the Stakeholders' Learning and Collaboration Forum.

Fostering a global UCP community of practice

In response to the growing need for civilian protection, dwindling humanitarian budgets, and the weakening of international protection systems, NP has made an intentional effort in the past decade to make the practice of UCP more widely available and accessible to communities affected by violence. Part of its strategy has been to foster a community of UCP practitioners, researchers, and supporters at global and local levels.[10] At the global level NP has supported the establishment of a UCP network that is sustained through a shared website, working groups, newsletters and regular meetings on issues of interest and concern.[11] In and between countries where NP is operating, it has supported the development of local, national, and regional civilian protection networks. During 2024, this resulted in several knowledge exchanges between UCP practitioners from South Sudan, the USA and the Philippines, with exchanges both online and in-person. Connecting over shared challenges such as election-related violence and gang violence, the growing community of UCP practice enables different approaches and best practices to be explored for greater learning and impact across contexts.

Above: Celebrations during child protection training with WPT. Tutnyang payam, Mayendit County. 17 January 2024. © NP

Centring a community of practice in South Sudan around Community Protection Teams

In South Sudan, NP is focusing on developing a community of practitioners and supporters of nonviolent, people-centred security, including UCP. The backbone of this emerging community are the Community Protection Teams (CPTs) that NP established together with local communities across the country. There are currently almost 100 teams—68 Women Protection Teams (WPTs) and 29 Youth Protection Teams (YPTs)—across South Sudan, playing an active role in preventing violence and promoting positive peace. Many of these teams have continued to use UCP methods to forge the path to peace forward after NP has withdrawn its presence and accompaniment. In locations of displacement, such as Juba IDP site, where IDPs from across the country reside, CPTs are one of the few actors mitigating conflicts that easily trigger violence elsewhere in the country. CPTs are even implementing much-needed initiatives to tackle the effects of climate change in their communities in Leer and Bentiu.[12]

Over the past years, NP has increasingly connected CPTs across South Sudan with each other and with stakeholders at the state and national level for the purpose of shared learning, collaboration, and advocacy. In areas such as Pibor, Walgak, and Ulang, CPTs have already started to work together. It has allowed NP to withdraw itself to some extent from being a frontline implementer of direct protection, even as existing CPTs frequently request NP to lead the establishment of additional protection teams in isolated frontline communities.[13] As a community-based protection structure, CPTs have the insight, ownership and flexibility to respond to threats as they evolve. Their sustainability is high as members engage voluntarily.[14] By connecting CPTs to each other as well as to other stakeholders, including authorities, humanitarian and development agencies and human rights defenders, horizontally and vertically, NP has supported the growth of locally driven support networks around the CPTs and expanded their scope of engagement. By doing so, it has prepared the ground for an emerging community of unarmed civilian protection practitioners that is grounded in community-level direct action.

Connecting Community Protection Teams with human rights defenders

In parallel to NP's direct protection efforts at the community level, increasingly led by CPTs, NP has assisted human rights defenders (HRDs) at the national and state levels to get organised and connected. NP has increasingly brought HRDs and CPTs together at state and national levels and facilitated information exchange, network building, and learning. Local conflicts are influencing national politics, and national-level political dynamics have triggered local-level conflicts. HRDs and CPTs are increasingly collaborating with each other at the state level. National-level HRDs have been mentoring CPTs in the practice of influencing decision makers, while CPTs have informed HRDs about relevant community-level dynamics. It has shown the fluidity of peacebuilding and human rights advocacy. At the community level, the labels of CPT and HRD do not matter. Here they are all people committed to protecting the rights, lives, and the dignity of those most affected by violence.

NP has further accelerated the interplay between human rights advocacy and peacebuilding in South Sudan by strengthening the advocacy capacities of CPTs and familiarising HRDs with essential peacebuilding tools. In an effort to decrease the mutual distrust between HRDs and state actors, NP has created opportunities for the two groups to connect. The engagement has not only led to increased dialogue about human rights but has also increased the safety and security of HRDs. One HRD told NP that these increased relations and engagement with state actors have made him feel safe enough to relocate back to Juba. It is an example of how peacebuilding efforts can increase civilian protection and the promotion of human rights.

To facilitate greater synergy between CPTs, HRDs, and state actors, NP has realised that it needs to do more to draw state actors into this emerging community of practice as human beings instead of as mere representatives of the state. Therefore, NP

"We came together as strangers, but we leave as partners, united in our mission for peace and a peaceful South Sudan."

provided training on UCP and mental health support to government officials in 2024. This allowed for an intimate dialogue with duty bearers on the relationship between mental health. It also provided recognition of the prevalence of trauma across South Sudanese society and of government officials as individual members of that society. This engagement deepened their understanding about the work of NP and CPTs as well as the role that state actors can play to join or support a national community of UCP practice.

Convening a community of practice at the national level

In September 2024, NP brought together 150 people at a forum in Juba that included CPTs, HRDs, journalists, national NGOs, tribal leaders, government officials, military and police, and international actors. Members of the global UCP/A Community of Practice were among its participants, as well as CPTs that have continued to protect their communities without NP's support for years.[15]

Through the forum, vertical linkages were created between CPTs and national-level actors that are essential for the development of a country-wide EWER mechanism or national-level rapid response capacity. As an outbreak of violence in one area of South Sudan has the potential to trigger conflicts elsewhere, collective action together with national actors is a potential pathway to better interrupt the

Right: Stakeholder Collaboration and Learning Forum. Juba, South Sudan, 23-25 September 2024. © NP
Quote: Stakeholder's Forum participant. 23-25 September 2024.

cluster of localised cycles of violence that continuously re-ignite each other. When violence broke out in May 2024 between youth from Rubkona and Leer counties residing within Juba IDP camp, for example, this not only escalated tensions in Juba but also triggered incidents of violence in their respective areas of origin. Members of the UCP community of practice across Juba, Rubkona and Leer locations responded to this escalation and started to coordinate their efforts with each other. NP and CPTs provided protective accompaniment and patrols in hotspot locations as they monitored and shared incident updates across locations in real-time to anticipate and prevent further violence. At the same time, national actors responded with police presence and interventions from influential community and political figures.

Different actors in the forum articulated their own vision of increased coordination and collaboration. These conversations took place in the same week that the Government of South Sudan announced it would postpone the national elections from 2024 to 2026. This announcement, as well as the upcoming national security bill, elevated the intensity of the debate and the urgency participants felt about taking action. It also showed a level of confidence among CPTs and HRDs to speak out and direct critical questions to high-level decision makers in the room, which marked a stark contrast with the level of confidence NP witnessed among CPTs and HRDs years ago.

As international support for South Sudan is decreasing—NP's presence in the country has shrunk significantly in 2024—and South Sudan finds itself once again on the brink of civil war in 2025,[16] the development of a national peace force that is equipped to rapidly respond to the escalation of conflicts at community level, is a vision that NP will continue to work on with partners in South Sudan in the years to come.

Above: EWER Committee members. Pibor, South Sudan, March 2024. © NP
Right: YPTs, WPTs, and NP meet. Juba IDP Camp, South Sudan, January 2024. © NP

[10]Between 2017 and 2023, NP has brought together practitioners, partners, and researchers from 160 organisations across 45 countries to collectively identify shared good practices of UCP. S

[11] https://nonviolentpeaceforce.org/ucp-community/; https://www.ucpacommunityofpractice.org/

[12] In Leer, women protection teams supported the construction of dikes as a community-based flood response following mass displacement caused by flooding, whilst in Bentiu, Child Protection Committees conducted patrols to prevent children from playing in areas prone to flooding that resulted in cases of drowning children dropping from monthly in 2022 to none during 2023 and the first half of 2024.

[13] NP's identity as an outsider and its ability to put together a team composition of staff members with diverse identities have made it easier to initiate UCP efforts in isolated areas than it has been for neighbouring CPTs.

[14] Sustaining youth protection teams has been more challenging, as youth are more likely to move. On the other hand, the movement of youth also provides opportunities for UCP to spread to other areas.

[15] The forum, supported by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation and the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, built on a series of state-level forums that NP organised in collaboration with the women groups and state-level local authorities between June and July 2024 in four areas. NP staff worked together with CPTs in and around these forums to formulate advocacy messages to appeal to national-level policy and decision makers.

[16] https://theconversation.com/south-sudan-on-the-brink-of-civil-war-bold-action-from-the-international-community-is-needed-253555

Iraq

PROTECTION THROUGH CONNECTION: PEOPLE-CENTRED SECURITY AS A CATALYST FOR SOCIAL COHESION

"When we returned to Imam Gharbi, South Mosul, the community completely rejected us. They didn't mix with us or our children. But after NP came and built a strong relationship in the village, they encouraged women and girls to form a Women's Protection Team (WPT). As returnee women from the camps, we were afraid of sitting in the same place or hall with the wives and daughters of the martyrs.

In the first UCP sessions provided by NP, the returnee women (from IS-affiliated families) would sit together, and the families of the martyrs and the rest of the community would sit together without mixing or talking to each other. But gradually, we started interacting, and the martyrs' families began to accept us. We worked together in groups during the sessions. During the nonviolence session, it was the best session by far. We worked, trained, cried, and understood each other's feelings, and we showed empathy toward each other. We started doing activities together and visiting each other's homes."
- Returnee, WPT member, South Mosul

CPT conference. Iraq, May 2024. © NP

It has been eight years since the Islamic State—Da'esh (IS)—was defeated (2017), but Iraq continues to face challenges in rebuilding the country. There are nearly five million returnees and 1.1 million IDPs. Tensions within and between ethnic-religious groups, as well as between (perceived) IS-affiliated individuals and host communities, trigger incidents of violence. These conflicts, as well as the absence of comprehensive reconciliation processes, hinder the safe return and reintegration of displaced people. The potential for violent conflict is exacerbated by (perceived) unequal access to aid and livelihood opportunities, especially in northern Iraq. These developments and dynamics show that the issue of civilian safety remains important across efforts of stabilisation, return and reintegration.

Direct protection as a stepping stone towards social cohesion

In the course of 2024, NP has made efforts to address ethno-religious tensions and enhance social cohesion in Iraq through people-centred security programming. Efforts to foster social cohesion are traditionally postponed until environments are deemed safe for people to (re-)connect, though the lack of connection often perpetuates cycles of violence and insecurity. At the same time, efforts that facilitate reintegration and reconciliation often lack a focus on security, even as security concerns prevent many people from returning or participating in reintegration processes. NP's relational approach to protecting civilians allows it to advance security and social cohesion simultaneously. Its teams in Iraq have strengthened *social relationships*, as they seek to reduce threats by bringing conflicting parties together, humanising those who are considered enemies (*connectedness*), and widening the options of conflicting communities for nonviolent responses (*orientation towards the common good*). By promoting broad participation in protection processes, NP teams have reduced the common division between protector and protected, thus promoting *equality*.[17] In this way, NP teams are able to rebuild and repair the social fabric at early stages of conflicts, whilst continuing to address security issues after a humanitarian transition.

Community Peace Teams (CPTs) in Iraq have been at the forefront of this integrated approach to security and social cohesion. They have conducted regular unarmed protective patrols and accompaniments in high-risk areas, such as schools, marketplaces, and parks, where insecurity and violence are widespread. Their visible presence has not only deterred potential perpetrators but also reassured groups at risk of violence. For instance, in Jmesa, South Mosul, CPTs and NP staff patrol near schools where girls have been frequently harassed, restoring a sense of safety for students and parents alike. Girls have reported feeling safer on their way to school and in public spaces. These activities have also allowed women and girls to return to school without the same level of concern or the need for an escort from their families. Furthermore, through shuttle diplomacy and collaboration with security actors, CPTs have held perpetrators accountable, while proactively raising awareness about violence prevention and reporting mechanisms.

The combined efforts of NP and CPTs have increased safety and strengthened social cohesion. Community members increasingly report sensitive cases such as domestic violence, online blackmail, and extortion directly to the CPTs—a notable achievement given the entrenched social taboos surrounding gender-based violence—and duty bearers are responding more effectively. Thus, CPTs and NP have not only reduced violence and contributed to safety but also increased dignified access to services, created opportunities for social engagement, and restored a sense of partnership between communities and those responsible for their protection. It has also provided a stepping stone towards addressing ethno-religious tensions, because most people have been reluctant to engage in inter-communal dialogue without having other needs met and grievances safely and effectively addressed

Community peace teams as a stepping stone towards reconnecting divided communities

In 2024, NP and CPTs have made extensive efforts to build trust and reconnect divided communities. This process has started with CPTs, both within and between. While each CPT remains largely homogenous in terms of ethno-religious composition,[18] progress has been made towards more diverse team compositions. In the village of Iman Gharbi (South Mosul) that experienced a deep rift between returnees and families of martyrs, NP supported the establishment of a Women Peace Team (WPT) that includes 40 per cent returnee women alongside women from martyr families. Issues of shared concern, like violence against women and water management, have been particularly effective entry points for bringing divided groups together. The Water Resource Management Committee in Sinjar District, for example, consists of four Shia members and 16 Yazidi members. Intra-communal tensions have also been an entry point for breaking down barriers between communities. Similarly, in South Mosul, most tensions emerge between families of IS survivors and families stigmatised as "IS families." CPTs in these areas include members who lost family members to IS violence as well as members who have relatives who were IS affiliates. The formation of these diverse peace teams alone has been an important step towards healing and reconciliation and shows the potential for applying these processes to inter-communal conflicts.

A next step in the process of reconnecting divided communities has been the building of relationships between peace teams that represent different sides of divisions, especially communities in Ba'aj and Sinjar. While donor agencies have been more forthcoming in supporting communities in Sinjar, the primary survivors of IS genocide, NP has insisted on maintaining its presence in both locations in order to have a more systemic impact. This strategy has paid off. Over the course of 2024, CPTs from Sinjar and Ba'aj have increasingly worked together. The Sinjar WPT and the Ba'aj Youth Peace Team (YPT) collaborated on International Peace Day by organising a tree-planting event in an underserved area of return. The Ba'aj YPT also took part in the tenth commemoration of the Yazidi Genocide in Kocho and Qahtaniya and conducted patrols to de-escalate tensions between Yazidi and Muslim communities, in coordination with the YPT from Sinjar. In addition, they engaged Facebook admins to remove divisive content and approached religious leaders to condemn harmful rhetoric against Yazidis. These efforts have been a visible demonstration of solidarity and togetherness and contributed to a shift in narratives of pain, blame and hatred, in addition to reducing stereotypes and fears.

Community Peace Teams as force multipliers

The efforts by NP and CPTs have contributed to social cohesion in various ways at the level of individuals, communities and institutions. It ripples out and touches on various facets of humanitarian and development processes. The WPT in Ba'aj, for example, now acts as a primary interlocutor between police and women facing domestic violence and online harassment, while the WPT in Imam Gharbi plays a similar role in opening communication channels for returnee women who face stigma and discrimination that limit their access to reliable employment opportunities. Late 2024, YPTs from Sinjar and Ba'aj joined forces to advocate for evening schools for secondary students in Qahtaniya and Adnaniya. While security concerns drove initial action—lack of access to education increases the likelihood of radicalisation—its impact was much more diverse, strengthening collaboration between divided communities and expanding the networks of CPTs into the education sector. Finally, the WPT from Hardan, Sinjar, overcame multiple social barriers to advocate with the government to address the lack of water and limited road infrastructure in Hardan, Sinjar. This helped to ease tensions within the Yazidi community and reduce resentment towards the Sunni Arab population, who had been perceived

Above: Hardan WPT. Hardan, Sinjar, Iraq, 2024. © NP
Right: CPT member at girls' school. Ba'aj, Iraq, 2024. © NP
Below: CPT conference. Iraq, 2024. © NP

as having better access to services.

Connecting duty bearers with communities to address their needs

A final area of contribution to social cohesion by NP and CPTs has been the establishment of collaborative relationships between civil society and government institutions. NP brought, for example, CPTs, the National Security Service and community police together in a Community Security Forum in Sinjar to share and discuss the problem of online extortion. As a result, the various parties are now communicating directly with each other to report and respond to cases without the need for NP to facilitate the process. Duty bearers have also become more flexible and proactive in their actions by no longer demanding a formal complaint before taking measures to mitigate online extortion. In fact, duty bearers are now actively consulting with CPTs on security matters to shape their actions, for example, asking WPTs where their own patrols should be conducted. This is significant because cultural norms would have previously prevented women from being considered sources of information on security matters. It also indicates the recognition among duty bearers of the value of unarmed civilian protection structures. Other outcomes have been the establishment of a Community Police Office in Ba'aj and improved coordination with CPTs on gender-based violence reporting mechanisms in South Mosul.

NP also played a pivotal role in enhancing accountability mechanisms through trust-building between duty bearers and communities. One significant development was NP's collaboration with the Human Rights Police Chief in Mosul, which addressed misconduct and abuse by police forces. NP first built relationships between the Human Rights Police and CPTs, enabling CPTs to report cases of violence and misconduct by police officers directly to the Chief. This mechanism created a pathway for communities to hold security duty bearers accountable, encouraging professionalism and impartiality within the security sector. For instance, during a meeting with the Human Rights Police Chief, the WPT in Imam Gharbi raised concerns about the lack of effective reporting mechanisms. The Chief took immediate action, contacting the local police station to activate better coordination with the CPTs. This advocacy marked a turning point, as CPTs and local security forces began working together from that moment on.

In summary, through a combination of Community Security Forums, bilateral meetings, and continuous follow-up, NP and CPTs have managed to create better communication and collaboration with duty bearers. By bringing together community members, police, community police, tribal *hashd*, tribal leaders and other stakeholders in shared forums, NP and CPTs have fostered accountability and transparency. The effects are likely to exponentially improve social cohesion and security as positive feedback loops develop and reinforce growing trust and interdependence between duty bearers and communities. Even in Ba'aj—where trust has been low in security actors—students have reported that police resuming their patrols around the school has made them feel safer.

Towards longer-term social cohesion

Despite progress, a lot remains to be done. Many people who have survived years of violence, exclusion and discrimination are not keen to engage for peace. Survivors of IS often confide that it is hard to care for others when their own rights have not yet been realised. As traumas of Yazidi survivors of genocide remain unresolved and passed on to the next generation, their perception of other communities as perpetrators or passive bystanders is unlikely to rapidly shift. Nonetheless, the shift in how communities and duty bearers approach security and coexistence is an important and essential beginning for social cohesion as they rebuild the social bonds and trust that have been broken since 2014.

[17] Key ingredients of social cohesion usually include social relationships, connectedness, orientation around the common good and equality.

[18] CPTs are composed of members from the community. Their exact composition depends on the group but spans across gender, demographics and ethno-religious compositions. Some are purely women or youth. In Ba'aj, South Mosul, and Zummar CPTs are Sunni Arabs (and Kurds in Zummar). In Sinjar, the main composition is with Yazidis—one in Hardan, in Qahtaniya and two in Sinjar Town. One YPT consists of both Shia and Yazidi.

Left: CPT conference. Iraq, May 2024. © NP
Below: CPTs at Qayyarah Peace Festival. Qayarrah, Iraq, September 2023. © NP

"A hidden pain
like a back mark
I've felt it
A lasting trauma that will
never go away
Even with millions of dollars."

Extract from 'Wounds and I' by Aulia, a participant of programming with Flower Aceh, a partner of NP Indonesia[19]

Above: Aulia. Aceh, Indonesia. February 2024. © NP
Right: Partners at inception workshop in Aceh, Dec 2022. © Flower Aceh

Indonesia

PROMOTING RECONCILIATION, HEALING, AND THE RIGHTS OF WOMEN IN ACEH

A successful yet unfinished peace process

In 2005, months after a tsunami devastated Aceh, a groundbreaking peace agreement was reached, granting Aceh political autonomy. This ended nearly three decades of an armed conflict estimated to have killed 30,000 people.[20] The agreement included the formation of an Aceh Truth and Reconciliation Commission (ATRC), provisions for reparations, and the integration of Acehnese Islamic criminal law (*jinayat*) into the regional legal framework.

Nearly twenty years on, the situation in Aceh has improved significantly. The Aceh Truth and Reconciliation Commission (ATRC), while 11 years late in its establishment, has documented abuses committed in the civil war. Various efforts have been made to address reparations and reform the criminal code. Economic activity has increased, and poverty rates have declined. Yet, despite significant progress, aspects of the peace agreement remain unresolved. The ATRC has no judicial powers and limited resources. Reconciliation and justice efforts in local communities, including the reparation for victims of human rights violations and abuse, have suffered significant delays. New remains of victims from the conflict period are still being uncovered and many people, especially women and girls, have been excluded from the efforts to bring the peace process to completion.[21] Moreover, the implementation of Islamic Law in Aceh as part of peace agreement has created serious barriers for women and girls to report rape or other forms of sexual violence, and many of its provisions are a breach of international and national human rights law and standards.

These lingering gaps are more than administrative oversights—they are areas of vulnerability where unaddressed trauma and systemic exclusion could reignite cycles of mistrust and harm. In this context, protection is not about physical intervention alone, but about creating space for healing, repairing relationships, and breaking the silence to restore dignity.

Over the course of 2023 and 2024, NP set out to support the completion of Aceh's peace process by supporting local efforts to strengthen transitional justice, protect women's rights, and promote civic engagement. Acting as a catalyst and convener, NP brought together six civil society organisations—including some that had lost touch with each other or diverged in focus—restitching a protective fabric that had begun to fray. Instead of providing frontline protection, NP worked behind the scenes to facilitate shared strategies, restore mutual trust, and promote collective action. It took an additional step toward localisation by establishing Nurani Perdamaian Indonesia, a local foundation led by Acehnese staff and governed by an Indonesian board, supported by NP.

From transitional justice to collective healing

Truth and reconciliation is one of the remaining loose threads in Aceh's peace process. The ATRC that was set up by the Aceh government has faced multiple challenges, including political sensitivities, limited institutional support, national-level uncertainty about transitional justice, and funding constraints. The recording of personal experiences of violence remains an important issue for many victims in the process of addressing their grievances. Without it, many of them refuse to accept other forms of reparation. This open wound has stood in the way of completing Aceh's peace process. The absence of public acknowledgement of acts of violence has become a quiet threat to peace. Left unspoken, grief calcifies. Left unheard, it isolates. And isolation breeds resentment. NP stepped into this space, not to amplify the voices of victims, but to listen, to be in solidarity, and to connect. This was a key area local partners asked NP to support them with.

Throughout 2023 and 2024, NP and partners, notably KontraS Aceh and Koalisi NGO HAM, made progress by increasing civil society engagement and awareness of transitional justice, strengthening advocacy for reparations, and facilitating the empowerment of victims. The two local partners brought together victims, civil society organisations and government representatives to cultivate a more inclusive conversation around truth and reconciliation. Victims, in particular women, actively participated in statement-giving processes, allowing their experiences to be captured in formal reporting. KontraS and Koalisi NGO HAM also supported ATRC personnel in increasing their documentation practice and facilitating better data analysis that aided advocacy efforts. This strengthened political will among parliamentarians to address past human rights violations and brought the issue of transitional justice to the forefront of the legislative discourse. Finally, NP's two partners collected 1,204 victim-statements that led to monetary compensation for

245 victims. Combined efforts supported a cultural shift towards more openness as victims began to speak more openly about past injustices. As more victims stepped forward, others followed, transforming silence into collective resilience. They also supported a deeper integration of transitional justice principles and practice within Aceh's governance structures and a stronger legislative focus on peacebuilding and human rights protections in parliament.

NP supported its two partners in the recording and analysis of statements and fostered a more holistic and creative process by drawing in a broader set of actors, including the women's rights organisations described below. When the partners struggled to maintain their efforts in the midst of national election campaigns, NP supported them in mobilising and training victims' organisations in the process of recording statements. This shift—supporting survivors to assume roles of truth facilitators—exemplifies NP's approach to community-centred protection. It improved the quality of statements, as fellow victims were more sensitive than the assigned ATRC statement takers and appreciated the nuances of details that make a difference to the statement. Victims spoke more freely, knowing they were not being observed, but understood. It also led to more statements being collected than expected, as victims felt more comfortable sharing their stories with fellow victims. In addition, it triggered a new wave of civic engagement and a shift from the pursuit of truth and reconciliation through formal channels towards efforts within communities to seek collective healing.

The broadening of the focus or evolution from formal accountability to community engagement and healing that took place organically showcases the potential of UCP as a practice of people-centred, relational security and the healing power of nonviolence. By creating a safer space for victims to voice their experiences of injustice in relationship to others, and by proactively engaging with those in power to address injustice and insecurity, NP and partners made a contribution to the healing of a long-standing cycle of violence in Aceh and to the growth of a culture of nonviolence.

Enhancing protection of women and children within Sharia Law

The consortium NP put together in Aceh consisted of a variety of groups focusing on different issues. While KontraS and Koalisi NGO HAM focused on truth and reconciliation, three other partners focused on the prevention of sexual violence, the promotion and protection of women's rights and the inclusion of women in peacebuilding, by means of leadership training, policy advocacy, community outreach and victim support.

One of these groups is Flower Aceh, a women's rights organisation whose leaders used to receive protective accompaniment from PBI during the war. Twenty-five years later, it is still working for peace and security, now confronting systemic violence against women. One notable task Flower Aceh and another partner, Balai Syura UIA, have taken on in 2023 and 2024 was campaigning for revisions to the Islamic Criminal Code practised in Aceh, *Qanun Jinayat*, for the lack of protection it provides against sexual and gender-based violence. This required a lot of courage as well as diplomacy, as it is a highly sensitive issue and the role of women in religious affairs has been limited, despite the active roles they have played as human rights defenders and architects of peace. At the beginning of their campaign, the women's groups struggled to gain access to influential stakeholders, including religious leaders, because of their public stance on the issue of reform. Stakeholders with opposing views would entrench their positions and only engage from a distance.

This led NP to step in as a connector—actively fostering linkages between different stakeholders at the local, regional and national levels. It also mobilised other partners, including the partners working on truth and reconciliation, to use their human rights networks as additional channels for the women's groups to gain direct access to religious leaders. Once access was gained, NP supported its partners in scaling down combative campaigning in favour of constructive dialogue—an approach deeply rooted in nonviolence. This revealed that concerns about protections laid forth under Sharia law were shared to some extent, but only expressed behind closed doors. Aware that conversations in private circles were different from what was being spoken publicly, sustained engagement on multiple fronts was undertaken. This allowed religious leaders to gradually acknowledge publicly that room for policy improvement exists in the implementation of Sharia law. It ultimately led religious leaders to release their own expert opinion on the issues and the problems they identified in the Islamic Criminal Code for the first time, which increased buy-in from other influential actors.

These results are significant because the *Qanun Jinayat* is part of the terms of autonomy uniquely applied in Aceh as part of the peace agreement. Therefore, religious and government authorities have always refrained from publicly exploring or acknowledging any concerns about sexual and gender-based violence and women's rights under this code for fear of provoking discontent and undermining the stability achieved since the end of the armed conflict. Although there remains some regional opposition to revising the *Qanun Jinayat*, the efforts that the women's groups started and the support that was gradually gained from religious leaders, the central government and among the public have led to a policy draft of the revision of the *Qanun Jinayat*.

Rasyidah, Acehnese community leader for mental health who has worked with NP and Flower Aceh. Aceh, Indonesia, 2024. © Denise Rafaeli Cadorniga/NP

[19] https://nonviolentpeaceforce.org/acehs-next-generation-healing-trauma-through-poetry/

[20]https://asia-ajar.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/peace-day-aceh-01.03.2022-1-1.pdf

[21] The Helsinki accord recognised the crucial role of gender equality and the participation of women in the peace process. Women's groups in Aceh played a vital role in advocating equal rights and were instrumental in the inclusion of gender provisions in the peace agreement. See also: https://www.thejakartapost.com/indonesia/2024/04/01/komnas-ham-opens-probe-into-bones-found-at-acehs-rumoh-geudong.html

[22] It also helped ensure that children cannot be tried under Qanun Jinayat, and in the event that they have been victims of sexual exploitation or abuse, their cases will be seen under national law where their protection is more integral to the process.

United States

YOUTH EMPOWERMENT AND STRENGTHENING COMMUNITY SAFETY IN NORTH MINNEAPOLIS

The United States finds itself at a time of instability, upheaval and rising tension: the number of hate groups is increasing, gun sales are reaching record levels, and cities around the country are seeing an erosion of social safety nets like housing and education alongside a rise in punitive responses to insecurity.[23] In Minnesota, where NP has had a presence since 2020, this is reflected in increasing racial inequality, declining access to education, and gun and gang violence—all of which disproportionately impact young people.

In response to these challenges, NP has concentrated its efforts in Minneapolis on working with youth in Northside, an area of the city that has experienced persistent disinvestment over the years and where two gangs operate. Many young people on the Northside are at risk of using violence and being victims of it. In low-income neighbourhoods, violence is three to four times higher than in other neighbourhoods, a rate exacerbated by fewer job opportunities, weaker professional networks and lower earnings. Much of the criminal activity and gang violence happening in North Minneapolis is carried out by young people, who are faced with limitations in their skills and scarcities in opportunities. This compels some to turn to selling drugs and joining gangs to economically support themselves and their families, as well as find a sense of community and belonging.

Creating safer spaces for healing

In Northside, NP aims to interrupt cycles of violence and provide a more holistic, participatory and less violent model of community security. NP's approach to interrupting cycles of violence has focused on the school-to-prison pipeline, a system that pushes minors and young adults from disadvantaged backgrounds out of classrooms and into the juvenile and criminal legal systems. By reaching out to youth and drawing them into regular activities of healing and learning, the risk they face of being harmed by violence or participating in it can be mitigated.

Above: NP Community Peacebuilders lead a training. Minneapolis, U.S. 13 May 2024. © NP
Following page: Mural in NP community space. Minneapolis, U.S. © NP

Within this process, NP has brought together protection and healing, two areas of work that are often kept separate. When soldiers protect, they usually put on armour and "toughen up"; for healing to take place, on the other hand, you need to open up and make yourself vulnerable. In contrast, NP has focused on creating spaces of relational security where young people are able to explore safety through opening up and connecting with others. Through activities such as Healing Circles, NP has created space for youth to come together in safer spaces to share and discuss the challenges to their safety, learn how to control their emotions and heal disagreements through nonviolence as an alternative to violent conflict resolution. Twice a week, anywhere from five to 18 young people in Minneapolis attend the Healing Circles. In these spaces, there is no judgement, one person speaks at a time, and people agree to disagree with each other. By talking about difficult issues in a safe group setting, youths develop the strength and skill to expose their vulnerabilities publicly, without feeling weak or threatened.

The courage and confidence that youth have gained in the Healing Circles have impacted other parts of their lives as well. One young person reported that his teacher approached him to say that whatever he has been doing outside of school, he should keep it up. She had noticed that his participation and effort in class had improved dramatically. Other youth participants have discussed finding the courage to speak up, the ability to control their emotions without resorting to violence and speak assertively instead of aggressively when encountering an unfair

situation or a conflict. Sometimes, even adults who are part of the young people's lives have come to the healing circle and shared their struggles. The youth have now started to take turns facilitating and coaching everyone, even the adults. They have discovered their capacity to not only help themselves but also serve others.

One-to-one mentoring on the bench

Another aspect of NP's work with youth has been one-to-one coaching and mentoring. Every day, 10 young men check in with NP staff to talk about "competing with life," bringing up their grades, and staying away from fights and other bad situations. This daily connection has provided them with a safety net of support, encouragement and reassurance. This regular mentoring has led to noticeable behavioural changes both in this setting and outside. For example, one young man, who previously had regular contact with the criminal legal system and regularly missed his sports practice, was encouraged through mentoring, becoming more engaged and committed to relationships with those around him. In time, he started coming regularly and on time to basketball training, for which he was rewarded with time on the court during the last game.

"This is what happens when we show up for kids as people—when we see them not as numbers or case files, but as *humans* with stories, setbacks, and unbelievable potential. They start showing up for themselves—and each other—in a different way. They start building new cycles," reflected Odell Wilson, NP Community Peacebuilder and part-time basketball coach and mentor.[24]

Transforming the neighbourhood through collective action and direct protection

The community in North Minneapolis, where NP works, is taking notice. People see that these youth keep their grades up, stay out of trouble, and show real commitment to their future. As Odell puts it: "The work we're doing in youth peacebuilding is making a difference. And now, more than ever, the community is asking us to keep pushing forward, to keep supporting these kids as they prove to themselves and others what they're capable of." When the NP team first moved into the neighbourhood, crime rates were high. There was almost a daily presence of police, ambulances, and people out at the bus stops under the influence of drugs. Now, there is a greater sense of safety. Parents worry less about their children's safety at the nearby bus stops, and the presence of police has significantly decreased.

Consistent presence in the community has been essential to this transformation, as well as collective action such as cleaning the streets together. These achievements are never secured alone, and NP's collaborations with community-led organisations and church groups have played a crucial role in fostering safety, including Brothers EMpowered, Restoration Inc., A Mother's Love, and Twin Cities Recovery Project[25] by focusing on substance abuse prevention.[26]

NP's reputation and strong relationships across the community also mean it has the acceptance necessary to directly intervene during incidents of violence and de-escalate the situation. For example, when outside the liquor store a fight broke out between two men from the neighbourhood that NP knew, two staff members rushed to the scene.[27] Although the police had already arrived and handcuffed the men, the trust NP had with the police convinced them to release the men and allow NP to manage the situation. Consequently, NP staff were able to support those involved to resolve their conflict without the use of force, so that by the end, both men were shaking hands and calling an end to their fight.

By interrupting the school-to-prison pipeline, connecting protection and healing, creating opportunities for collective action and directly responding to incidents of violence, NP and the community of North Minneapolis present an example of a nonviolent, community-driven approach to security. It shows what co-creation of community safety can look like in urban settings, a way that challenges to public safety can be met, in the US and elsewhere. Although the vision and model will be different for every community, basic human needs will be the foundation for all, because safety and security are basic human needs. As Will Wallace put it: "Safety look like when they at the park, they don't have to be ducking from bullets… Safety looks like when young people are able to provide safety for their community and then hold their friends accountable. Safety can look like when kids are not homeless. You know, safety can look like when there's food on the table. All these things have to be met."[28]

"This is what happens when we show up for kids as people—when we see them not as numbers or case files, but as humans"

[24] https://www.brookings.edu/articles/in-washington-dc-and-elsewhere-tough-on-crime-policies-make-cities-less-safe/

[25] https://www.brothersempowered.org/; https://www.restorationinc.org/; https://www.amothersloveinitiative.org/; and https://www.twincitiesrecoveryproject.org/

[26] https://nonviolentpeaceforce.org/more-than-a-car-ride-the-quiet-power-of-showing-up/

[27] https://nonviolentpeaceforce.org/peace-by-peace-direct-intervention-community-transformation-in-north-minneapolis/

[28] https://www.minnpost.com/metro/2025/03/can-downward-gun-violence-trends-in-north-minneapolis-curb-a-perception-that-its-unsafe/

Government & Institutional Support in 2024

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