

The Nonviolent Peaceforce in Sri Lanka: methods and impact (September 2003-January 2006)

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Since 2003 the Nonviolent Peaceforce (NP) in Sri Lanka has aimed to increase the safety of civilians in Sri Lanka so that they can contribute to a lasting peace that includes a sense of justice. The NP has effectively assisted people to move to safer places, and supported people in interactions with authorities. The NP has also contributed to defusing ongoing violence and preventing further violence within specific situations. In addition, the NP has helped to mobilize other national non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) to contribute to peace and non-violence efforts, and supports local leaders to engage in peaceful efforts to resolve conflict and prevent violence.

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Introduction

The mission of the Nonviolent Peaceforce (NP) is to build a trained, international civilian nonviolent peace force.¹ The Nonviolent Peaceforce works in conflict areas to prevent death and destruction, and protect human rights. Therefore, they create the space for local groups to struggle non-violently, enter into dialogue, and seek peaceful resolutions. In Sri Lanka, the NP teams are deployed in four field sites in the north and east of the country. These are the areas that were most heavily affected by the civil war, the Tsunami (2004) and the ongoing, targeted violence that has continued since the ceasefire of

2002. In the last 3 years, there were significant flare-ups of communal violence between Tamil and Muslim communities in the east, while in the same period, there has also been a steady stream of assassinations of Tamils who were members of political groups other than the dominant rebel group, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (LTTE). LTTE cadre has also been assassinated on occasion. An internal split in the LTTE in spring of 2004 resulted in a breakaway faction under the name of 'Karuna', establishing itself in the east. This faction, though militarily defeated by the LTTE in April 2004, still exists underground. Since then, the level of targeted assassinations against civilians has drastically increased, along with an increase in disappearances, particularly in the same area. Following the election of President Rajapakse in November 2005, the level of violence increased suddenly, and significantly. During this time there has been a dramatic increase in disappearances and reports of human right violations by the Sri Lankan armed forces, the police, the LTTE and other unknown actors.

Field teams

As of December 2005 the project had 20 field team members (FTMs) working in four teams. They came from many different countries, such as Japan, India, Canada, USA, Brazil/Palestine, Germany, Philippines, Kenya and Ghana. FTMs work

and live in mixed: cultural, gender, class, religion, age and language teams. English is the working language shared by all.²

The focus of the teams is to decrease and prevent violence in co-operation with Sri Lankans, and to support Sri Lankan participation in creating peace that includes justice.³ In order to do this, the teams must have excellent relationships with all actors in their areas including the LTTE, the Sri Lankan armed forces and the government of Sri Lanka (via the police and local government officials). Additionally they must also have very strong relationships with peace and justice activists, human rights promoters, development workers, and other related INGOs (International non-governmental organisations) and NGOs (non-governmental organisations). The teams must be located in easily accessible offices, not only in terms of transportation, but also in areas that all ethnic groups can safely visit.

The activities of the team have included: *being present* (thus discouraging violence) at community events such as temple and other religious festivals; hartals (general strikes) and community-wide meetings; *accompanying family members of missing persons* and making inquiries as to their whereabouts; *cooperating* with Peoples Action for Free and Fair Elections (PAFFREL) to help prevent violence and unfair practices during elections; *supporting the coordination* and work of networks of local NGOs and INGOs as related to the mandate; *helping to connect* communities to needed resources and INGOs to local communities; *mediate* between various groups during conflicts; *accompanying local NGO workers* to deliver services in vulnerable communities, etc. This work has meant that at times FTMs are present in very volatile and violent situations, putting themselves at risk in the service of peace keeping.

The process of engaging with organizations, individuals and communities in order to support Sri Lankan engagement, and to help decrease and prevent further violence, is slow and repetitious. One thing leads to another, whether it is a positive enhancement or a negative undercurrent to the work. Similar, seemingly small activities may have to be done over and over again before new opportunities occur to engage in work that will have larger impacts. Work tends to build upwards, from impacting individuals or small groups, to eventually expanding to larger groups and communities. It also takes time to build effective reciprocal working relationships with the appropriate network of other local and international actors. FTMs spend time visiting individuals, families, community leaders, organizations, and government and LTTE leadership. Solid, trusting and effective relationships with significant people and organizations in the area are one of the essential keys to NP's work in the field.

Accompanying people

Accompanying threatened people. In March 2004 there was a split in the LTTE. Colonel Karuna, from the Batticaloa area, alleged discrimination within the LTTE against eastern Tamils and broke away with thousands of cadre. In April 2004 there was a brief fight at the Veragul river and then the so-called Karuna faction dispersed into the countryside. At that time, hundreds of child soldiers in the Karuna faction were released to return to their families.

NP was the only INGO and one of the few NGOs near the fighting at the Veragul and was quickly caught up in issues related to the release of the child soldiers. Families were looking for children, and vice versa. Very quickly after reuniting children with their families, families began to worry that the

LTTE would come to re-recruit their children. NP received many requests to help families move children to safer places: either training centres or schools, or to other communities where family and friends were available to help. When appropriate, NP provided transportation and accompaniment. Given that these children generally lacked proper identification, that their families were terrified, and that the families often had no resources for transportation, or knowledge or access outside their own village, NP involvement was essential. NP was able to get the young people through various checkpoints, keep them safe, and provide transportation that not only kept their travel unobtrusive, but also did not incur a financial hardship for the families.

Over a period of time, NP learned several critical lessons. Children needed to agree with their families that it was essential to move and to agree on the destination. If no agreement is made, they might run away and endanger not only themselves, but also others in the process as well. NP learned to do a thorough investigation of the request, asking both the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in many cases for supporting information. There were several cases, in retrospect, that were poorly understood and that might have placed a number of people in danger. People being accompanied have to clearly embrace non-violence, at least for the time being. Finally, there needs to be a clear plan. NP cannot start the process to accompany a person until the final drop-off point is clear in terms of place, and who is responsible for a child that is being accompanied. NP does not provide 'safe places' and so must be able leave the person(s) at a previously designated place.

As people in the community became aware that NP did this work, it has expanded to

assisting in the evacuation of other people threatened with abduction, or death. While the circumstances differ, the process is the same. There needs to be a good investigation to be sure that everyone involved is in agreement, a clarity about the truthfulness of the situation as best as can be ascertained, a commitment to non-violence, transportation that is as discrete as possible, and a clear end-point that is reachable with the time and resources allotted. There was one case where a person was killed while NP was in the middle of this process. This has increased the awareness of the tension between being careful and thorough, and responding to the level of urgency appropriately.

These accompaniments have not only saved lives and helped to prevent specific instances of forced recruitment, but have built relationships within the community. As word spread that NP was doing this kind of work, other people approached NP for other issues. Clearly there was a growth in trust and respect. Conversely, to not do this work, would have undermined relationships. In particular, partners NP works with on a variety of issues have initiated some of these accompaniments. It is critical to respond to their requests seriously, whether or not in the end FTMs decide to act as requested. At the same time, the limitations of the work and the reality that, in many cases, NP intervention appears to be powerless, contributes to decrease trust in some people. Due to all of these factors, the nature of the work changed in many ways after April 2004. It also became clear that responding to a critical community need was instrumental in building new relationships that then opened new and significant opportunities to implement the aims of NP.

Accompanying people meeting with authorities. During the same time period of April/May 2004, NP connected with mothers and other

family members who were looking for their children. NP was requested, on occasion, to be present during meetings with the LTTE while these mothers asked for information about their children. This is always a very sensitive situation, as the LTTE would prefer to meet people individually, and without accompaniment. Family members feel afraid to meet the LTTE alone, and want the perceived safety and support of internationals. At times NP accompaniment seems to have made a significant difference. On more than one occasion, NP has been part of an effort that resulted in the release of a group of young soldiers. Fewer, but similar instances have occurred when civilians engaging policy, army, 'home guards' or other government officials on human rights, conflict, protection or other sensitive matters have requested NP accompaniment. At other times, particularly since the Tsunami, people have asked for NP accompaniment to deal with various local officials of the government of Sri Lanka, or with the LTTE on other issues. Issues may be as wide ranging as personal IDs, land titles or other sensitive issues. At other times, NP presence seems to have provided a sense of confidence for people to advocate for themselves as well as made a difference in how people were treated and the response to their requests. One of these accompaniments actually took place over several days, as FTMs went with mothers to visit several offices in cities in other districts. This involved not only the meetings, but also providing transportation, and by staying together helped the women feel safer.

In order to do this work NP must maintain good working relationships with authorities and actors in the communities where NP operates, including representatives from both the government of Sri Lanka and the LTTE. While being clear on the areas of

disagreement, FTMs stress the shared values and perceptions, such as parents should be able to determine what their children do, a families' right to lobby for the safety of family members, and the right to request accountability from bodies that claim to represent civilians without fear or intimidation. NP in Sri Lanka, at least as of this date, has not engaged in 'name and shame' pressure tactics, but rather has found ways to act on shared interests. It is important to know when to back off and give the authorities some 'face-saving' space for safety's sake, as well as the sake of future relationships.

NP has learned that it is often better not to have their presence be a surprise, but to warn authorities ahead of time they are coming. As with the evacuation accompaniment, it is critical to have an end-point and limits in mind before undertaking this kind of accompaniment. FTMs must be very clear what they will and won't do, and at what point they will, or won't, continue. It is important to plan ahead for worst case scenarios and to be sure that all NP staff who will have anything to do with various parts of these efforts are fully briefed about, and concur with, the plan. It is critical to be clear what decisions NP will make and what is up to the people being accompanied – i.e., if FTMs feel a situation is unsafe, they must be able to decide to leave, even if other people don't feel the same level of threat. It is also critical to have a decision-making process agreed on ahead of time. Lastly, it is important to agree what roles NP will play and what role the people NP accompanies will play in the actual meetings. Through experience, FTMs have come to trust their own intuition about the urgency of a request, and how to proceed with it.

Accompanying NGO staff. In the immediate aftermath of the tsunami, NP was requested to accompany different NGO and INGO staff across Sri Lankan Army and/or LTTE

checkpoints, so that aid and relief could be delivered. Because NP was already known in some areas, and because of NP's international status, NP was able to assist others in their relief and rehabilitation work. As violence continued to escalate in the following year, a number of other local NGOs requested accompaniment in order to cross checkpoints and/or to feel safer when working in threatened communities. NP has continued to develop these relationships when doing so helps to increase the safety and security of communities, helps to decrease tensions in specific communities with inadequate resources and assistance, and in other situations that clearly meet the NP Sri Lanka aims. Critical development work cannot take place if the levels of violence or threat of violence is too high.

These accompaniments are for shorter periods of time, and tend to reoccur. They are mutually beneficial. While NP accompaniment provides greater access and safety, local NGO staff has played a critical role in introducing NP to threatened and vulnerable areas, thus extending the reach of the work. Often these relationships, which began over very limited co-operation around movement of staff, have led to more long term co-operation to address issues of early warning, planning responses to increases in violence, and other strategic areas of focus.

Lessons learned. The current practice of NP in Sri Lanka has been to do these accompaniments with a relatively low profile and attracting as little attention as possible in order to protect those we are accompanying. This may change however, as the violence increases. NP expects they will need to make armed actors more aware of their movements and presence, in order to contribute to the safety of those they accompany. If threatened directly, perhaps it will become necessary to

mobilize more international attention to this work

NP does accompaniment because:

- It is a way of supporting Sri Lankan civilians directly in circumstances where other options, or international support, may be unavailable to them.
- Sri Lankans doing good community work feel it increases safety.
- It strengthens/creates new relationships and opens new opportunities to peace and community work.
- NP is part of a larger strategy we use to engage vulnerable communities.
- It assists in addressing issues of human rights and engagement with less violence or intimidation.

Accompaniment has helped to protect lives, increase safety for civilians to engage in peace and justice work, decrease violence, and has been critical in strengthening other NP work. Interestingly, it has also increased NP's own security as people in the community share more. It has improved relationships with other organizations. NP has also helped to empower individuals, and groups of individuals, by increasing their sense of what they can do with NP and by themselves, and opened up more possibilities for civilian initiative. Overall, NP has found this element of the work in Sri Lanka to be critical to the total impact of the project.

The ability to carry out accompaniment rests on the Sri Lankan government, the LTTE and other actors concern for internationals and the opinions of international governments and organizations. Should there come a time when any of these entities no longer have these concerns, or they are greatly diminished, this work will have to change. NP is grateful to both the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE for their co-operation with, and respect for, our work.⁴

Calming communal violence

Mutur, in Trincomalee district, saw some of the worst communal violence between Tamil and Muslim communities in 2003. NP chose to open an office there in early 2004 as a way to contribute directly to peace keeping in the region. In early December 2005, a Muslim politician was shot and killed in Mutur. The violence escalated rapidly with the abduction and killings of several Muslims and Tamils over a period of 2 or 3 days. Rumors spread rapidly. There were Tamils in predominantly Muslim areas and Muslims in Tamil areas. The dead bodies of those abducted earlier were found and witnessed by hundreds of people, adding additional fuel to the angry situation. As families at the edge of their own ethnic community moved to safer places, such as mosques and schools, cattle got in to some farmer's fields, allegedly let in on purpose, and destroyed valuable crops.

In the midst of this violence and chaos, NP's FTMs worked closely with other organizations such as the Foundation for Co-existence (FCE), UNICEF, Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM), and AHAM (a local Sri Lankan NGO). Leaders from each ethnicity felt that they could not make the first move to meet, although they agreed that there was an urgent need to come to some understanding to calm the violence before it escalated further. NP was able to work closely, in particular with FCE and SLMM, to schedule a meeting between the local political LTTE leader and several Muslim leaders from various communities. This was worked out in part by NP shuttling back and forth, making calls for others, so that no one had to look like they had taken the first step.

Additionally, in the first day or two, NP accompanied groups of Tamils and Muslims stuck in the wrong community back to their

home communities. Because NP was out on the roads and in the communities, NP was able to relay valuable information to and from various groups. For instance, some vulnerable communities asked NP to request more security from the police. NP worked hard to track down the truth behind various rumours, and to share that truth widely.

Despite the history of violence in this community and the initial indications of escalation, the situation did not escalate further. There have continued to be several more killings that appear to be a pattern of retaliation, but nothing like the wholesale attacks of previous years.

NP had worked closely with all the involved leaders and organizations that eventually drew up a memorandum of understanding for ways to defuse future violence and prevent further killing. The memorandum calls for the normalizing of life in the area, with schools, businesses and transport returning to normal.

NP is continuing to work with key leaders and organizations to ensure the memorandum is implemented and strengthened as needed. There are also a couple of community Peace Committees in this area. This crisis has strengthened their work as well. NP has worked hard to support their leadership and growth in these hard times. The Peace Committees are nodes of non-violence and peace activism in the midst of tensions and pressures to retaliate.

There have been, and continue to be, strong impacts arising from the work during this crisis. New relationships were built with key leaders in several communities and organizations. NP's work is more visible and more credible in the community and with significant partners such as FCE. NP's work clearly contributed to a decrease and prevention of violence and directly helped to bring a number of people to safer locations. The FTMs

of NP themselves have been able to develop a much better understanding of the various actors and forces in the area – the LTTE, the Sri Lankan government and various religious leaders, but various ‘spoiler’ groups as well. Thus NP is in a better position to work more strategically and effectively in the future.

Lessons learned. It is extremely stressful to be in the middle of such complex events with such a high potential to explode in further violence. It is painful to see the bodies of those killed and the reactions of grief and rage. It is hard to be committed to work and yet not have enough people, let alone sophisticated equipment, to be able to do all that could be done. It puts stress on the relationship between the central office and the field offices because there is a need to act quickly and get input when communicating is often hard and there is insufficient time. NP has not yet developed sufficient processes for FTMs to recover from these high stress levels.

At the same time there was a deep satisfaction in being present, able to do what FTMs had come to do, to contribute to preventing death and destruction, to supporting local leadership for non-violent transformation, to decreasing the tension and making it less likely more violence would flare up. Inter-organization disagreements and agendas affected the work problematically. The team learned a lot about how to work non-violently even at that level, and how to hold the community leadership interests and perspectives as the guide by not getting too involved in inter-organizational issues.

Overall the work itself was very effective. However, the surrounding circumstances of increasingly violent attacks on the Sri Lankan Army and Navy forces, increased security checkpoints and village security sweeps, as well as overall heightened conflicts have prevented the expected return to more

normal circumstances. It is a good example of very successful work that is, in some ways, dwarfed by the surrounding circumstances. Nonetheless, it is clear that NP’s work contributed to strengthening local leadership’s ability to resolve issues non-violently, a partial defusing of volatile situations, protection of individuals in unsafe circumstances and a heightening awareness of the potential for non-violent community resolution. Most people in the places where NP works, long for non-violent mechanisms and paths to resolve the conflicts that emerge. NP has contributed to the community identifying and to strengthen these possible paths, even in difficult times of pain, rage, fear or danger. The long-term impacts of these very recent few weeks are yet to be seen.

Conclusion

The work in Sri Lanka began with a phase of building relationships, being present with people and places and small local NGOs. Eventually there were specific requests for help and critical incidents occurred. NP was at times able to make a difference with presence, networking, accompaniment, linking, witnessing, monitoring, and reporting. The follow-up led to a new respect and understanding of NP’s work, new requests, new relationships, and a gradual building of the work. NP’s work with religious festivals, *hartals*, violence between fishing communities, violence between the Sri Lankan Army and LTTE, and between communities, all fit this process model.

Work in particular communities followed a similar pattern. Relationships were initiated around specific incidents; requests were made for something small with individuals and/or a group. NP was helpful – facilitating a meeting, supporting some non-violent steps to resolve conflicts and tensions, accompanying people to the Sri Lankan government or

LTTE to resolve critical issues, supporting small groups of civilians to take new action, or even to open up discussion of topics usually not discussed. People and communities started to trust and look to NP for more follow up.

Through the actual work, NP built relationships with other organizations in the field. Over time, NP teams helped support and create and/or participated in networks that deal with human security, peace, children's issues, early warning, violence preparation, election monitoring, tsunami aid and internally displaced persons. NP accompanies, networks, facilitates, encourages, and connects in and through these relationships. NP supports the work of community-based organizations (CBOs), NGO, INGOs, international organizations (IOs) and local government and authorities in development, protection, peace, and violence prevention and they use NP's work in turn to prevent violence and increase safety to increase their effectiveness. So far, current identifiable impacts have included the diffusion or prevention of violence in specific situations, and communities, at particular times. NP has affected child recruitment and increased civilian involvement in peace work in small but important numbers. Though hard to 'prove', evidence and feedback from colleagues supports these conclusions.

Along with these clear contributions, there remain critical challenges to the work. NP Sri Lanka struggles with the tension between responding to immediate crises and staying focused on the planned work. There are often more requests for work than NP is able to respond to adequately, and there is a need to work with yet more focus and depth. While there is now an articulated strategy guiding the work, there is room to clarify and strengthen this strategy. If the long-term goal is to support Sri Lankans contributing to

peace with justice, NP must sharpen the focus in a way that supports broader impacts. The work must not only impact larger numbers of people, but support or link to work that results in more structural and sustainable changes. While NP has built a number of good relationships at the community and national levels with other organizations, there is room to increase the impact on other, larger organizations and their use of resources and programmes.

¹ The Nonviolent Peaceforce is composed of about 90 member organizations from all over the world. Together, in 2002 at the International Convening Event, these organizations appointed an International Governance Council (IGC) to oversee the mission and direction of NP. The Nonviolent Peaceforce (NP) is also supported by hundreds of individuals and organizations. Nobel Laureates, peace activists, communities of faith and many others around the world have endorsed NP's goals and projects. Country groups work within their nation to enlist support and spread the word about NP's activities. Regional offices support the staff. Affinity and support groups work locally on behalf of the Nonviolent Peaceforce. The author would like to thank: William Knox, Linda Sartor, Rita Webb, Atif Hameed, Angela Pinchero, Christine Schweitzer & Jan Passion for feedback and suggestions. This article is based on a more extensive report, see: <http://www.npeurope.org/documents/NPSLimpactandsummaryAug03-Dec05.pdf>

² The FTMs are supported by two field officers (local Sri Lanka staff who function as both translators and field team members) and several translators.

³ The work is carried out within the framework of NP's principles which include giving primacy to those involved in the conflict, nonviolence, non-partisanship, independence for NP, and human rights (see: <http://nvpf.org/np/english/srilanka/slcode.asp.html> for full Code of Conduct.

⁴ A particular subset of this work has addressed issues of human rights and child rights. While many Tamils support the aspirations articulated by the LTTE, some do not support all their methods and nowhere is this more evident than on the issue of child recruitment and in particular forced recruitment. Clearly many young Tamils join the LTTE voluntarily because they support the LTTE cause and/or because there are so few options for them in the north-east due to lack of educational facilities, jobs and ongoing discrimination. When NP is requested by individual families or groups of family members to help them either prevent forced child recruitment/abduction or to accompany families investigating abducted children, NP provides accompaniment. Additionally when requested, NP may follow up with the LTTE on particular cases on behalf of the family.

Though NP has received fewer requests to investigate disappearances linked to the Sri Lankan police or army, NP accompanies and follows up in the same way with these cases. This work not only helps to prevent violence in various ways, but supports civilians in taking what is often their first step to work for human rights and resistance to militarization. In a number of cases with which NP has worked, children have been moved to safer places or released from the LTTE and 'disappeared' people have been accounted for. And in many cases they have not.

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