

South Caucasus: Civil Society Organizations Form Nonviolent Peaceforce Advisory Council

By Sophia Skrypnyk, NP Program Advisor

No other organization I knew of before could do the work that NP does. NP knows how to work with conflicts: it has opened the channels of communication between communities in remote areas, NGOs and armed forces, and spread confidence among all those actors.

Meeting with grassroots activists



So says the Director of Society for Humanitarian Research in Baku, as he reflects upon the week he spent learning about the multi-faceted work of Nonviolent Peaceforce on the conflict-affected island of Mindanao.

The Society for Humanitarian Research is one of the prominent civil society organizations from the South Caucasus invited by Nonviolent Peaceforce to visit its program in the Philippines.

In the last two years, NP has carried out several exploration projects in Eurasia, resulting in a deployment of the first field teams in Georgia and increased visibility throughout the South Caucasus. A study visit "Civil society innovations for civilian security and human rights: NP's lessons from Mindanao" was held from August 28 – September 5, 2012 as part of NP's continuing effort to consolidate constituency and knowledge base for Unarmed Civilian Peacekeeping in the South Caucasus,

Study visit participants were introduced to both civil and military representatives of the parties in conflict, explored the working of the ceasefire monitoring mechanisms and met community and civil society leaders co-operating with NP. The group was exposed to divergent narratives about the conflict, civil society discourses and efforts for peace, as well as the multifaceted realities of the Mindanao conflict in the Cotabato, Maguindanao and General Santos areas.

The visitors were impressed by the scale of NP's work, local acceptance and respect enjoyed by the organization, and its strict practical adherence to the key guiding principles of its work, such as impartiality and the primacy of local actors.

An Abkhazian volunteer with the Center for Humanitarian Programs stated, "I have worked for international organizations operating in Abkhazia

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*NP Field Team Leader in
Maguindanao tells the visitors
about NP work in the Area*

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many years, including UNOMIG (United Nations Observer Mission in Georgia). Yet, what I notice here is that, even without the capacity and resources of the UN, NP has been able to achieve significant results. NP has also been able to maintain impartiality, which is particularly difficult”.

She is supported by the Chair of the Association of Women of South Ossetia for Democracy and Human Rights: “NP work has its similarities with the work of other organizations operating in conflict zones. But what makes NP different is its strategy excelled into the science. It is breathtaking. I was able to witness

the results of decreasing escalation of armed violence and civilian protection. For NP, individuals are important, regardless of their position. Those things cannot be faked. I would be very happy if NP would start operating in South Ossetia.”

While NP’s work in the Philippines enjoys wide acceptance and ensures tangible impact on civilians, the organization remains a newcomer in the South Caucasus region and needs local constituents to respond to the complex

challenges faced by the conflict-affected civilian population. The increased understanding of theory and practice of Unarmed Civilian Peacekeeping achieved during the visit by select civil society leaders will contribute to NP’s progress in the South Caucasus.

The founder of the Ergneti Center for Rehabilitation and Development in Georgia explains, “Comparing the situation in the

*Representatives of
NP's Georgian partner
organizations inquiring
with NP staff member in
the Philippines about the
community meeting they
just visited*



Philippines to the one in Georgia, we have already passed this stage of the conflict. NP managed to create a network, which is working in the Filipino context, and we made first steps in this way as NP partners in the Georgian region of Shida Kartli. We are happy that things already started working out, and happy to have the opportunity to discuss and exchange on the best way forward for NP in our region with civil society representatives from all parts of South Caucasus.”

The Chairman of the Civil Society Institute based in Yerevan has envisaged local application of NP’s mandate: “I had an opinion that NP will not be able to work on the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan because of the complex border issues that we are facing. But what is interesting and positive about NP is the clarity of the mandate in comparison to other international NGOs. There is a need for a clear mandate in the South Caucasus which would allow avoiding many recurrent mistakes. The main focus of NP work is peacekeeping and this is a significant reason to have this organization work in our region”.

The civil society participants of the Study Visit have concluded their stay in Mindanao by holding a founding meeting of the South Caucasus Advisory Council of NP, which took place in Maasim, Sarangani province. The Advisory Council will guide the organization on plans and implementation strategies in the South Caucasus and will help ensure the sustainability of its projects in the region.

A Day in the Life: Impressions of a Civilian Peacekeeper

By Georgi Engelbrecht

Early mornings in Maguindanao are not so much different from those in Europe. Well – almost. The sun rises at 6, and the folks from the barangay (village) are already getting on their feet. The sound of bikes and local sikal-sikals is the soundtrack for this new day. Yet another day for an Unarmed Civilian Peacekeeper begins.

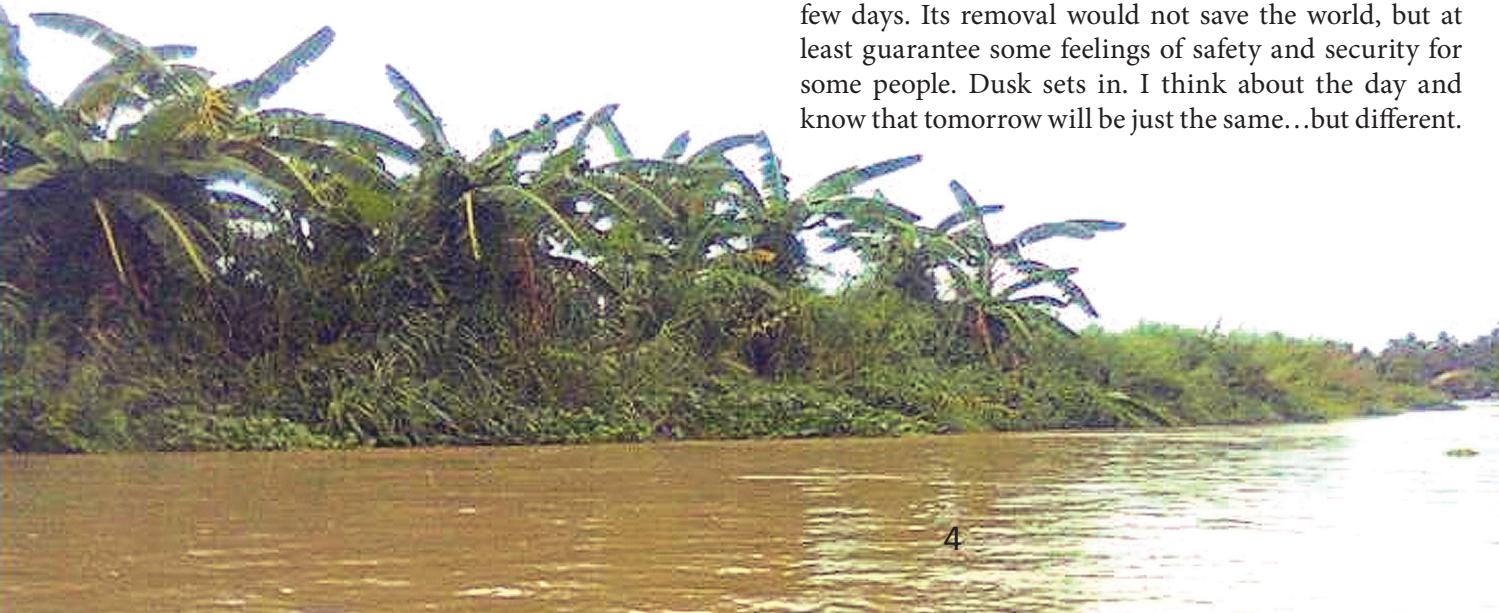
Living and working in the same environment as your colleagues might be a challenge, but rarely do we have the opportunity to experience and witness many different cultures in a short period of time. You're always part of a team. Each member of the team must be a diplomat, skilled communicator, psychologist, sociologist, writer and much more.

This is a day in the life of an Unarmed Civilian Peacekeeper. I'm sitting in an air-conditioned room with my teammates. There is only a small desk without decoration. Two women rush through the office. We are received by a representative of the Mayor of a small municipality. To speak with officials is one of the ubiquitous tasks of the team. Courtesy visits are a diplomatic channel to portray our presence with the necessary tact and respect. Particular talks and discussions with politicians or officials might appear unusual at first, yet without these ties, our work cannot be properly co-ordinated. Sometimes the scenery of the governmental insti-



tutions is surreal: big government buildings standing alone on wide plains of grass. Sometimes it is natural: men smoking and texting; women laughing shyly behind their hands after seeing a foreign visitor. But with every visit, a message is communicated. Not only do we perceive and observe, but we are also being perceived and observed, even in smaller meetings, even when we have a small merienda or snack.

The meeting is over, but another visit follows soon. There is a camp for Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in the vicinity of the Local Government Unit. Part of a civilian peacekeepers job is to observe and assess the situation of IDPs. Mindanao harbors high numbers of them. Many of the affected people are children, women and the elderly. Often, they receive only sporadic assistance from the government due to their sheer numbers and a lack of resources. Talking and listening to them is not only a gesture but an effort to change the situation a little bit. The humanitarian machinery of assistance is slow, as it is everywhere. Each time a child looks at me, or an elder tells a story, I feel tempted to give a promise. But it's not that easy. Now, this old datu, or traditional Muslim leader, offers us fish and rice. His toothless smile makes me feel at ease. Later he will tell me how he survived his childhood in Mindanao, when he was fighting as a guerilla against the Japanese.



*Conflict can come when it is least expected.
And the ghosts of the past still haunt this
green paradise, or “land of promise.”*

On the way back from the camp we pass the wide, green areas that form the rice and corn chambers of the country. The roads pass huge coconut trees, hills with mangoes and many other fruits. This region of Kutawato is blessed and cursed at the same time. Many local conflicts in Mindanao stem from land disputes. Who does this tree belong to? It's a question which more often than not motivates farmers to take up arms and demand—or defend—their fields and harvests. Whenever I am crossing the various landscapes of Maguindanao, this sad reality kicks in. Conflict can come when it is least expected. And the ghosts of the past still haunt this green paradise, or the “land of promise”: that's what Mindanao actually means.

So what am I doing then? Does it make sense to let a bunch of foreigners into a crisis area, bring them to the hotspot and hope for deterrence? Why not? Civilians

are trusted. They are unarmed, neither challenging the armed actors, nor scaring the local population. Proactive presence is, after all, not just a buzzword, but the impact is sometimes hard to measure. And dealing with the armed forces and police demands additional skills.

Now we are sitting in a shack with the Colonel. Coffee is offered to us, with sweet bananas. The Colonel nods in agreement, when we tell him about the presence of a military detachment that makes villagers feel very uncomfortable crossing a street to the health center of the barangay. Some people stay at home even at the cost of their health. We try to depict the civilians' situation in clear yet calm words. The face of the Colonel does not promise us anything, yet his words assure us of some sort of change. We thank him and leave.

It is almost 5 pm. I fall almost dead onto my bed. I wonder whether the detachment will still be there in a few days. Its removal would not save the world, but at least guarantee some feelings of safety and security for some people. Dusk sets in. I think about the day and know that tomorrow will be just the same...but different.

Peace in the Philippines: One Step Closer

After four decades of violence resulting in some 120,000 deaths and displacing an estimated two million civilians, the Government of the Philippines and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front have now reached a historic breakthrough in the form of a Framework Agreement to end the conflict in Mindanao, Philippines. The agreement was signed at an official ceremony last month.

As the only international non-governmental member of the Malaysian-led International Monitoring Team (IMT), Nonviolent Peaceforce was able to directly reduce the suffering and destruction wrought by violence upon the civilian population.

“Peace at the negotiating table was made possible by the daily reality of peace on the ground over these past two years – itself the result of a unique experiment in unarmed civilian peacekeeping embedded in an official ceasefire mechanism. The success of this experiment now opens up new opportunities to replicate this model in other conflict settings around the world,” said Tim Wallis, Executive Director of NP.

This past summer, Mel Duncan, Director of Advocacy and Outreach for Nonviolent Peaceforce, spent several weeks visiting our field sites in South Sudan. The following is a post about his encounter with a loose-knit, meagerly armed, local defense force called the Arrow Boys.

The Arrow Boys and NP

By Mel Duncan

From our base in Nzara we traveled by Land Cruiser for two hours through the lush green forest on red rutted roads splashing through puddles up to our door panels.

We stopped in a boma (a small village) a few kilometers from the border with the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). We were in the heart of what is referred to as the “LRA Affected Areas,” those parts of South Sudan, the DRC and the Central Africa Republic where the Lord’s Resistance Army currently operate.

It is the rainy season. Crops will start to be harvested soon. The LRA will be coming to look for food. They usually travel in small groups of 9 or less and attack even smaller groups.

We met with 25 “Arrow Boys” and the chief of the payam. The Arrow Boys, armed with bows, arrows, spears and homemade single shot rifles patrol the bush surrounding their bomas. They walk every day through dense undergrowth tolerating rain, mud, tsetse flies and snakes. A few have boots. None have rain gear or first aid.

They are frustrated. When threats appear, it takes the Sudanese army 2-3 days to respond. UN agencies and NGOs withdraw.



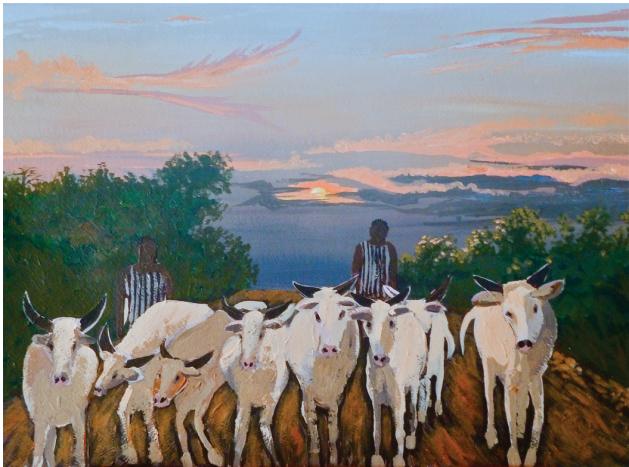
NP staff meets the Arrow Boys

The Arrow Boys see no other ways to protect their communities. As one told me, “It is kill or be taken.”

So there we were: Nonviolent Peaceforce and the Arrow Boys. We weren’t there in a vain attempt to try to convince them to lay down their weapons. We were there to find our common ground in terms of protecting civilians. The NP team met the next morning and strategized how to develop the relationship with the Arrow Boys, based on our principles and mandate:

- Training on Conflict Early Warning/Early Response.
- Training on Unarmed Civilian protection including child protection.
- Advocacy with the UN mission to increase their patrols of the area during the harvest season.
- A regular presence of NP peacekeepers.
- Advocacy on the international level to negotiate a settlement.

It was a humbling encounter. The Arrow Boys want to hear back from us. We will return with our offer and talk. NP will remain nonviolent. The Arrow Boys will retain their weapons. As we authentically engage with each other, we all will learn a lot.



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