Intervening to stop climate-related conflict

The Protecting Our Communities project will enable both farmers and herders to speak up for their communities—and take joint action to stop violent conflict.

This fall, we began a project to work directly with communities in the center of violent clashes between crop farmers and cattle herders in northern Nigeria—with a focus on empowering women and youth. Farmer-herder conflict is at times deadlier than the Boko Haram insurgency. Even though farmers and herders identify with different ethnicities and religions, the core driver of the conflict is a reduction in usable land, as climate change dries the Sahel.

Over a two-year period, members of local herding and farming communities will work closely with dialogue training experts: first learning to facilitate conversations among themselves, and then, to analyze the conflict in joint conversations among farmers and herders. Meanwhile, our team will teach community members how to use a proven “early warning-early response” system to report incidents that could trigger escalations of violence. These strategies will be combined with call-in radio shows to engage a broad audience in critical thinking about the conflict; a social media network that will engage hundreds of people in actively counteracting rumors and hate speech that fuel the violence; and advocacy to government officials and security forces.

Such deep, locally-based peacebuilding, in such a high-risk area, is not possible without a knowledgeable local team. We are therefore in the process of establishing our first-ever full Karuna Center satellite office led by program manager Mariam Abdu. The local partners who make up our team include farmer and herder associations, Women’s Interfaith Council, and Neem Foundation. We co-developed this project, then obtained a grant to implement it from the U.S. State Department’s Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor.

Building consensus through dialogue on U.S. climate policy

The lack of U.S. policy to mitigate climate change has severe consequences for the safety or survival of communities worldwide—including our partners in Nigeria. To help overcome ongoing political deadlock on this issue, we continue to partner with Pricing Carbon Initiative (PCI) to facilitate quarterly confidential dialogues among more than 100 key organizations about climate change policy, across party lines.

Frontline communities—areas most harshly impacted by carbon pollution—are disproportionately inhabited by people of color who have often been marginalized in policymaking, yet have first-hand knowledge about real-world effects of policy choices. In October 2019, we began facilitating dialogues that focus on these equity issues—themed Transforming the Conversation on Carbon Pricing (TCCP)—in partnership with PCI, Citizens’ Climate Lobby, and Deep South Center for Environmental Justice.

TCCP is the start of a conversation that we hope will increase understanding and respect for environmental justice in policy conversations about pricing carbon, and build common ground among a broader network to address climate change.
Steps toward deeper social healing in Rwanda

Healing Our Communities is a collaboration of Karuna Center, HROC (Healing and Rebuilding Our Communities), IRDP (Institute of Research and Dialogue for Peace), and Aegis Trust.

25 years after the Genocide Against the Tutsi, survivors, bystanders, perpetrators, returnees, and a new generation of youth face the continued challenges of living together in the same communities that were once torn apart by betrayal and violence.

Over the past 3 years, the Healing Our Communities project team has built and mentored a strong network of skilled resource people from diverse backgrounds—young and old, survivors and former perpetrators alike—in 16 communities across Rwanda. Dialogue clubs, trauma healing teams, and youth clubs, fueled by a contagious volunteer energy, have created an interlocking web of support that brings deep social healing to communities.

In every single one of these project locations, participants have decided to continue their valuable activities independently after grant funding ends in fall of 2019. Some communities have developed savings clubs or joint income-earning activities to fund ongoing reconciliation activities; some people are volunteering to visit other communities to set up initiatives there.

Dialogue clubs, which gather people from opposing sides of the genocide divide from 16 communities, continue to meet monthly. During our 3-year project, a total of 720 people participated for at least a year. Within each club, IRDP and Karuna Center have trained and supported facilitators to lead difficult conversations about increasingly deep and serious topics such as restitution for genocide crimes.

In our third year, the project placed special emphasis on reaching youth at risk for recruitment into violent extremism. Aegis Trust worked with them to develop a sense of social belonging, life purpose, and agency: the most effective antidotes to recruitment. A total of 1,400 youth had key roles in social cohesion activities, including 225 youth at risk of violent extremism. The youth carried out at least 408 activities (well beyond the project’s target of 64!) that helped vulnerable people and/or contributed to social cohesion through discussions, sports events and the arts. Youth also helped organize community-wide intergenerational dialogues, and shared reconciliation stories—producing 16 beautiful short documentaries. The public could also call in to listen and respond to stories using our project’s Interactive Voice Response (IVR) platform, which engaged over 87,000 people.

“I learned constructive ways to handle the anger caused by everything I experienced during the genocide.”

-A genocide survivor & workshop participant who spent years in conflict with her neighbors

In each of the 16 project communities, healing companions have undergone extensive training and mentorship as peer trauma counselors, and are helping communities to heal and reconcile. Beyond original plans, HROC responded to a request for an added trauma healing workshop specifically for youth born from genocide rape. In all, at least 2,288 people have learned about trauma and ways to support others, whether their suffering stems from the losses of survivors or the guilt and shame of some perpetrators, bystanders, and their families.

“I used to be a dangerous person. I was a drug dealer in Gicumbi district. I met a person named Manasseh, and we became friends. He advised me to join their youth club in order to be a peacebuilder. The advice and the activities of the youth club changed me completely. I am no longer a drug dealer—not even a consumer. I also learned skills such as building houses and making bricks, because we do it to help vulnerable people, and then I started doing it as a job.”

-A young man who was identified as at-risk for violent extremism
Supporting youth peacebuilders to reach across divides

Karuna Center enacts StAR—Societal Transformation and Reconciliation—in partnership with four Bosnian organizations: Youth Initiative for Human Rights (YIHR), Center for Peacebuilding (CIM), PRONI Center for Youth Development, and Mali Koraci - Small Steps, with USAID support.

Though 24 years have passed since the Bosnian War, Bosnia and Herzegovina today is harshly divided along ethnic lines. Many Serbs, Bosniaks, and Croats grow up attending segregated schools. Youth live among the vestiges of a war they did not experience, while facing an insecure future: they have the world’s second-highest rate of youth unemployment, and, though war is not imminent, the divisive rhetoric of political leaders brings fears of renewed violence.

StAR builds on the potential of this generation of young Bosnians, helping them to avoid the trap of cynicism and spearhead initiatives for social healing. The project layers the unique approaches of four Bosnian organizations in 10 cities. PRONI opened youth clubs to create a space to gather across ethnic divides, and has offered dozens of workshops ranging from job skills to emotional literacy. CIM’s peace camps and caravans take youth on a journey of personal growth and skill-building for peace leadership. In fall 2019, 22 recent peace camp graduates are leading activities to share their experiences and skills with about 160 more youth, starting a ripple effect in their home communities.

Meanwhile, YIHR is teaching young adults how to effectively counteract prejudice in the media, spotting and reporting hate speech. Project participants have attended film and theater festivals that focus on using the arts to develop critical thinking, empathy, and dialogue. Thirty youth participated in the International Theatre Festival, and 50 youth attended the prestigious Sarajevo Film Festival. There, Karuna Center led a discussion at the screening of Maglaj: War and Peace with the three commanders featured in the film—who fought each other during the war, but are now a model of reconciliation. All these events opened up the world to youth who rarely, if ever, leave their home towns or interact with anyone outside their ethnic group.

In addition to StAR’s ongoing youth camps, community projects, workshops, and events, Mali Koraci organizes broader community discussions to reduce tensions. Next, at each site where we are active, we will facilitate discussions, drawing upon specific local knowledge, about the signs that a society is progressing toward violent conflict. These frank conversations, together with youth activism, are a starting point for more authentic reflection about the legacy of war—and communities’ common desire to avert a return of violence.

Improving conflict interventions in West Africa

We work with the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS)—comprised of 15 member countries—to strengthen their response to early warning of emerging conflicts, as part of the USAID REWARD program. Earlier this year, we facilitated a training exercise in which 12 departments across ECOWAS developed coordinated, multi-leveled responses to a hypothetical crisis in an imaginary nation. We are now working with ECOWAS to institutionalize systems to better respond to similarly complex conflicts in the real world.
Over the past 25 years, Karuna Center has worked collaboratively with local partners to strengthen peace leadership and build community resilience in 35 countries.

Where many of Karuna Center’s earlier programs took place, our work with local partners and communities has had a positive ripple effect. In many cases, former participants are mentoring new generations of peacebuilders. Some are Karuna Center partners today.

Exploring the roots of U.S. social & political divides

Many of the conflict dynamics that we witness worldwide are also apparent today in the United States. Like many other nations, the U.S. continues to wrestle with its legacies of violence and oppression—in a severely polarized political climate. This fall and winter, we are organizing a workshop series in our home office community: Engaging Peace: Reparation and its Forms. We are convening community conversations around the many different forms that making reparations can take, to begin addressing the damaging legacies of racial oppression in the United States—and how reparations can reach beyond politics to help build peace and heal divides.

At the same time, we are co-convening a local discussion series, Understanding the Many Dimensions of White Identity: Politics, Power, and Prejudice with Critical Connections. This series explores the causes and consequences of the resurgence of visible hate in political, public, and online spaces, and how this relates to “white power” movements as well as expressions of “whiteness.” These events are free and open to the public; people of all backgrounds are welcomed. Details: www.karunacenter.org.

Ethiopia: resilience against violent extremism

Abiy Ahmed, the 43-year-old prime minister of Ethiopia, was awarded the 2019 Nobel Peace Prize for making peace with neighboring Eritrea and restoring freedoms after decades of authoritarian rule. Unfortunately, long-neglected ethnic, religious, and political tensions are now giving rise to mounting violence and displacement. Based on our previous work during the democratic transition in Nepal, the U.S. Embassy in Ethiopia has asked us to develop a program to mitigate violence in three key Eastern Ethiopian cities that will begin in November 2019.

Our strategy brings together multiple sectors of society—youth, women, security forces, municipal leaders, university officials, religious leaders—in intensive dialogues, bridge-building, and problem solving to reduce religious and ethnic tensions in their cities and vulnerability to radicalization and violence.

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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.