We envision a just and peaceful world in which difference is a value.

To support our work:

Our Building Resilience Against Violent Extremism in Schools (BRAVE Schools) project supports the capacity of school communities to prevent violence and address hate-related incidents. This pilot includes eight schools in Western Massachusetts.

BRAVE Schools trains and supports a cross-cutting Care Team within each school. Earlier this year, we worked with the Alliance for Peacebuilding to evaluate each school’s existing capacity for violence prevention. Now, we are working with each Care Team as they each develop a Resilient and Safe Schools (RSS) Plan to strengthen their school’s holistic capacity for preventing violence. Our lead trainers in this project, Tony McAleer and Robert Örell, are leaders in creating pathways for people to avoid or exit hate groups, and are themselves former violent extremists who were recruited as youth.

BRAVE Schools engages students as well as staff: Tony and Robert have visited middle and high school students at four schools to discuss how hate groups recruit, what could put their peers at risk of becoming involved, and how to get out. We are also collaborating with The Center for Restorative Practices at Amherst College to host a daylong workshop for students in facilitating community-building circles.

Based on feedback and interest from Care Teams, we are integrating support for restorative justice and non-punitive methods for addressing challenging behaviors—and incorporating training in threat assessment and threat management. We are also facilitating a Peer Support Network among the Care Teams that we hope will continue even after this pilot ends.

Toward a Climate of Peace

During this year of escalating violence, we have found great hope in the growing impact of our work with local peacebuilders worldwide.

In areas where climate change is driving land conflicts, we are working with local partners to develop new models of community peacebuilding. Our partnerships in Nigeria have strengthened communities’ own capacity to prevent violent conflict, and are now informing national policy on farmer-herder relations. This fall, we are adapting that approach to address climate stress along the Benin-Niger border.

In the U.S, our pilot project in Massachusetts works with schools to strengthen violence prevention and foster school climates in which students feel greater safety, respect, and support. Meanwhile, we facilitate national dialogues on climate change policy, to help move important advocacy forward. Worldwide, we support our local peacebuilding partners to expand their important initiatives through the Paula Green Legacy Fund. By developing the capacity of impacted communities and organizations to solve problems, strengthen connections, and prevent violence, we are building a more peaceful and sustainable future.

U.S: Working Toward Safer, More Resilient Schools

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After years of practice, POCI community dialogue facilitators have become highly skilled at guiding challenging conversations on a range of topics. During the 2023 elections, none of the participating communities experienced politically-fueled violence. Local facilitators attributed this to the success of the project dialogues in deepening understanding and trust across religious and ethnic divides. (At left, a community dialogue; at right, one of the project’s statewide dialogue forums).

**Nigeria: Sustaining the Success of Community Peacebuilding**

Now in its fifth and final year, the Protecting Our Communities Initiative (POCI) has had an enormous impact in supporting Nigerian communities at the center of complex land use conflicts and rising insecurity. We co-lead the project with the Nigeria-based Neem Foundation and three community-based organizations: Voluntary Aid Initiative in Zamfara state; Elohim Development Foundation in Benue; and Hope for the Village Child Foundation in Kaduna. The project works within 18 core communities to develop their capacity to reduce violence, while strengthening relationships among farmer and herder communities on the frontlines of the climate crisis.

A key focus in the project’s final year is on developing the capacity of these communities and organizations to sustain project activities into the future. The project’s core components include:

- **Early Warning-Early Response** (EWER) committees identify, track, and resolve local incidents that could spark broader conflict. To tackle problems like kidnapping attacks, they also build relationships with local security forces. The EWER committees have addressed over 853 incidents to date across all 18 project communities.

- **Community Dialogue Facilitators** are building trust across ethnic and religious divides in each community—and collaborating with EWER committees to address disputes.

- POCI holds regular call-in radio shows and shares success stories over social media to reach a broader audience. Community drama performances have further educated and engaged community members about the project’s peacebuilding systems.

- Through POCI, Neem Foundation has counseled more than 650 people impacted by psychological trauma, and trained 195 peer counselors.

- **Advocacy** with traditional and religious leaders, security agencies, and government officials has built their support and collaboration.

POCI’s statewide and interstate forums have brought the project’s community peacebuilders together with a range of leaders and decision-makers to discuss sustaining and expanding the project activities. In December 2023, we will co-convene POCI’s second national conference on farmer-herder relations, focused on policy and building stakeholder networks. POCI is also working with national governmental agencies to incorporate the project’s model into national planning for strengthening farmer-herder relations and early warning-early response systems.

As kidnappings by armed bandits increased across some POCI project communities this year, our team suspended program activities in that state to reduce the risk to community members and staff. However, the communities found their work of identifying and addressing early warning signs so valuable that they chose to continue to meet and hold dialogues independently, despite our caution. POCI’s peacebuilding systems were designed to be used by and for community members, and during this high-risk time, they addressed over 40 incidents—the most of any state participating in the project in the same time period.
Benin: Building Climate and Conflict Resilient Communities

Building Climate and Conflict Resilient Communities (BCCRC) is a new initiative that addresses the significant impact that climate change is having on people in the Sahel region of Africa—focusing on the seasonal routes where nomadic Fulani cattle herders cross from Niger into Benin. Launched in October 2023, this project will pilot an innovative approach using climate data as part of its work to engage impacted communities in preventing violent conflict.

This initiative builds on the work of Karuna Center and Neem Foundation in Nigeria, with the addition of a third key partner, the Benin-based organization Association Coexister. Drawing on the lessons learned from the Protecting Our Communities Initiative, BCCRC will facilitate community resilience in addressing violence by improving trust and collaboration between farmers, herders, security forces, and government. The project pays special attention to developing understanding with and lifting the voices of Fulani communities who are often marginalized from governance and security processes.

Because climate change is a direct driver of conflict in the region, this project will work with the project funder and a Karuna climate data coordinator to pilot a novel strategy of providing vital climate-related information directly to farmers and herders. To support local herders and farmers in adapting their land use activities and reducing the potential for conflict, the project will access climate data from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and other sources. The data will be disseminated through the project’s WhatsApp groups and local radio shows, providing information on herder movement, route conditions, and security concerns.

As in Nigeria, Karuna Center will train and mentor a diverse cohort of community dialogue facilitators, who will work in teams to build trust and address conflicts across ethnic and religious divides in four core communities in northern Benin near the Niger border. At the same time, the project will engage community leaders in early warning-early response committees that identify the first signs of potential conflict, and coordinate with local leaders and security forces to develop ongoing effective responses to de-escalate tensions. The project will also host a regional forum that brings stakeholders together to plan for collaboration beyond the project’s end.

U.S: Beyond Political Polarization, Working Toward Climate Solutions

Through Transforming the Conversation on Carbon Pricing (TCCP), we co-facilitate national, confidential dialogues to build common ground for climate change solutions across political and ideological divides. TCCP combines the international peacebuilding expertise of Karuna Center, and the climate and environmental strategy experience of Pattern Change Lab, to guide participants beyond positional stances to build trust based in understanding each other’s deeper interests and needs.

TCCP dialogues focus specifically on improving understanding and relationships between environmental justice proponents and carbon pricing advocates. While carbon pricing advocates seek a tax, or some kind of price, on carbon pollution, environmental justice focuses on the rights of communities directly impacted by pollution—who are disproportionately people of color and low-income.

TCCP’s dialogue process has allowed carbon pricing advocates to better understand the urgent human rights concerns of communities whose need for clean air, water, and soil is not necessarily addressed by market-based approaches for reducing emissions. The process has likewise created a space for proponents of environmental justice to explore new approaches to carbon pricing that seek to take these concerns into account, and to better understand the motivations of carbon pricing advocates who range from politically conservative to progressive. These relationships have created opportunities for TCCP participants to give feedback to congressional offices working on legislation to put a price on carbon as a means of reducing greenhouse gases.

This year, TCCP has been working with an expanded group of participants to develop Phase 2 of this project, which focuses on creating a set of concrete policy recommendations for carbon pricing mechanisms that avoid negative impacts and protect all communities’ right to a healthy environment. That work is guided by the question: How do we design a pricing carbon policy with equity and justice from the start?
Honoring Paula Green’s Legacy by Supporting Local Peacebuilders

The Paula Green Legacy Fund was established in 2022 by an anonymous lead donor and other generous supporters to honor the life and work of Karuna’s founder, Dr. Paula Green. The first small grants, made in 2023, support four peacebuilding organizations who are leading critical violence prevention and intervention work in their societies. We have partnered with each of them in various projects over many years.

Healing and Rebuilding Our Communities is a Rwandan organization that creates community-based psychosocial support for people to heal their traumatic conflicts and rebuild their peaceful lives. Their innovative approach to reconciliation has been key in helping communities rebuild from genocide. This small grant supported an in-depth refresher training for community-based “Healing Companions,” who provide vital peer-to support for people coping with psychological trauma, recently heightened by pandemic impacts. See: healingandrebuildingourcommunities.org.

Center for Peacebuilding rebuilds trust and fosters reconciliation across ethnic and religious divides in Bosnia and Herzegovina, using dialogue, youth peace camps, and skill-building in conflict resolution. As the organization faced serious economic hardship related to the ongoing impacts of the pandemic, this small grant supported their strategic planning, and allowed them to develop a long-term partnership with a larger funder to continue their vital work. Learn more about them at www.unvocim.net.

Sarvodaya Shanthi Sena Sansadaya, in Sri Lanka, used this grant to support a full three-day training for 26 youth religious leaders, to prepare them for ongoing roles in promoting interfaith and communal harmony in an area with deep-seated religious and ethnic tensions. The training built their skills in understanding the root causes of conflicts and managing conflict effectively. Learn more: www.sarvodaya.org/shanthi-sena.net.

Combatants for Peace (CfP) is a binational organization founded by former members of the Israeli army and former participants in the violent struggle for Palestinian freedom—who have since renounced violence to work in partnership, nonviolently, for an end to the occupation and a just and lasting peace. You can learn more about Combatants for Peace at cfpeace.org and afcp.org. The Paula Green Legacy Fund provided a modest emergency grant to support CfP’s activism in November 2023.

In 2017, during her work with CfP, Paula wrote: “They are incredibly brave to turn their backs on the war rhetoric that exists in their communities and on the negative portrayals of each other in local and international media. They know that neither side is going away and that their land has seen far too much bloodshed. Their shared commitment is to build support on both sides of the divide for a nonviolent process that leads to a just peace.”

Karuna’s public events and presentations during 2023 have focused on best practices for leveraging dialogue in the practice of peacebuilding, locally and globally—and explored strategies for countering the resurgence of extremist hate and violence in the United States. For example, we led a an international virtual/in-person panel on The Role of Dialogue in Peacebuilding: Where Research Meets Practice at the Alliance for Peacebuilding’s annual conference (left photo), and convened experts in countering hate for a BRAVE Schools public event on Radical Compassion: Overcoming Hate and Building Understanding (right).