Beyond Crisis: Building the Future, Together

People who are impacted by violent conflict have a common desire—and a fundamental right—to participate in building a more peaceful future. As the global pandemic presents new threats to human security, we reaffirm this human right and need. It is more important than ever to support peacebuilding and amplify the voices of people working to make their societies more inclusive, just, and peaceful.

The pandemic presents a fundamental threat to security: it is exacerbating the underlying causes of conflicts, undermining people’s livelihoods, contributing to isolation, and providing new opportunities for both authoritarianism and violent extremism. Even in the face of these challenges, we find cause for real hope in our work with peacebuilders and community members—as people worldwide reach across divides, to work together and strive for a shared, peaceful future.

Sharing Skills to Stop Conflict from Spreading

Community members directly impacted by violent conflict often have the best insight into solutions. In rural Nigeria, the Protecting Our Communities project (more information inside) works closely with communities who are caught up in violent clashes between nomadic cattle herders and crop farmers.

For example, our team is teaching community members how to run local Early Warning-Early Response systems. To reach communities at a time neither travel nor large gatherings were possible, our partners at the Neem Foundation trained new, locally-based trainers and held 18 separate, local workshops in communities. These local response committees are made up of a wide range of problem-solvers with diverse views and circles of influence. As they become aware of reports of brewing conflicts, they now pool their knowledge to jointly choose the right response to de-escalate potential violence.

Reducing Vulnerability to Ethnic Violence

We are launching a new project in Myanmar—“Watering the Banyan Tree”—that builds on our previous Karuna Myosae (Seeds of Compassion) project. Traditionally, the Banyan provides shelter and a gathering space for problem-solving dialogue. This project nurtures space for civil discourse through work with religious and community leaders; women, youth, and ethnic minorities; and civil society organizations. Using public arts, advocacy, and skill-building in dialogue, we will promote interfaith respect and inclusion of minorities.

Our work in the U.S. (see inside) brings people together in conversations that foster collaboration on issues of systemic injustice. Our current efforts center on environmental justice and on amplifying the voices of Indigenous people of the Northeast. For upcoming public virtual events, see: www.karunacenter.org/events
Working with Regional Leaders to Protect Human Security

In addition to working at the community level, we work within governments and multilateral organizations to promote more effective and nonviolent responses to emerging threats. Since 2015, we have worked with the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS)—made up of 15 countries—to strengthen their collective responses to emerging conflicts in the region. As part of the USAID REWARD program, we have co-developed new frameworks with ECOWAS to make best use of early warning information, and best coordinate their responses, to prevent and mitigate violent conflict more effectively.

ECOWAS’ approach is based in a holistic analysis of human security—which acknowledges the importance of health, economic, and environmental factors in addition to political and social dynamics. One of our early 2020 trainings (photo at right) guided ECOWAS staff to practice using the new tools, across departments, to design a response to a real situation—the complex humanitarian crisis in the Lake Chad basin, which is impacted by climate change, irrigation practices, human migration patterns, and violent extremism.

As the COVID-19 pandemic emerged, we created webinars for ECOWAS about using the tools and procedures we developed together. Engaging with ECOWAS throughout this work has given us new appreciation for the vital role of regional organizations in mitigating violent conflict.

Equipping a New Generation for Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Bosnia and Herzegovina remains a nation divided by ethno-nationalist politics more than 25 years after the Bosnian War. As the pandemic brings new challenges and inflames old tensions, empowering the next generation of peacebuilders is critical. Through our STaR (Societal Transformation and Reconciliation) project, Bosnian youth and young adults have embraced these challenges with energy and dedication.

From 2018-2020, Karuna Center partnered with four Bosnian organizations—Center for Peacebuilding (CIM), PRONI Center for Youth Development, Youth Initiative for Human Rights (YIHR), and Mali Koraci (Small Steps)—to enact the STaR project in 10 locations across the nation. The team collaborated to support youth leadership through layered program areas:

- Working with a cohort of youth to monitor—and officially report—online hate speech
- Supporting youth peacebuilders to lead nearly 100 activities, engaging thousands of community members
- Equipping young adults to lead groups for over 1,200 youth at ongoing Youth Clubs
- Training 95 youth through six Peace Camps and two Peace Caravans, then supporting them to lead their own week-long Peace Camps & other projects to reduce prejudice
- Expanding hundreds of youths’ worldview through rare field trips to others’ places of worship, art & activism activities, and more

As the pandemic reached Bosnia, activities quickly shifted and expanded online—though in-person activities have since resumed with social distancing. Youth collaborated online to produce an impressive video about the dangers of scapegoating during the pandemic and the need to honor our common humanity. They conducted outreach over social media, and created a new series of events—called #hajmopričat (Let’s Talk)—to engage youth in discussions with public figures about how art, sports, and other aspects of daily life can help build social cohesion and peace.

Meanwhile, the project team also led intergenerational activities. We hosted 29 events across the nation featuring three former military commanders—ethnically Serb, Croat, and Bosniak—who fought on opposing sides during the war, but now work together for peace. We screened a film about their story, then facilitated discussions with them afterward—engaging community members, police, veterans, a political party, and youth. Through these screening events and additional STaR roundtable discussions, communities have learned more about the factors that led to war in the 1990s—and what they can do now to counter harmful prejudices and prevent future violence.

This project was supported by USAID peacebuilding funding.

“...In these seven days, I have learned that no matter how outlandish our disagreements are, they can always be improved with a healthy conversation and compromise, as we did with you at this camp. I’ve learned that no matter how bad it is, things can turn for the better.”

- A peace camp graduate, after attending an additional training-of-trainers to learn peacebuilding workshop facilitation
Empowering Communities to Stop Cycles of Farmer-Herder Conflict in Nigeria

The **Protecting Our Communities** initiative supports rural Nigerian communities at the center of violent clashes between crop farmers and nomadic cattle herders. In partnership with the Nigeria-based Neem Foundation, we are sharing peacebuilding tools that can help stop the cycle of violence. The project is based in 18 communities throughout Benue, Kaduna, and Zamfara states that include a balance of “hot spots,” peaceful communities, and communities transitioning to peace. Our approach is to address a critical gap in peacebuilding efforts by focusing on the contributions of women and youth, who are often the first to notice a problem but are rarely included in formal channels. We also engage religious and traditional leaders and local government officials, who are able to collaborate with and amplify community efforts.

In addition to teaching community members how to lead effective Early Warning-Early Response networks (see front page), we are intensively preparing community dialogue facilitators who will lead frequent, small group dialogues. Focused on insights of women and youth, these will build trust and ultimately lead to recommendations to reduce conflict—actions that the community and local farmer and herder associations can take on their own, as well as recommendations to the government and security forces.

Due to pandemic travel restrictions, we have had to adapt our dialogue training approach. Instead of training community facilitators directly, Karuna Center is training Neem Foundation facilitators and field staff remotely, supporting and mentoring them through practice sessions that also serve to test the efficacy of our own virtual training. Following these virtual training-of-trainers sessions, the trained Neem facilitators will travel in-person to teach community members how to lead dialogues. This new model could also enable us to teach dialogue facilitation in areas inaccessible for reasons other than the pandemic in the future. Additionally, the team is holding a series of call-in radio shows, and building a strong social media presence, to support and promote community conflict resolution and counteract rumors that can quickly escalate into widespread violence.

Dialogue in a Divided America

2020 has seen broader awareness of the reality and the history of systemic racism in the U.S.—and renewed action for racial justice. It is also the 400th anniversary of the Mayflower landing in Wampanoag territory: a starting point for the story of European settlement. We are hosting a “local” event series (now online, free and open to all)—Erasure and Restoration: An Exploration of Past and Present in the Kwinteuk Valley’s Indigenous Communities—to re-examine our region’s history through events facilitated by Indigenous people and recognized allies. For centuries, the dominant narrative of US history has supported colonialist ideas and perpetuated systemic racism. As part of this event series, working groups of participants will explore ways to shift this narrative locally, to better respect Native history and people.

To register for upcoming events: [www.karunacenter.org/events](http://www.karunacenter.org/events)

Nationally, we continue to co-facilitate a series of dialogues—Transforming the Conversation on Carbon Pricing—in partnership with the Deep South Center for Environmental Justice, Pricing Carbon Initiative, and Citizens’ Climate Lobby. The goal is to create a constructive space for leading advocates of carbon pricing policies and of environmental justice to talk together, about how to advance climate policy in ways that better include the concerns of vulnerable communities. This link is especially critical now, because exposure to pollution is one of the reasons COVID-19 is much deadlier for people of color in the U.S. than it is for white people. Pollution sources are disproportionately sited in communities of color, causing higher rates of some “pre-existing conditions.” New research further connects poor air quality with severe COVID-19. A focus of our dialogues is on ensuring that efforts to address overall emissions do not allow these deadly racial disparities to continue. Everyone needs and deserves a healthy environment.

The aboriginal leader George Erasmus says, ‘Where common memory is lacking, where people do not share in the same past, there can be no real community. Where community is to be formed, common memory must be created.’

**We have a story of America that is being told but is not shared by everyone.** We have a story of discovered lands, God’s chosen people, exceptionalism, freedom, opportunity, promised lands, manifest destiny, and land of endless resources, while millions of others—African Americans, Native Americans, other people of color—have a shared and lived experience of genocide, stolen lands, enslavement, forced removal, mascots, cultural appropriation, boarding schools, Jim Crow laws, children separated at our border, and on and on it goes. **The divide here, of the story we are telling ourselves about this country, is as far away as a hawk is from the moon.**

– Larry Spotted Crow Mann, while presenting on 9/22/20

---

The Erasure & Restoration event series is funded in part by Mass Humanities, which receives support from the Massachusetts Cultural Council and is an affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities. Additional funding for this event series is provided by the Ellis L. Phillips Foundation. All of our work is made possible by Karuna Center’s donor community.
Passing the Mantle within Karuna Center

Olivia Stokes Dreier—Karuna Center’s Executive Director from 2010 through July 2020—has retired from full-time work after 18 years at Karuna Center. We are pleased to say that Olivia will continue to be involved in Karuna Center as a trainer, facilitator, and expert in conflict dynamics.

We have been excited to welcome Polly Byers as Executive Director! For more than thirty years, Polly has worked to support peacebuilding practices and improve international development and humanitarian aid policy. Working from within and outside of government channels, she has driven efforts to make aid more responsive to communities impacted by violent conflict. At Karuna Center, Polly is excited to build on and expand connections with our partners, and is focusing intensively on enhancing Karuna’s capacity to become even more effective in supporting the resilience of conflict-affected communities to foster peace and reconciliation.

The Lasting Impact of Reconciliation in Rwanda

A recent evaluation of our 2016-2019 Healing Our Communities program found measurable results from the project—including more openness to communication about the conflict, more positive attitudes toward social integration, and greater trust between survivors, perpetrators, and bystanders of the 1994 genocide. Ginny Morrison, our Director of Programs, is co-authoring a book chapter about this work.

The project engaged over 2,250 Rwandans in trauma healing work; mentored ongoing peer counselors (“Healing Companions”) within 16 communities; trained dialogue facilitators to continue leading dialogue clubs in the same communities; and mobilized 1,400 youth, including 225 identified as at risk of violent extremism, who volunteered in diverse teams to design and lead over 408 projects to advance social cohesion.

Healing Our Communities was a collaboration with three innovative Rwandan organizations: Healing and Rebuilding Our Communities, Aegis Trust, and Institute of Research and Dialogue for Peace.

Building Community Resilience to Violence in Ethiopia

Since fall 2019, we have been working with diverse Ethiopian leaders from the cities of Harar, Dire Dawa, and Jijiga—supporting them to establish city-wide Community Resilience Committees, to advance interethnic and inter-religious cooperation, and improve local ability to prevent and mitigate violence. The pandemic interrupted our series of forums in Addis Ababa, which were focused on dialogue and peace leadership skills—including steps toward an eventual vision of transforming their cities into Zones of Peace. As a result, we have adapted to provide webinars.

Ethiopian peacebuilders have met with even deeper challenges following the assassination of popular musician and activist Hachalu Hundessa on June 29, 2020. The event triggered widespread protests, communal violence, and a rise in interethnic and inter-religious tensions and rumors. Sweeping government interventions included an almost month-long internet shutdown and thousands of arrests. Despite a rapidly changing and challenging context, the Community Resilience Committees have continued to meet and strategize, to formalize and build their local peacebuilding organizations, and to lead TV programming and other outreach to educate the greater public on approaches to monitor, mitigate, and prevent tensions in their communities.

This project is a collaboration between Karuna Center; the Ethiopian Interfaith Forum for Development, Dialogue and Action; and African Immigrant Communities (AIC), Inc.

Karuna Center for Peacebuilding
447 West Street
Amherst, MA 01002 U.S.A.
+1 413.256.3800
www.karunacenter.org

OUR MISSION is to empower people divided by conflict to develop mutual understanding and to create sustainable peace.

WE ENVISION a just and peaceful world in which difference is a source of creativity and strength.