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

* * *

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

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

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

Unarmed civilian protection (UCP) directly saves lives; UCP that includes social cohesion programming brings about benefits such as an increased sense of shared identity, solidarity and equality that could, in the long term, avert conflict or support its successful resolution. The strategies of both approaches can often be intertwined and it is important to be explicit when setting objectives for different interventions as to their short, medium, and long-term goals.

**Defining and promoting social cohesion**

Many agree that programs to promote social cohesion can often influence efforts to bring about or maintain peace. There are ongoing discussions about social cohesion including its very definition which is a topic among many international bodies with experience working directly with communities enduring conflict or emerging from it. Other topics include impact settings, enabling platforms, and the importance of networks:

- **Impact settings**
  - *Urban settings:* Many consider strengthening social cohesion to be a critical aspect of community programs in towns and cities, particularly involving marginalized and migrant groups.
  - *Refugee settings:* Refugees’ rights and host community needs are key to fostering social cohesion through access, local economic development and enhancing positive signs of inclusion of refugees in cultural or economic life.

- **Enabling platforms**
  - *Strengthening the role of the media:* Its role in fostering social cohesion, and local
governments’ communication capacities is undisputed, especially with the range of traditional and new tools at our disposal today.

▷ **Education**: Promoting social cohesion is frequently cited as one main objective of public education. The social benefits of education can translate into societal benefits, but perhaps even more critical is the importance of fair distribution of opportunities and skills.

- **Networks and socially cohesive activities**
  
  ▷ **Cooperative multi-stakeholder networks**: These support social cohesion by ensuring involvement of municipalities, central government, NGOs and donors. Participatory meetings, social media, knowledge-sharing and multi-service centers for vulnerable populations can be a catalyst for such networks.

  ▷ **Linkages between local and central governments**: Especially where local governments deal with crises and feel unsupported by their central governments, facilitating these linkages is a crucial step.

- **Additional elements being discussed**

  ▷ **Economics**: Social cohesion is increasingly considered an important issue for wealthy countries and countries emerging from poverty; strengthening social mobility, social capital and social inclusion are considered key factors in this discourse

  ▷ **Post-conflict societies**: Social cohesion is increasingly part of the donor and INGO portfolio in areas of violent conflict and post-conflict.

NP’s work in **UCP** aligns with the four pillars of social cohesion as outlined in **Search for Common Ground**, a multi-stakeholder framework on social cohesion:

- **Social relationships**: Building relationships is at the core of UCP methodology. As a non-partisan external third party, NP builds and fosters relationship as a pathway to preventing violence and protecting civilians.

- **Connectedness**: NP draws on its network of relationships to connect people. In particular, it seeks to connect populations and individuals most vulnerable to violence with individuals or institutions that have the largest influence to prevent violence or reduce its impact.

- **Orientation towards the common good**: NP maximizes the inter-connections with local actors to promote and model nonviolent behavior; dissuading potential perpetrators from harming civilians; reminding authorities of their responsibility to protect civilians; and assisting community members in becoming pro-active participants of peace and security processes.
• **Equality**: By remaining impartial, employing gender-balanced and ethnically diverse teams, and standing side by side with people who are excluded on the basis of sexuality, race, or religious affiliation, NP promotes an environment that is conducive to equality.

Activities that help knit societies together
NP is involved in many of the activities that promote social cohesion -- from simple, hands-on tasks to more complicated political interventions including:

- Ensuring that socio-economic services and opportunities reach under-served areas and communities.
- Building collaborative relationships between civil society and State or non-State authorities.
- Facilitating dialogue among conflicting groups.
- Encouraging community participation and active engagement in political and local activities.
- Encouraging authorities’ responsiveness to its citizens.
- Reducing stereotyping and discrimination based on race, sexuality, gender, ethnicity or religion.

*Social Cohesion Community Meeting in Juba, South Sudan*
- Promoting messages of tolerance, and peaceful co-existence towards religious communities.

NP also contributes to social cohesion programming through our four other areas of work:

- Our work in the area of “Women, Peace and Security” includes creating learning opportunities and increased access to information for women and sexual or gender minorities. At the same time, we aim to strengthen gender-sensitive policies and procedures of institutions that are engaged in social cohesion projects and increase awareness about inequality and marginalization of women (for example in customary courts or police force).

- In the area of child protection, we foster dialogue between communities and authorities, with the issue of child protection as an entry point for greater responsiveness among authorities towards wider civilian protection. We support stronger child protection policies and procedures of institutions that are engaged in social cohesion projects and help to increase awareness about the special needs of children.

- When it comes to protection in humanitarian emergencies, our work to reduce discrimination and stereotyping about Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), and to generate solidarity and empathy among (host) communities for the protection and well-being of IDPs, are also an opening to create a shared sense of social responsibility and cohesion.

- And our work on inclusive ceasefires and peace process means that social cohesion efforts can be enhanced by connecting project beneficiaries with leaders in the peace process (authorities or civil society representatives of informal peace infrastructures) to clarify decisions, correct misperceptions, reduce fears, and build trust. Sometimes, NP’s organizing of visits and exchanges can go a long way towards connecting different stakeholders who might otherwise not hear, or listen to, each other’s concerns and needs.

Overcoming social dissonance also means addressing violent extremism. Here, social cohesion efforts can be enhanced by relationship-building with or inclusion of members of (perceived) radical groups in existing activities or networks, reducing stereotypes or discrimination of groups that are branded as violent extremists among project beneficiaries, and facilitating dialogue about the threat and fear of real or perceived extremism among project beneficiaries.