Cooperation creates the power to build a better future.

As our world faces unprecedented challenges, we believe in the power of people everywhere to build peace. In the past year, we have partnered with peacebuilders worldwide—from Myanmar and Nigeria to the United States—to share skills for ongoing, locally rooted peacebuilding. We work together to transform the conflicts that disrupt community life, and support shared action toward more equitable, sustainable societies.

The vital relationship between peacebuilding & our environment

Global climate change and violent conflict are deeply intertwined. As land use, water access, natural habitats, and the migration of people are altered by shifting weather patterns, communities in already fragile or conflict-affected areas face a cascade of new economic and political challenges. Meanwhile, the world’s militaries create a massive “carbon boot-print” of greenhouse gas emissions.

One of Karuna Center’s core values is that the people directly impacted by a problem should be engaged in creating the solutions. Climate change creates complex impacts in local communities, where externally imposed action plans could easily fail or do inadvertent harm. By keeping the insights of people who have lived expertise at the center, we believe it becomes possible to support resilience, strengthen cooperative systems, and create new, practical solutions.

Working across divides to reduce pollution at its source

As a nation, the U.S. remains the second-largest producer of greenhouse gases worldwide. Both nationally and globally, the impacts of these emissions are not equal. In the U.S., pollution sources are disproportionately sited in communities of color, causing diseases including cancer, asthma, and severe COVID-19. However, efforts to address environmental harms at the national level have typically not included leadership from the most impacted communities. This means that efforts to address overall carbon emissions could inadvertently allow deadly racial disparities to continue.

In response to this tension between advocacy for carbon pricing mechanisms and environmental justice, we co-lead the Transforming the Conversation on Carbon Pricing (TCCP) project, housed at the Deep South Center for Environmental Justice. Through confidential national dialogues, advocates of carbon pricing and environmental justice activists have been learning from each other. Through these new relationships, TCCP participants have been working to include environmental justice concerns in national climate change legislation.

Strengthening resilience to climate impacts

Communities in rural Nigeria are at the center of land and resource conflicts resulting from global climate change. In the country’s north, over 350,000 hectares of land succumb to desertification each year. At times, clashes around the use of arable land are deadlier than the Boko Haram insurgency.

We work in partnership with the Nigeria-based Neem Foundation and three local community-based organizations to co-develop local peacebuilding systems, such as dialogue and Early Warning-Early Response committees, that focus on building the capacity of impacted communities. Community-led efforts are now resolving conflicts, building trust, and advocating effectively to local leaders and government.

Read more about peacebuilding in Nigeria inside →
We reached an amicable resolution between the farmers and herders: that the farmers will cultivate from a particular place to another, while the herders were told where not to go with their animals. This is one of hundreds of achievements that we have had involving resolution of conflict in the community."

— Youth leader in Kajuru, Nigeria

Protecting Our Communities: Local Peacebuilding Systems in Nigeria

The project team has successfully adapted all programming to prioritize participant safety during the spread of COVID-19 as well as the rise in bandit attacks upon people traveling from place to place. As a result of the team's peacebuilding efforts so far:

- Community-based facilitators are leading problem-solving dialogues between herders and farmers, as well as other community members in conflict. After months of in-depth training, diverse facilitation teams operate in all 18 communities that are part of Protecting Our Communities.

- Early Warning-Early Response (EWER) Committees, operating alongside the dialogues in each community, have resolved more than 100 local incidents that they identified as having the potential to spark broader conflict.

- Community members have held advocacy visits with elected, traditional, security, and religious leaders to advance community-informed strategies to improve security.

- The project's monthly call-in radio shows, in three different Nigerian states, have been successful in educating and engaging the broader community around peacebuilding topics—supported by the project's social media campaigns.

In the next year, the project will expand to incorporate peer-to-peer psychosocial supports that address the trauma of violent conflict, and add community-based drama performances as a form of peacebuilding outreach.

The Protecting Our Communities Initiative supports 18 local communities in rural Nigeria to develop practical, locally-led solutions to conflict—with a focus on including women and youth. The region is caught up in cycles of conflict between crop farmers and cattle herders, as changes in rainfall patterns reduce the arable land. They also face rising bandit attacks and ransom kidnappings, as well as pandemic-related economic hardship and the nearby growth of violent extremist organizations.

Over the past two years, we have partnered with the Nigeria-based Neem Foundation and three local community-based organizations—Elohim Development Foundation, Hope for the Village Child, and Voluntary Aid Initiative—to co-create community-based peacebuilding systems within 18 communities.

Local dialogues — regional impact

During a recent Protecting Our Communities Initiative dialogue in Nigeria’s Benue state, major associations of farmers and of herders agreed upon action steps to address issues that fuel the farmer-herder conflict. They pledged to advocate jointly to the government for parity in subsidies to farmers and herders, as well as for the construction of dams so that herders don’t have to travel onto farmers’ land in search of water.

The chairman of the All Farmers Association of Nigeria reported that “trust and confidence have been built amongst the two parties,” while the chairman of the Miyetti Allah Cattle Breeders Association of Nigeria commented, “the dialogue has made it easier for both parties to believe in finding a lasting solution for the long conflict.”
Watering the Banyan Tree: Supporting Myanmar Peacebuilders since the Coup

Traditionally, the Banyan tree provides shelter and a space for gathering. In that spirit, the Watering the Banyan Tree project builds on our previous Karuna Myosae (Seeds of Compassion) initiative—using public arts, advocacy, and dialogue to promote interfaith respect and inclusion of minorities.

After months of planning in late 2020 and early 2021, our project team was poised to host the first training in early February. But on February 1, Myanmar’s military (Tatmadaw) overthrew the democratically elected government, throwing the country into chaos.

The coup put our partner organizations and our two Myanmar-based staff at risk of being targeted for their peacebuilding activism. Since February, the people of Myanmar have endured a brutally violent crackdown by the military that has included mass shootings of protesters, political imprisonment, heightened surveillance, curfews, restrictions on personal movement and gatherings, and increased violence following the deposed civilian government’s September declaration of war against the Tatmadaw.

Despite these many challenges, the strength of the people’s movement against the coup has created hope for a new, more inclusive and democratic Myanmar, and our colleagues and partners have persisted in their work for peace.

At first, the project team carefully monitored and analyzed the evolving context while maintaining a reduced profile to keep partners and staff safe. Through a number of recent strategic planning sessions, the project partners have adapted the project to meet the current needs of the country while protecting the safety of all those involved. Beginning in early October 2021, the project moved fully into the implementation stage.

Even in this difficult context, people throughout the country are motivated to connect with one another and to learn dialogue skills so that their conversations can be more meaningful and productive. There is an increasing need to create safe spaces for people to talk as well as to listen, and an increasing hope for inclusion as the voices of minority groups are heard. Watering the Banyan Tree is creating these spaces and equipping individuals with the capacities needed to dialogue with one another across divides. Owing to both COVID and the military government, the project team has developed innovative new virtual approaches to deliver training and to host dialogue events.

Simultaneously, the project is engaging with people both inside the country and outside to teach them creative ways to conduct advocacy using art. Through the project, individuals will get the training and support they need to lead advocacy campaigns, including mentorship from experienced artists. These efforts will drive change at local, national, and international levels to better meet community needs for security and development.

In this time of crisis, it is important to recognize and celebrate the resilience and creativity of Myanmar’s people, including a civil society which is adapting and responding in this moment to continue building peace.

When a soldier who’s been indoctrinated through propaganda and coercion chooses to defect rather than kill another human being, that says something important about the human spirit and the possibility of change. We need to create an environment where people willingly choose non-violence—in Myanmar, in Southeast Asia, and in the world.” - A peacebuilder and Karuna technical advisor in Myanmar
Decolonizing curricular resources

For Native American and Indigenous Studies Teaching and Learning in New England

A Decolonizing Curriculum Working Group of 15 volunteers met over the spring and summer of 2021 to envision and discuss how to make strong, truthful, and culturally grounded Native American and Indigenous Studies resources available to the public, and to professionals tasked with educating the next generations of Americans. The group, chaired by Dr. Jessica Dolan and Dr. Ron Welburn, grew from our 2020–2021 Erasure and Restoration event series.

The result is a curated bibliography that spans age levels, integrating general education with area-specific studies. It includes written and audio-visual resources from across Turtle Island (North America) as well as those authored by Native people from New England that are specific to Indigenous nations of the Northeast. This resource is searchable by topic and age group, and easily accessible through the Karuna Center website. Please share it broadly—with K-12 Educators, professors, librarians, organizations, & lifelong learners of any age!

karunacenter.org/decolonizing-curriculum

Addressing COVID-19 impacts in Pima County, Arizona

Rebuilding to Resilience is a capacity-building initiative with the Pima County (Arizona) Health Department that is still in its early stages. Pima County faces high rates of COVID-19, tensions around covid vaccines and mitigation measures, and health disparities based on race, ethnicity, and income. We have been using our Transformative Dialogue approach to aid the department’s formation of a diverse Community Advisory Committee.

We are now also applying dialogue to improve health literacy and health outcomes for the county’s residents. In that capacity, we will help the department to design and facilitate inclusive community engagement processes, and lead training sessions for the department’s staff.

Cultivating peace as the pandemic disrupts community life

Our 2011-2013 post-war reconciliation program in Sri Lanka, led in partnership with Sarvodaya Shanthi Sena, formed local peacebuilding councils that remain active with ongoing support. This year, the councils took action to support the mental health of children experiencing stress, anxiety, and depression during the pandemic. Community-based religious leaders collaborated across faiths to engage children in 4 different age groups in a friendly “7 day challenge” competition. A total of 840 children completed this independent program, which encouraged them to cultivate inner peace, express themselves, give respect across differences, and connect with nature and their community.

To learn more about our peacebuilding work or become more engaged, you are invited to any meeting of our Karuna Connectors drop-in group! For details: karunacenter.org/connect

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.