**Submission of Nonviolent Peaceforce**

**to the Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights of internally displaced persons**

**on thematic priorities of the Special Rapporteur on the human rights**

**of internally displaced persons**

**(June 2023)**

Background

Nonviolent Peaceforce (NP) is an international non-governmental organization focused on protection of civilians. Our mission is to protect civilians in violent conflicts through unarmed, civilian-led strategies, build peace side-by-side with local communities, and advocate for the wider adoption of these approaches to safeguard human lives and dignity.

Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) around the world are enduring intense violence and suffering. Whether direct injury or death, torture, sexual violence, the loss of loved ones, or the compounding effects of insufficient infrastructure to support them, the challenges that IDPs face are urgent and critical. In the face of these harms, protection needs are significant. Traditionally, the Protection of Civilians is often understood as something that is codified in a law or a mandate, provided to civilians by states or third-party organisations. Conventional practice in emergency conflict settings assign the direct protection of civilians from violence to actors such as armed peacekeepers, the police or military, and more holistic general protection tasks such as mediation and dialogue, legal protection, or peacebuilding to humanitarians. This conventional approach unfortunately overlooks the ways that civilians protect themselves and one another. **Re-centring civilians in how protection is conducted, re-orients where agency and power is found. This disrupts and shifts power asymmetries that are common when ‘protection actors’ are separate to communities and wield power-over, rather than power-with. The use of Unarmed Civilian Protection (UCP) strategies allows different approaches for the protection of civilians to emerge, enabling us to reconsider institutional constraints and conventional boundaries.**

To meet growing and urgent protection needs around the world means understanding and optimising what different actors can offer. There are no perfect tools or panaceas in protection. But when the international community shifts to community-based approaches and can be clear-eyed about current power disparities that shape our protection policies and systems, there is an opportunity to recraft the protection of civilians in ways that centre the experiences and agency of those most affected by, and most often first responders to, violent conflict – communities themselves.

Climate change and internal displacement:

**Climate change is a significant driver of displacement and exacerbates conflict leading to new and increased protection needs.** Extreme weather events are already “causing an average of more than 20 million people to leave their homes and move to other areas in their countries each year.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Throughout the world, civilians are struggling with the consequences of these events. One NP partner in South Sudan reflected on flooding that has ravaged the country as “the worst thing that happened in my lifetime.”[[2]](#footnote-2) These floods have prompted mass displacement, destroyed livelihoods and further exacerbated social and political tensions which were already high in the wake of the country’s civil war.

While seeking both to improve the protection of IDPs in the midst of immediate catastrophic climate events and prolonged climate crisis, NP recommends that the Special Rapporteur on the human rights of internally displaced persons:

1. Place civilian-led, nonviolent mechanisms at the forefront of protection responses in the face of climate and conflict crises;
2. Integrate the protection of civilians in responses to climate change and prioritise the Do No Harm principle;
3. Increase financing of civilian protection mechanisms, such as Unarmed Civilian Protection and prioritise integrated responses to the compounded threats of climate change and violent conflict;
4. Recognize the potential negative impact of militarised approaches to protection in accelerating climate change and exacerbating violent threats to civilians; and
5. Integrate environmentally ethical and climate change mitigating practices into the protection of IDPs.

Internal displacement due to generalized violence, including the role of criminal violence

Generalized violence can threaten the health, safety, security, and/or well-being of a community or another large group of people leading to displacement and humanitarian emergencies. **A holistic approach to humanitarian actions aims to not only save lives and ease suffering but to safeguard human dignity in the process and to build resilience**

**of those affected to withstand future shock.** When responding to displacement due to generalized violence, NP believes the following issues merit attention:

* **Protracted displacement:** Affected populations are often deprived of basic rights while host communities and states struggle with increased competition over access to basic services, labour markets and accommodation.
* **Human-made insecurity:** Patterns of violence and conflict are repeated, challenging efforts to procure lasting political solutions and peaceful outcomes.
* **Trafficking and smuggling:** Persons trafficked or smuggled risk often remain stateless and are inadequately reflected in existing legal or assistance frameworks. Critical investment in resilience is insufficient yet vital to lasting, sustainable change.
* **Protection needs beyond displacement:** Protection needs related to displacement often continue beyond physical movements. For many, displacement does not end at a point in time.

NP therefore recommends that the Special Rapporteur on the human rights of internally displaced persons:

1. Advocate for attention to and strengthening of immediate, direct protection of IDPs from generalized violence including criminal and other violence;
2. Recognize and address the particular needs of the most vulnerable including women and girls, groups that are a minority and/or marginalized due to ethnicity, religion, gender-identity and/or orientation or other exclusion due to discrimination, harassment, or violence; and
3. Support and promote UCP as a tool for protection by helping to create an infrastructure for violence prevention and community cohesion which unleashes the power and agency of local actors and supports them to be key proactive actors in their own protection.

Internally displaced persons and peace negotiations, mediation and peace processes, and peacebuilding

Internally displaced persons are often excluded from conversations about the very issues which caused them to flee their homes. Among displaced communities, women, youth and other marginalised communities are often further excluded. NP believes that sustainable peace and reconciliation can only be achieved through the radical centring of those most affected by violence and conflict, among whom IDPs are a significant group. It is particularly important that IDPs are included as key stakeholders in peace processes as they must find that the processes are fair and effective if they are to feel safe returning to areas they have fled. With this in mind, NP recommends that the Special Rapporteur on the human rights of internally displaced persons:

1. Elevate the voices and decision-making power of displaced persons within peace negotiations, mediation and peace processes, and peacebuilding, making sure to include IDPs from marginalized and overlooked groups;
2. Recognize the diversity of experiences held by IDPs and the ways in which identity, social standing and other factors affect these experiences; and
3. Facilitate peacebuilding activities between IDPs and host communities to support cultural exchange, social cohesion, trust- and relationship-building, and inclusion.

Secure and sustainable integration and/or reintegration into the communities in which they settle or return to

When seeking to improve the integration and/or reintegration of IDPs, NP believes it is critically important to invest in social cohesion and to ensure sufficient focus on re-building trust and relationships to create confidence in safe, sustainable returns through conflict-sensitive humanitarian, development, and re-settlement policies. NP recommends that the Special Rapporteur consider three key actions in attempting to improve social cohesion between IDPs and their host communities.

1. **Strengthening the leadership capacities of women and youth:** When undertaking activities vis a vis IDP communities, the marginalisation of women and youth is often an area of concern that is overlooked. Conflict-sensitive and gender-sensitive approaches in initial and follow-up projects, should aim to integrate the development of leadership capacities of women and youth within the broader context of protection and conflict resolution activities. For example, in South Sudan and Myanmar, NP strengthened leadership skills of women across the country by supporting them to conceptualize and initiate community-led activities for peace and security. After initial skill-building, bringing various groups together across conflict lines helped facilitate dialogue and create bi-communal activities between women groups from different estranged communities and between women’s groups and security forces as well.
2. **Facilitating inter-communal and intra-communal dialogue:** In South Sudan and Sri Lanka, NP has played a role in informal grassroots level community peacemaking efforts. NP shuttled back and forth between community leaders and monitored the implementation of any agreements they made. Rather than taking on a leading role as mediators, NP identifies local mediators and supports or even physically accompanies them. The idea of doing low-profile legwork instead of high-profile mediation work, is often an eye opener to ‘disempowered’ local actors that assume they must first become skilled mediators in order to do something. The involvement of local community leaders and representatives of political or customary institutions in the process of conflict resolution can further strengthens social cohesion.
3. **Strengthening community resilience:** Local actors have a great capacity to forge solidarity, to sustain hope and purpose, and to adapt and negotiate creatively with the challenges presented as a result of their application of UCP with local communities. Through the application of proactive engagement and other UCP methods, self-confidence and agency increase among local actors, as do safety and security, trust, local ownership, creativity, critical thinking, social engagement, and other factors associated with resilience.

1. <https://www.unhcr.org/uk/what-we-do/how-we-work/environment-disasters-and-climate-change/climate-change-and-disaster> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://nonviolentpeaceforce.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Climate_Crisis_UCP.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)