Towards a PEOPLE'S PEACE

A Task for Activists, Peacebuilders, and Allies

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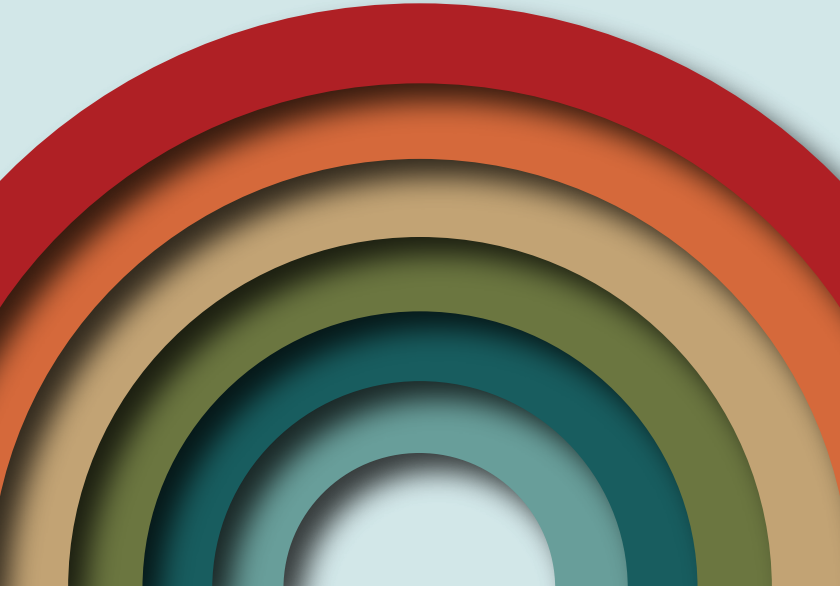

Framing Essays for the 2025 Copenhagen People Power Conference

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Towards a People's Peace: A Task for Activists, Peacebuilders, and Allies
By Hardy Merriman, Gino Govender, Steward Muhindo, Ola Ibrahim, Hanyea Mohammed, Shreen Saroor, Véronique Dudouet (2025)

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International Center on Nonviolent Conflict
600 New Hampshire Ave NW, Suite 1010
Washington, D.C. 20037 USA
www.nonviolent-conflict.org

SERIES EDITOR: Bruce Pearson
INTERIOR LAYOUT AND DESIGN: Aaron Troia
CONTACT: icnc@nonviolent-conflict.org

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Foreword

"Those who love peace must learn to organize as effectively as those who love war."
—Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Who are the unsung heroes of this moment? It is the activists and ordinary citizens who are struggling locally—often at great personal risk—to address injustice and conflicts through nonviolent means, to reduce violence and killing during wars, or to rebuild societies in an inclusive way to ensure that a tenuous truce can take hold. Peace is not something we can sit back and wait for. Just like war, it requires organizing, foot soldiers on the ground, who are willing stand up for it. Yet too often, we are more attentive to the armed groups than the unarmed citizens who are pushing back against them. That needs to change.

There is an urgent need to rethink and reinvigorate the global peacebuilding architecture from below.

Our world is increasingly at war. The alarming rise in armed conflicts and civilian casualties has exposed

the fractures in our peacebuilding systems. The existing architecture, including UN missions, is paralyzed by geopolitical rivalry, underfunded, and struggling to maintain legitimacy. From Sudan to Myanmar, Gaza to Ukraine, we see the devastating toll of war and a growing disregard for international humanitarian law and human rights standards. Yet we cannot afford to give in to despair.

The United Nations is actively engaged in efforts to rethink and reform peacebuilding. The 2025 Review of the UN Peacebuilding Architecture and the Pact for the Future underscore the commitment to transforming global governance and enhancing international peace and security. A key question, however, is: How we can listen to the people at the center of conflicts and support their efforts to take agency in their own peace processes?

Consider the story of Steward Muhindo, an activist with the LUCHA movement in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, whose story you can read in this report. Forced to flee his village at the age of 15 due to armed conflict, Steward's journey led him to advocate for peace and justice. Despite facing torture, arrests, and job losses, he remained committed to nonviolent resistance. His story exemplifies the power of grassroots movements in transforming victims of violence and injustice into active agents of change. Steward's conviction that

"the people are the foundation of change" underscores the importance of supporting local efforts to build peace from the ground up.

Historically, peace negotiations have often sidelined those with the strongest interest in peace—the ordinary citizens—while giving voice to those wielding weapons. This conference seeks to reverse that dynamic. We aim to place ordinary citizens, their movements, and their grassroots organizations at the heart of peacebuilding efforts. We call on all actors within the system to listen to these voices and reorient the peacebuilding architecture around them.

The Copenhagen People Power Conference brings together activists and movements on the ground with experts, diplomats, donors, and foundations to explore how they can better support grassroots efforts in creating peace. Over the past months, grassroots action-research initiatives, writing workshops, webinars, and in-person convenings of activists and practitioners have amplified the voices you will hear in this report. This collaborative effort is just the beginning of a broader movement to ensure that peacebuilding is driven by those who are most invested in its success. We aim to support movements on the ground and produce input, recommendations, and linkages to broader efforts at reforming peacebuilding and uniting it with social justice.

In these challenging times, social movements offer a beacon of hope. As international actors retreat, we must build on local resources and agency that have been overlooked for too long. When civil society is under attack, social movements provide citizens with opportunities to engage and advocate for peace. As governments increasingly turn towards militarism and narrowly defined national interests, global solidarity and peace and justice movements present an alternative form of strategic coordination at both global and regional levels.

This conference is a call to action. This report is a call to action. It is a call to recognize and amplify the power of people in creating lasting peace. Let us heed the call and start to organize as effectively for peace as others do for war, and together, build a future where justice and peace prevail.

Tim Whyte
Secretary General
Mellemfolkeligt Samvirke/ActionAid Denmark

The Crucial Role of Social Movements in Peacebuilding

by Hardy Merriman

In 2023, ActionAid Denmark (AADK) convened their inaugural Copenhagen People Power Conference. This groundbreaking event put movements at the center of our understanding of how to advance democracy, climate justice, and peace and security. Drawing international participants from social movements, advocacy organizations, and the philanthropy and foreign policy communities, the convening fostered important dialogue, spurred two new publications, mainstreamed the topic of movement support, and set an agenda of future collaboration.[1]

Success is often followed by heightened expectations, and the unavoidable question arose shortly thereafter: Would AADK's follow up efforts include organizing another conference?

The answer soon came as a decisive yes, but then on which issue(s) should the next conference focus?

There is no shortage of problems in the world that merit attention. AADK boldly chose to look more deeply at ways that movements can advance just peace and security—how organized and mobilized civilians can reduce the likelihood of violent conflict, decrease its intensity, and contribute to fair and sustainable resolution.

This topic is vital and urgent. Violent conflict has risen in myriad forms in recent years. By the beginning of 2024, evidence showed that 2021–2023 were the three most deadly years for state-based conflict globally since 1989.[2] In addition, deaths from conflict between non-state actors has risen sharply worldwide since 2013 and now appears to be stabilizing at a much higher level than at any time in the prior three decades.[3] During this same time, incidents of one-sided violence against civilians by state and non-state actors have also followed an overall upward trend.[4]

2024 showed little likelihood of reprieve. With several ongoing wars, the annual death toll from state-based conflicts is expected to be high, and data is still being analyzed.[5] It is further estimated that at least 1 in 8 people in 2024 were exposed to violent conflict globally, and by mid-year, the number of people forced to flee their homes due to violence and persecution reached nearly 123 million.[6] Political violence also rose by 25% worldwide, and was concentrated in the more than 70 countries holding elections in 2024, which saw an average increase of 63%.[7]

Violent conflict is one of the most challenging human problems to address. Yet it demands a tireless response because it is so destructive. Its impacts are never confined to just one country—they are always regional, and often global. The tentacles of conflict extend both geographically and temporally, affecting people's lives, governance, and levels of corruption during periods of fighting, as well as long after one side surrenders or peace agreements are signed.

While top-down methods of conflict management receive much attention, some of the most promising developments for addressing this problem come from the bottom-up efforts of people power movements. We know that civilians often bear massive suffering in war and communal violence, and that they need protection. Yet that should not blind us to their potential power. A growing body of cases, research, and practice shows that organized communities and nonviolent movements can constructively impact all stages of conflict.

Drawing from Practice

Chapters in this work highlight first-hand experiences and insights from several practitioners.

"Toward a Grassroots Global Solidarity Movement" by Gino Govender shares reflections from activists and organizers from Sudan, Palestine, Democratic Republic of Congo, Lebanon, and Ukraine. The

prompting question for each of these individuals—"What does a grassroots-based, global people power solidarity movement look like to you and your community?"—yields a range of ideas for responses that people, communities, and civil society organizations can take. A consistent theme is the need to increase opportunities and structures that support collaboration and sharing of lessons, both within and across borders.

"Civilians in Peace Movements in Eastern DRC Targeted by Rebels" by Steward Muhindo begins with an account of the recent M23 paramilitary takeover of the city of Goma and shares some of its harrowing communal and individual impacts. Muhindo also mentions M23's focus on persecuting civil society and activists, which is an implicit acknowledgment that they recognize the power of organized civilians. He then recalls his own experience of fleeing from violent conflict, which led him to decide to work for an advocacy organization, and then later to join the LUCHA movement to advance peace, democracy, justice, and good governance. His activism both furthers these goals and has a personal impact, as he states that: "This struggle also frees me from the burden of my painful past marked by armed violence and allows me to express my aspirations for a peaceful, prosperous, democratic, and free Congo."

"Resistance Committees in Sudan Organizing Under Dictatorship, Coup, and Conflict" by Ola Ibrahim details the critical work of the numerous local, informal Resistance Committees in Sudan. Playing a leading role in the pro-democracy struggle that ended the 30-year rule of dictator Omar al-Bashir, these neighborhood associations continued to organize and actively push for democracy in the post-transition period, including after the 2021 coup d'état. When civil war broke out in 2023, state capacity collapsed and Resistance Committees adapted by forming Emergency Response Rooms that organized healthcare workers and services, gathered and distributed medical supplies, and liaised with government entities. They also set up central kitchens to provide food for families in need, and field protection committees to monitor conflict developments, share information with civilians, and assist with evacuations.

"Women's Peace and Security After Civil War in Ethiopia" by Hanyea Mohammed shares some of the author's firsthand experiences of the horrors of the Tigray War, and then recounts her organization's (Beza for Women) work to offer food, legal aid, economic support, information sharing, psychosocial support, and other individual and community healing efforts to suffering civilians. Training women leaders is also an essential aspect of their work and strategy. Mohammed details carrying out these peacebuilding activities both

during the Tigray War—when other organizations were more likely to suspend operations—as well as afterwards through engagement efforts that support the long-term recovery process.

"Shaping Peace During and After War in Sri Lanka" by Shreen Saroor describes the impact of civil war on the author's family and community in Sri Lanka's Northern Province, as well as her later decision to leave her private sector job in the capitol city and return to her hometown of Mannar to support peace. While the civil war was ongoing, Saroor and two childhood friends resurrected the Mannar Women's Development Federation, which sought to improve social, economic, and cultural rights of Tamil and Muslim women. She writes of providing legal aid, microcredit, counseling, support to survivors of sexual violence and domestic abuse, mediation and reconciliation of community conflicts, and support for police to set up units that are oriented toward the circumstances of women and children. After the civil war ended, Saroor notes that danger remained for organizations that advocated for accountability—especially for women victims—and local advocates faced increased violence and persecution. Yet community-driven peacebuilding continues. She states: "We are no longer just survivors of a brutal war; we are active agents of change."

"Lessons for the International Community" by

Véronique Dudouet draws on the author's extensive experience as a scholar and practitioner supporting movements and peacebuilding. She outlines a variety of forms of international engagement on these fronts and emphasizes three broad categories of support. These include **being attentive** by learning about movements, their contributions to peacebuilding, and their specific insights on their own local circumstances; **being assertive** by amplifying the voices of activists, organizers, and peacebuilders domestically and internationally; and **being supportive** by addressing security, technical, and strategic needs of movements, as well as by providing connections and access to networks of support. Cross-cutting themes include considering the principle of "do no harm" in any external support efforts, and the importance of long-term engagement throughout all phases of conflict transformation.

Drawing from Research

The above perspectives are a rich source of insights and lessons. They also are complimented and reinforced by a growing body of research. Studies show us that people power movements can constructively influence conflict, peace, and security in several ways, including:

1. Creating conditions that **lower the risk of violent conflict** and insecurity in societies.

Reducing conflict intensity by shifting the behavior and strategic calculations of armed groups, as well as by taking other protective measures toward civilians.

2. **Increasing the likelihood that ongoing violent conflicts reach a peaceful resolution**.[8]

Selected findings on each of these are outlined below:

To reduce the long-term risk of violent conflict, people power movements can advance goals—such as democracy, human rights, transparency, and the rule of law—that are conducive to peace and stability. Their record of doing so is well-documented.[9]

Movements also can prevent violent conflict by demonstrating an effective alternative form of power.[10] When communities feel that their fundamental interests are threatened, too often people conclude that joining violent groups is their only viable option. Yet people power movements are consistently far more effective at defeating authoritarianism than violent insurgency. Accordingly, movements can help undercut the emergence and recruitment efforts of armed groups by sharing knowledge about nonviolent methods of change, fostering a sense of empowerment, organizing community service groups, and engaging in acts of nonviolent resistance against oppression.[11]

When a conflict is ongoing, **movements can also take actions to decrease its intensity**.[12] For example, research from 16 civil wars in Africa from 1990 to 2009 finds that civilian noncooperation tactics such as strikes and boycotts can significantly reduce conflict deaths.[13] Other studies have found that self-organizing among communities to represent themselves in local talks with armed groups can have similar effects.[14] Cases in Colombia and Syria also suggest that organized civilians in conflict zones may be in a better position than large international organizations (such as the United Nations or the International Committee of the Red Cross) to transmit norms of respect for life and international humanitarian law to armed actors.[15]

Movements can also **increase the likelihood that violent conflicts result in a durable and equitable peace**. An analysis of nearly sixty years of data (1955 to 2013) on civil wars finds that when nonviolent movements are active amid armed conflict, the conflict is more likely to result in a negotiated settlement as well as post-conflict democratization.[16] In particular, protests and political engagement by civil society have been effective at driving parties to start peace talks, and disruptive acts such as sit-ins and blockades have been impactful in moving these talks to a peaceful conclusion.[17] An illustrative example of this is when 5,000 Liberian women from diverse backgrounds organized

vigils and protests to drive peace talks in 2003, and then sent a delegation that organized sit-ins and a nonviolent blockade at the negotiation site when the talks seemed to be stalling.[18]

A growing body of scholarship further recognizes that direct civil society inclusion in peace negotiations leads to better conflict outcomes. To this end, acts of nonviolent protest by civil society have been found to increase the probability that civil society groups will be included—and given substantive roles (such as full participants or mediators)—in peace negotiations.[19]

After formal negotiations have ended, people power movements can also play a crucial role in ensuring that all parties live up to their commitments and that relevant new policies are implemented.[20]

Supporting Movements to Advance Just Peace and Security

These research findings and the diverse accounts in this publication make a strong case for deeper support and engagement with activists, organizers, and movements in conflict-prone and conflict-affected areas. We know that activists are often on the front lines of fighting for rights, freedom, and justice. They organize service delivery, psychosocial support, mediation, information sharing, and other life-saving functions in the midst of violent conflict. They can also foster reconciliation,

accountability, and community participation in peace processes and post-conflict settings.

These are all areas where the 2025 Copenhagen People Power Conference can enable learning, exchange, collaboration, and ultimately impact. Let us seize this opportunity.

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1. The two publications are:

ActionAid Denmark. *Building People Power: How to Stand with Social Movements*. ActionAid Denmark. March 2024.

Hardy Merriman. *We Need People Power to Address a World in Peril*. ICNC Press and ActionAid Denmark. 2023. https://www.nonviolent-conflict.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/People-Power-to-Address-a-World-in-Peril.pdf.

2. Siri Aas Rustad. *Conflict Trends: A Global Overview, 1946–2023*. *PRIO Paper*. Peace Research Institute of Oslo (PRIO). 2024. https://cdn.cloud.prio.org/files/92a7aad5-3572-4886-9e9c-8aa155f1d0f4/Conflict_Trends-2024_DIGITAL.pdf.

A state-based conflict is "a contested incompatibility over government and/or territory, where at least one party is a state and the use of armed force results in at least 25 battle-related deaths within a calendar year."

At the time of writing this publication, full 2024 data for state-based conflicts is not yet available.

3. Rustad. *Conflict Trends*.

A *non-state conflict* is "the use of armed force between organized groups, none of which is the government of a state, resulting in at least 25 battle-related deaths within a year."

4. Rustad. *Conflict Trends*.

One-sided violence is "the use of armed force against civilians by the government of a state or by a formally organized group, which results in at least 25 battle-related deaths. Extrajudicial killings in custody are excluded."

5. The data cited earlier in this section on deaths from state-based conflicts draws from the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP). As of the time of this writing, comparison data for 2024 is not yet available. https://ucdp.uu.se/.

6. "Conflict Index: December 2024." Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (ACLED) https://acleddata.com/conflict-index/.

"A Year of Turmoil: Conflicts, Crises and Displacement in 2024." UNHCR https://www.unhcr.org/news/stories/year-turmoil-conflicts-crises-and-displacement-2024.

7. "Conflict Index: December 2024." Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (ACLED) https://acleddata.com/conflict-index/.

8. The summaries of research findings in this section are drawn from: Merriman, *We Need People Power to Address a World in Peril*.

9. Numerous studies find that people power is a potent driver of democratic change, including:

Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan. *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict*. Columbia University Press. 2011.

Jonathan Pinckney. *From Dissent to Democracy: The Promise and Perils of Civil Resistance Transitions*. Oxford University Press, 2020.

People power is also a potent force to counter corruption, for example see: Shaazka Beyerle. *Curtailing Corruption: People Power for Accountability and Justice*. Lynne Rienner Publishers. 2014.

For analysis of the relationship between democracy and improved peace and security outcomes, see:

Martin Lundstedt, Felix Wiebrecht, Vanessa Boese-Schlosser, Kelly Morrison, Natalia Natsika, Marina Nord, Evie Papada, Yuko

Sato, and Staffan I. Lindberg. *Case for Democracy Report*. V-Dem Institute. March 2023. https://v-dem.net/documents/34/C4DReport_230421.pdf.

10. Hardy Merriman and Jack DuVall, "Dissolving Terrorism at Its Roots," in *Nonviolence: An Alternative for Countering Global Terror(ism)*, edited by Ralph Summy and Senthil Ram. Nova Science Publishers. 2007. https://www.nonviolent-conflict.org/resource/dissolving-terrorism-at-its-roots-2/.

11. Maria Stephan and Leanne Erdberg, "To Defeat Terrorism, Use People Power," *Minds of the Movement*, March 28, 2018. https://www.nonviolent-conflict.org/blog_post/defeat-terrorism-use-people-power/.

Illustrating this power of nonviolent methods, there are also examples of armed groups functionally substituting people power for violence by switching their strategies and tactics (temporarily or more permanently) to nonviolent means. Historically, this dynamic has been seen at various points in conflicts in Nepal, East Timor, West Papua, Egypt, South Africa, Palestine, Western Sahara, Mexico, and Colombia.

See: Véronique Dudouet, "Dynamics and Factors of Transition from Armed Struggle to Nonviolent Resistance," in *Journal of Peace Research* 50, no. 3 (2013): 401–13. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343312469978.

Véronique Dudouet, *Civil Resistance and Conflict Transformation Transitions from Armed to Nonviolent Struggle*. Routledge. 2015.

12. Oliver Kaplan. *Resisting War: How Communities Protect Themselves*. Cambridge University Press. 2018.

13. Luke Abbs and Marina G. Petrova, "How—and When—People Power Can Advance Peace Amid Civil War," *United States Institute of Peace*, July 15, 2021. https://www.usip.org/publications/2021/07/how-and-when-people-power-can-advance-peace-amid-civil-war.

14. Oliver Kaplan, "Protecting Civilians in Civil War: The Insti-

tution of the ATCC in Colombia," in *Journal of Peace Research* 50, no. 3 (2013): 351–67. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343313477884.

Juan Masullo Jiménez, *The Power of Staying Put: Nonviolent Resistance Against Armed Groups in Colombia*. ICNC Press. 2015. https://www.nonviolent-conflict.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/The-Power-of-Staying-Put.pdf.

15. Oliver Kaplan. "Nudging Armed Groups: How Civilians Transmit Norms of Protection." in *Stability: International Journal of Security and Development* 2, no. 3. 2013. https://doi.org/10.5334/sta.cw.

16. Luke Abbs, *The Impact of Nonviolent Resistance on the Peaceful Transformation of Civil War*. ICNC Press. 2021. https://www.nonviolent-conflict.org/the-impact-of-nonviolent-resistance-on-civil-war-resolution/.

17. Abbs and Petrova, "How—and When—People Power Can Advance Peace Amid Civil War."

18. Ibid.

Janel B. Galvanek and James Suah Shilue. *Working Tirelessly for Peace and Equality: Civil Resistance and Peacebuilding in Liberia*. ICNC Press. 2021. https://www.nonviolent-conflict.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Working-Tirelessly-for-Peace-and-Equality-Liberia-SR.pdf.

19. Desirée Nilsson and Isak Svensson, "Pushing the Doors Open: Nonviolent Action and Inclusion in Peace Negotiations." in *Journal of Peace Research* 60, no. 1 (2023): 58–72. https://doi.org/10.1177/00223433221141468.

20. Véronique Dudouet, *Powering to Peace: Integrated Civil Resistance and Peacebuilding Strategies*. ICNC Press. 2017. https://www.nonviolent-conflict.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/powering_to_peace_veronique_dudouet_icnc_special_report_series_april2017.pdf.

Envisioning a Grassroots Global Solidarity Movement for Justice and Peace

by Gino Govender

In October 2024, the Global Social Movement Centre (MOVE) convened a gathering in Arusha of activists and peacebuilders working in conflict and post-conflict zones. The aim of the gathering was to build collective wisdom around the vital role social justice movements can play in advancing peace and justice before, during, and after violent conflicts, and what support is needed from their allies.

This gathering was a precursor to the 2025 Copenhagen People Power Conference, where governments, multilateral actors, donors, researchers, civil society organizations, and movement leaders converge to further explore the role of social movements in creating peace and justice in violent conflicts, and the roles of the different stakeholders of the movement support

ecosystem. Building up to the conference, MOVE also designed and presented a series of six global webinars on the theme, "Towards a People's Peace: How Social Movements Can Help Create Just and Nonviolent Futures."

In posing some critical questions on building peoples' solidarity movements in violent contexts, participants sought to explore:

- Building solidarity connections and healing
- Similarities and lessons across different movements
- Strategies and tactics in conflict and post-conflict situations
- Types of support for frontline workers and organisations.

Finding Common Ground: A Yearning for Lasting Peace

During an evening of the MOVE workshop at the MS-TCDC in Arusha, delegates from Haiti, Sudan, Palestine, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Lebanon, and Ukraine* came together at dusk in the garden to reflect and share their insights and experiences on the topic, "What does a grassroots-based,

* Participant names withheld for privacy and security.

global people-to-people solidarity movement look like to you and your community?"

We sought the wisdom of activists operating on the frontlines of war and struggles against injustice on what must or might be done to build a connected movement. This conversation went deep into the night. Using our cellphone torches for lights, we took notes around the table as the conversation evolved into a serious, sombre reflection of the urgency to stop the global slide into geopolitical power struggles and wars of the few on the one hand and, on the other, uniting the broadest possible front of people and peoples' organisations yearning and working for a just, sustainable, and peaceful world.

What follows is a basic record of this conversation that ended up as a report to the rest of the delegates the following morning.

Shaping Our Message

We must learn from each other, know the true stories about each of our respective struggles and our histories. We must know what the people are demanding and respect their hopes and aspirations. By doing so, we can learn how to speak for and support each other, and show we care about injustice beyond our own struggles.

We know that grassroots movements are crucial as they work with and build the power of people and local communities to bring about change from the bottom

up. The active involvement of people in peacebuilding ensures that such a "movement of people" is inclusive and representative of diverse perspectives and needs. To involve people at the grassroots level, our message for peace and against injustice must be able to unite and inspire people with facts that are simple, clear, and consistent. We must keep telling *our story*. This will help counter misinformation and disinformation.

We know from history that war dehumanises. Our message by our activists must humanize, *never* dehumanize, people. Furthermore, our message must avoid portraying people as helpless victims but as people involved in demanding an end to injustices and fighting for their rights. It must be clear that people desire peace *with* justice. They are demonstrating their resistance and disobedience to injustice and wars they do not want.

People must know that war is financed by people's taxes. This system allows governments to spend huge sums on war instead of meeting the basic needs of their people, such as public heath, clean water, energy, and education.

Whenever and wherever we speak, we must always ensure that our message is based on mandates and the demands from people on the frontlines of a particular struggle—we do not impose our solidarity. We walk behind and in support of their struggles.

As social movements, particularly in the ActionAid

praxis, we work to create conditions for young people and women to be part of and to lead negotiations and processes aimed at peacebuilding, humanitarian, and reconstruction efforts.

Making Peace a People's Issue

History repeats itself because we do not learn from the lessons of the horrors of war or the enormous price ordinary people pay because of warmongering politicians that serve the political economy of the military -industrial complex. It is, therefore, especially important for the youth in any community to search for the true story of "how we got here." Therefore, we must:

a) Make available and accessible the various good educational programs and materials (e.g., from the UN) to raise awareness about peace and solidarity. We can encourage the provision of training and resources to grassroots leaders to enhance their skills in conflict resolution, mediation, and advocacy.
b) Engage with and encourage schools, local leaders, and organizations to foster a culture of peace at an early age.
c) Encourage the formation of local peace committees and solidarity groups. Organise community events, workshops, and awareness campaigns to

promote peace and solidarity.

d) Create networks and platforms for local groups to share their experiences, successes, and challenges in peacebuilding from below and beyond borders.
e) Promote intercultural dialogue and understanding through exchange programs and collaborative projects.

Local organisations can also use hold their governments accountable to their own local laws and standards when applicable—for instance, laws against supplying arms to countries that are engaged in conflicts and violations of human rights and treaties.

Connecting the Grassroots with the Global

We must understand the purpose and the peace mandate of the United Nations, the UN Charter, and International Treaties such as the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights—especially their adoption in the aftermath of the brutal Second World War that costs millions of civilian lives, and its continued relevance in contemporary world.

War is a crime. We must delegitimise war. Instead, we legitimise the struggle against illegal wars, illegal occupations, and *for* the right to peace and justice, to freedom and self-determination, to equality. We emphasise

that human rights are *universal* for *all without exception* and indivisible from each other.

The UN must end impunity for the warlords and ensure that leaders who violate international law—and who directly or indirectly perpetrate war crimes and genocides—are held to account by the International Criminal Court and the International Court of Justice.

We must explain the interconnectedness of humanity and the impact of what happens to people in one part of the world to their sisters and brothers in another. We use the metaphor of building a "central nervous system" of solidarity where we "feel each other's pain." It is plainly clear that people living in "conflict and war zones" across the world have paid a huge price and are tired of war. They yearn for a just peace. We know and understand that we all live in one connected ecosystem. Activists are global citizens. We should be able to connect with and find commonality between different struggles in different places and speak for and support each other.

As a way of connecting with each other and communities, we can establish platforms and alliances to bring together and connect peace activists and struggles for justice from around the world. We could examine existing—and explore new—ways of using different media effectively and to connect grassroots movements.

In this fragmented world, a good start is building and

investing in achieving unity of like-minded people and solidarity organisations and then work towards building new connections and collaborations to broaden and expand reach and depth. We know of the multitude of organisations with proven records dedicated to the noble cause of human solidarity and in the fight for justice and peace. Building fraternal unity with them in this struggle is vital. We envision an alliance of organisations working together at the national, continental, and global levels—from below and beyond borders. We the people demand: *End all wars, make peace.*

Conclusion

The themes in this report are the product of a truly remarkable, respectful, sombre, and engaged conversation in Arusha by young peace and humanitarian workers who hail from war-torn countries. They strongly believe that war is not inevitable and that peace is possible. People—young people in particular—yearn for a life of peace, of love and laughter, of living their dreams and hopes, and being part of and identifying with something popular and purposeful in a connected world. Solidarity begins in the heart and ends with the hands. It is guided by love for people and justice.

These youth are fully aware that building a global peace and solidarity movement at the grassroots level requires a multifaceted approach that includes

local involvement, global networking, education, and advocacy.

We are guided by the wisdom and call to action by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who famously said, "Those who love peace must learn to organize as effectively as those who love war." Moreover, a permanent peace is possible when dignity and justice for all prevails.

Through building a globally connected community of "peace warriors" we can create a force for good and conditions for a truly just world, one that is socially and environmentally sustainable. This is a long walk and there's no better time to start than now.

Accounts from Activists and Peacebuilders

Civilians and Peace Movements in Eastern DRC Targeted by Rebels

by Steward Muhindo

The City of Goma Plunges into Chaos

With its two million inhabitants, Goma is a vibrant city where the energy of the population blends with exceptional natural beauty. Between its bustling markets, lively bars, and a resilient and enterprising society, Goma is constantly buzzing with activity. Bordered on one side by the majestic Lake Kivu and on the other by the imposing Nyiragongo volcano, the city has a unique charm that made it the tourism capital of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Today, Goma has sunk into chaos following the war.

On January 27, 2025, the M23 rebellion and Rwandan army soldiers launched an attack on Goma. The

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Steward Muhindo is an activist with the movement LUCHA, based in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Congolese armed forces and their allies tried to contain the rebels' assaults and protect the city. This led to four days of urban fighting with catastrophic consequences. According to the UN, nearly 3,000 people were killed and almost as many wounded over these few days. Several cases of sexual violence against women and looting were also reported. The camps hosting displaced persons were destroyed by the rebels, further worsening the humanitarian and human rights crisis in the region.

As the M23 rebels and their Rwandan allies consolidate control over the city, the situation is far from improving. Arbitrary arrests, looting, extortion of goods, and various restrictions on freedoms are being reported. Human rights defenders are particularly targeted. On February 2, 2025, a political leader of the M23 rebellion publicly threatened human rights defenders. "Civil society, LUCHA... we in the M23 don't want that. And if we find you, you'll have a problem," he declared.

Goma, once beautiful, resistant, peaceful, and resilient, has become a place of ruin, desolation, and terror. The inhabitants of Goma fear for tomorrow, for the occupation, for being abandoned. But they have the mental resources needed to survive. Over the last 30 years, Goma has endured two devastating volcanic eruptions and permanent insecurity. "This too shall pass," a friend wrote to encourage me through this ordeal.

The Daily Life of a Resident from My Region

Kahindo lives in Kiseguru, a town located in North Kivu province in eastern DRC. Since 2024, the town has been occupied by M23 rebels. According to local civil society, cited by the UN radio in Congo, the rebels commit serious abuses against the townspeople.

Despite the occupation, Kahindo has not left her town. "Where would I go? How would I live with my four children? I might as well stay and die here," she says. Every morning from Monday to Saturday, she goes to her fields, her main source of income to support her family. One day, she encountered armed men stealing crops from her field. One of the armed men attempted to sexually assault her, but another opposed it because she was breastfeeding.

When she returned home, Kahindo found her four children crying from hunger. She could do nothing because she had come back empty-handed. She went to her neighbor to ask for help. The neighbor did assist her with a little food but said she too had crops stolen by armed bandits.

The tragedy experienced by Kahindo and her neighbor is not an isolated case. Many residents of Kiseguru face crop theft and serious abuses by armed groups. This is causing a famine in the town. They rely on humanitarian assistance to make it through the month. Unfortunately, humanitarian organizations say they do

not have enough resources to cover all the food needs in the region plagued by armed groups.

An Event That Changed My Life and Founded My Activist Commitment

In 2008, when I was only 15 years old, I was forced to leave my village of Kiwanja due to the war waged by an armed group called the National Congress for the Defence of the People (CNDP), supported by the Rwandan army. With my eight-year-old brother and my aunt, we headed for Nyamilima, a village located 40 km from our home. Since there was no means of transport, we made the journey on foot. In two days, we had walked 30 km without eating, stopping at a village called Kisharo. Exhausted, we decided to stay there.

I had severe neck pain, certainly because I had been carrying a heavy load on my head. My little brother's condition was even worse. After sitting for about five minutes, he couldn't get up. He was so exhausted that his feet wouldn't move. All night, we massaged his feet with hot water. The next day, he was better and could walk again. This helplessness in the face of my brother's suffering and the killings of several friends and family members by the rebels would awaken in me the desire to fight to change the situation in my country.

Because of the 2008 war, my family had to permanently move to Butembo, a relatively peaceful city

located about 300 km north of Goma. That is where I began my commitment to peace and justice, joining the Children's Parliament in 2010, a local advocacy structure for the respect of children's rights, including those exposed to armed conflicts. Four years later, I volunteered with a local human rights organization called CREDDHO (Center for Research on Environment, Democracy, and Human Rights). It allowed me to advocate for people whose rights had been violated and to specialize in human rights.

However, I felt within me the need to carry out a more direct, active struggle. The office advocacy, trainings, press conferences, and reports that our organization produced did not seem strong enough to force the authorities to commit to the well-being of the people. A little more pressure was needed.

Thus, in 2016, I joined LUCHA, a citizen movement made up mostly of young people who demonstrate for peace, democracy, justice, and good governance. I was able to participate in several peaceful marches, sit-ins, and general strikes to pressure national and international decision-makers to act for peace, justice, and democracy in Congo.

Within LUCHA, we have a strong conviction: the people are the foundation of change. We believe that if the people know their rights and peacefully demand their respect, the leaders will have no choice but to

comply. Thus, our awareness campaigns, marches, and sit-ins are primarily aimed at supporting to people to demand accountability from our leaders. Unlike the common practices in our country, where the slightest disagreement is resolved through arms and violence, we promote a peaceful mode of protest.

Although I have been tortured, arrested, detained, and fired from several jobs, I felt that this direct and active struggle matched my vision of the fight for a truly democratic, peaceful, and free Congo. This struggle also frees me from the burden of my painful past marked by armed violence and allows me to express my aspirations for a peaceful, prosperous, democratic, and free Congo.

The expansion of M23 is inflicting enormous suffering on civilian populations and threatening the young Congolese democracy. As the country gradually reconnects with democratic practices, this offensive glorifies the seizure of power by force and reinforces the idea that violence is a legitimate means of expressing grievances. In this context, voices like that of LUCHA, which advocate for citizens' aspirations through nonviolence and dignity, must be heard, supported, and promoted.

Resistance Committees in Sudan Organizing Under Dictatorship, Coup, and Conflict

By Ola Ibrahim

My home is located in an East Khartoum neighborhood that has always been quiet and middle class. Life moved at a steady pace here. Many of the houses around me were still under construction, a testament to the dreams of their owners. These homes belong to people who have worked abroad, particularly in the Gulf countries, hoping to one day retire in a place they could call their own.

For many in the neighborhood, including my father, the dream of owning a home and starting a small business was central to their lives. My father spent 28 years working in Saudi Arabia, saving every bit he could to

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Ola Ibrahim is an activist from Sudan.

build our house here. This story was shared by many Sudanese in the area—working far from home, building something for the future, hoping the house they built would offer security and stability in a country where the government provides little support for retirees.

I wake up in the morning to find my retired father opening the street door wide, standing to greet passersby as he prepares to get into his car and head to his small farm. It was a time of transformation. We had just finished a revolution that brought down the fascist Bashir regime. The echoes of this change were visible in every neighborhood of Khartoum, where the outer walls of houses bore the marks of our uprising—demonstration calls with dates and phrases like "Freedom. Peace. Justice," "No militias control the country," "Power for the people... The revolution from the people," and "The military should go to barracks... The Janjaweed should be dissolved." These words served as a daily reminder of the sacrifices, struggles, and hopes that had shaped our journey.

Life was not easy, however. Perhaps we were destined to be the generation that makes change but not the one that reaps its fruits. The Sudanese faced economic hardship during the transitional period. Basic goods were not available, and the remnants of the old regime in the state worked tirelessly to paralyze the flow of food and supplies. Yet, in the midst of this struggle, we

found solidarity in our neighborhood. We had already met during the protests to overthrow the regime, and we formed grassroots bodies that were horizontally organized and elected—our resistance committees.

We took it upon ourselves to ensure that food and essential supplies reached our neighborhood. I am part of them. In fact, I am them. I witnessed many forms of daily resistance that emerged. Some members stayed up late in the grain stores, rationing flour for each neighborhood. Others worked tirelessly at the gas warehouses, ensuring that fuel was available. They didn't do this for money; it was resistance work, driven by a deep commitment to the cause. They worked hard to ensure that the transition of power would continue smoothly and that we would not be left without the basic necessities in the face of overwhelming challenges.

In addition, the organizational work was at its peak. We met weekly in one of the houses in the neighborhood, sometimes even at the headquarters of the resistance committees in certain neighborhoods. There, we divided up the tasks, elected the organizational offices, and communicated with other bodies pushing for change. We formulated positions on the policies of the transitional government, advocating for justice for the comrades who had been assassinated by the former regime. We wrote the revolutionary charter, which was meant to establish the authority of the people.

To a large extent, this was the nucleus of the local government we sought—where power was shared among the neighborhoods and the needs of the Sudanese people were central to every decision. It was a vision of grassroots democracy, one that aimed to break free from the oppressive systems of the past and give power back to the people who had fought for it.

The Resistance Committees continued their political work, remaining active and dynamic within Transitional government circles—opposing and correcting. Access to members of the transitional government was possible, albeit with hesitation. Yet, a more violent fate awaited us at the end of the tunnel. On October 25, 2021, the military faction of the Transitional Sovereignty Council, led by General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, Commander-in-Chief of the Army, and General Hemedti, leader of the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), staged a coup.

Tens of thousands of people protested this coup. The grassroots resistance reached its peak, with the Resistance Committees working hand in hand with other grassroots organizations. During that time, we learned that aligning with political forces on a minimum set of demands was futile. Despite the many lives lost in the face of the military coup, we believed it was the perfect moment to expand horizontally—building networks with other advocacy groups and within neighborhoods.

Some neighborhoods even began organizing local council elections. There was hope—hope to overthrow the coup—as experience in both field and political organizing had grown.

The protests persisted for two years, relentless and unwavering, with tens of thousands joining weekly. Resistance took cultural and social forms in every neighborhood—more seminars, discussions, celebrations, and film screenings about military coups. Khartoum remained alive, youthful, and defiant.

Then came an ordinary day—April 15, 2023. Sudanese people went about their morning routines. Some had already left for work. Children headed to school. I remember saying goodbye to my mother at our doorstep as she rushed to catch her flight. But amid this extreme normalcy, at exactly 9 AM, the city's pulse paused—silenced by the sound of an explosion from southern Khartoum. It was the grim announcement of a new, dark chapter in the nation's history: the outbreak of war between the RSF and the army.

I didn't see my mother again until a week after the war began. She had been stranded at the airport for hours with dozens of other travelers, then forcibly confined in nearby homes amid the clashes, before finally managing to escape back to her house.

From my home, I could hear the shelling, the cries of the wounded, and the grim news of casualties. One

of them was a six-year-old boy struck by a stray bullet that first pierced his house and then his small chest. His mother, holding him tightly in her arms, rushed desperately from one hospital to another, searching for someone to treat his wounds. When every attempt failed, she reached out to a member of the Resistance Committees, who, through a few phone calls, managed to bring a doctor from the neighborhood. He tried for a long time to save the child, but the boy succumbed to his injuries, dying on the sidewalk. The heartbreaking scene was broadcast live on Facebook—an effort to document the atrocities.

It was a shocking moment. We realized then that the state had collapsed — civilians were abandoned without any institutional support. It was a catastrophe. Movement was restricted to within neighborhoods. Central hospitals and health centers ceased operations, overwhelmed by the sheer number of casualties. Many shut their doors as medical staff could no longer move safely through the city.

Within days, grocery stores emptied their shelves of food supplies. The Resistance Committees responded by forming Emergency Response Rooms in every neighborhood. In my own neighborhood, we gathered as a committee in front of the local health center. Within hours, we coordinated efforts to identify and gather the healthcare workers in the area, categorizing them

by specialty. We reached out to government entities to reopen health centers in the neighborhoods. Medical supplies and medications were transported from central hospitals to these local facilities.

We also formed field protection committees—monitoring security developments and providing information to residents, assisting with evacuations when needed.

Recognizing that many families couldn't survive long without a steady income, we knew we had to provide at least one daily meal for people in the neighborhood. This is how the idea of central kitchens emerged—cooking at least one meal a day and distributing it to residents.

This relentless work, driven by nothing but pure love for the homeland, continues as I write these lines — two years since the war broke out — in every neighborhood, every city, and every state across Sudan. Even within the camps of the displaced and refugees. It is part of the political stance of the Resistance Committees: responding to humanitarian needs and bridging the institutional gap. Amid the ongoing militarization and the creation of militias here and there, the road to a state remains long—and even longer toward a state of institutions and the rule of law. Yet, the will persists, steadfast in the pursuit of freedom, peace, and justice.

Women's Peace and Security After Civil War in Ethiopia

by Hanyea Mohammed

Organizing After the Conflict

The Tigray War was an armed conflict that lasted from November 2020 to November 3, 2022. It was a civil war primarily fought in the Tigray region.

On a normal day, schools, hospitals, churches, and mosques were open. Most people went to pray, learn, and receive medical care. Life was quite easy and normal. But during the fighting, we were unable to go to the mosque, church, market, or even access medical services. The war brought unimaginable horrors.

I witnessed these horrors firsthand in my hometown, Dessie, when it was taken over by combatants. I saw people wounded in hospitals and dead bodies damaged by heavy artillery shells. I saw women and mothers take their own lives after being assaulted and young children

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Hanyea Mohammed is a peacebuilder in Ethiopia.

killed in front of their families. When international organizations sent humanitarian aid for women and children in desperate need, many were unable to receive the support. This motivated me to advocate for them and amplify their voices to national and international organizations.

My organization was there during and after the conflict. We collected food from the community to provide for those in need. We offered psychological support and established referral linkages for survivors of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). We organized coffee ceremonies to bring people together, and we provided spiritual services led by religious leaders for all faiths.

Our organization, Beza for Women, is stationed in Dessie. *Beza*, a local word meaning *ransom* or *redemption* in Amharic, reflects our mission. We were also victims of the war, witnessing firsthand the immense challenges women, youth, and children faced during the conflict and still face now, since the War in Amhara that began in April 2023 continues between the Ethiopian government and Fano, the ethno-nationalist Amhara combatants. Many lives have been lost, infrastructure was damaged, and community groups have become hopeless over the past four years.

Beza for Women is well-known by the grassroots community and the local government for providing comprehensive services, especially for women. We were

the only organization that remained present during and after the Tigray conflict. Beza is trusted by women in our area because all our staff and volunteers were there during that difficult time. The community already knew our services, and after the conflict, the damaged communities—especially children and women who suffered from SGBV—came to our office. Due to the community's demand, we became aware of the immediate need for food assistance for internally displaced persons. We provided food and psychological support, distributing what we had collected from the community, with a special focus on SGBV survivors.

Our organization is registered with the Ethiopian Civil Society Agency, and we are a member of the Government and Non-Governmental Organization Forum. We have over 100 youth council volunteers and young female leaders. We provide information and services through local radio, village coffee ceremonies, and various social media platforms. The Women's Affairs Office and the community know our services well and refer rights holders to us. Despite the ongoing conflict in our area, we are still providing psychological and free legal aid services.

Supporting Young Women

Almaz, a 16-year-old student, lives with her mother (a 42-year-old widow whose name is withheld here

for safety reasons) and three other family members in Bahel Amba Kebele, Hotte sub-city of Dessie town in South Wollo Zone. Their lives had been unfolding normally until recent years when they were impacted by protracted fighting and related violence in their village, causing them great distress. Due to the war, Almaz and her mother were subjected to sexual assault and rape, leaving them with no idea of where to turn for help. Feeling ashamed and scared of repercussions, Almaz stopped going to school, fell into a state of emotional distress, and was unable to live her normal life. Facing many challenges, Almaz's mother, with her own experience of similar trauma during the conflicts, was determined to find a way out. She enrolled Almaz in Beza for Women's Community-Based Development Association's (BWCBD) comprehensive psychosocial and trauma counseling training, a project that helps traumatized victims of conflict through support, counseling, and therapy to help them integrate back into the community and regain a sense of normalcy.

Generously funded by Plan International Ethiopia, the project aims to improve women's and girls' participation and decision-making roles at Dessie Zuria Woreda* while specifically providing comprehensive

* A woreda is an administrative division between a zone and a regional state in Ethiopia.

psychosocial and economic support after sexual and gender-based violence brought on by the conflicts and residual violence. In partnership with the local government and a grassroots community organization, BWCBD introduced psychosocial aid and trauma counseling to assist those affected by gender-based violence. They provided a training of trainers (TOT) program for fifty youth volunteers, community leaders, and media professionals. Twenty female victims of SGBV were given training and assistance in setting up a livelihood.

Almaz and her mother attended the trauma counseling for three days. Furthermore, her mother received financial assistance to start a small business. The training helped her lessen the effects of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and allowed her to resume her regular life. Almaz and her mother have benefited greatly from this program, having gone from living scared and alone to being able to connect with, and help, the community again. BWCBD and its donor Plan International Ethiopia have worked hard to provide a safe environment, assistance, and support to Almaz, her mother, and all survivors of gender-based violence and sexual assault.

Before the counseling, Almaz was profoundly depressed due to the abuse and violence she had gone through; afterward, she was able to go back to school. Speaking with other victims, Almaz understood that she was not the only one facing this problem. She started

talking to her family and friends again. Now, through their continuous counseling and unconditional assistance, Almaz is able to focus on building her bright future—a future that is now attainable. She is thankful that her mom and the social workers from Beza for Women brought her to the training, as it made a significant difference and prevented her from committing suicide.

Almaz has had a chance to set her goals, reframe her beliefs, develop healthy coping strategies, and tap into her inner strength. She expresses her gratitude for the support and guidance that she received from the training, along with the support and guidance of her family. This service is essential in helping them feel comfortable enough to reach out for help and stay in school. On the other hand, to ensure the service continues long after Beza, the TOT program has equipped local leaders and youth volunteers with the capability to boost the demand for gender-based violence services and make them more accessible.

This experience has shaped my commitment to supporting my community through recovery and ensuring that no voice goes unheard.

Shaping Peace During and After War in Sri Lanka

by Shreen Saroor

The Expulsion of Muslims from the Northern Province

In 1990, I was a first-year student at the University of Colombo, far from my home in Mannar, a coastal town in Northern Sri Lanka. Though my family were Muslim*, we had always been closely tied to the Tamil community, and I had grown up surrounded by Tamil culture. I had originally been selected to study at Jaffna University, but after losing a relative studying there to the Indian Peacekeeping Force (IPKF) massacre in 1987, my father insisted I study in Colombo instead, fearing for my safety. We were already seven years into a civil war that would continue until May 2009, when

* In the Sri Lankan context, Muslims are a separate ethnic group. This demographic category that ignores any actual ethnic or lingual groupings is a vestige of the colonial period.

Shreen Saroor is a peacebuilder from Sri Lanka.

the Sri Lankan Army defeated the LTTE (Tamil Tigers). The religious dimension of the civil war is often left out of official accounts, with the story of the conflict simplified to a battle between Sinhalese government forces and Tamil rebels.

The first year in Colombo was difficult since I was the only student from the North, and my accent, origin, and appearance made me a target for severe military checks and ragging by seniors. The military thought I was a suicide bomber, and Sinhala students enjoyed mocking my accent when I spoke Sinhala, while Muslim students criticized my attire, especially not covering my head. I refused to conform to their expectations because I was proud of my identity. Growing up in Mannar, I had always felt connected to islanders—from language to food to festivals. But my world was about to change in ways I couldn't have imagined.

In October 1990, the LTTE began a brutal campaign to expel Muslims from the Northern Province. My father, politically savvy and connected with local leaders who were LTTE sympathizers, sensed the impending danger. A few days before the expulsion, the LTTE destroyed the bridges connecting Mannar Island to the mainland. They gave Muslims an ultimatum: leave or face dire consequences. Catholic religious leaders begged the LTTE to reconsider, but the order was final. In certain areas of the north, they gave only 24 hours for Muslims to leave.

My father and his affluent friends tried to arrange safe passage for fleeing Muslims, but the chaos was overwhelming. The LTTE robbed valuables as 75,000 Muslims were forcibly evicted from the Northern Province. Many families fled by boat to Kalpitya, a coastal town in the Puttalam district. My mother and brothers were among them. One of my brothers went missing for weeks until we finally found out his whereabouts. My father had a heart attack from the shock. It took three more months for my brother to reunite with us, protected by a Tamil colleague of my father's.

The pain of eviction stayed with my family. My father passed away in the shadow of the evacuation, his health shattered by the trauma. Though the Tamil community was not responsible, the effects of the LTTE's actions lingered, and the divide between Muslims and Tamils remains to this day.

Taking Action

My father and I often visited the makeshift camps for evicted Muslims in Puttalam while I was studying at the university. These displaced families sheltered in public buildings such as schools and mosques, or even in the homes, spare land, and community centers of the local population.

What bothered me most was watching a secular group of Northern Muslims become increasingly zealous as

they tried to forge a collective Muslim identity. I saw this shift particularly in the attire of the young women, especially their face coverings. Once, these girls had been encouraged to study hard and compete alongside their Tamil sisters to secure top scores in university entrance exams. But over time, they were subtly—and sometimes not-so-subtly—coaxed to leave school early. They were married off before they even turned 18. The change was staggering, and it felt wrong.

Northern Muslims had been more liberal and had mingled a lot with Tamils. Their practice of Islam was more secular, and many adhered to Sufi ideology. While Wahhabism was taking root in Sri Lanka, in the north it was restricted. Whether you were a girl or boy, you would have to complete your higher studies and enter university. If neighbor friends were studying medicine, you would be pressured to study hard to enter medical college. There was no discrimination. This was the culture I came from, and I felt wrong because evicted girls did not have this opportunity.

As a Tamil-speaking Muslim in Colombo, I grew alienated by the widening divide in Sri Lanka's ethnic and religious landscape. The political environment was growing more polarized, and my experiences of exclusion—both as a woman and as a minority—drove me to understand what it really meant to be a minority in this country. And so, in the late 1990s, I made a decision that would

change the course of my life. I left my job in the private sector and returned to Mannar, the place of my birth, to work on resurrecting the peaceful coexistence of Tamils and Muslims. I had seen firsthand how much the country was hurting, how marginalized communities—especially minority women—were suffering.

Returning Home

In 1997, I visited Mannar on the invitation of then-Vicar General Father Xavier Croos, one of the religious leaders who years earlier had appealed to the LTTE against the eviction. What I saw in Mannar was devastating. The prolonged government shelling had destroyed entire neighborhoods. Aerial bombardment, shelling, mass arrests, and detentions were a daily occurrence. Stories of multiple displacements, disappearances, mass killings, and starvation made me permanently change my journey thereafter. I went back to Colombo with a heavy heart, but definitely with a plan.

In 1999, with two of my schoolmates, I resurrected the Mannar Women's Development Federation (MWDF) to tackle these issues. The MWDF was initially a wing within the church relief organization, but it had become defunct. Under this banner, we set out to improve the social, economic, and cultural rights of both Tamil and Muslim women in Mannar. MWDF began offering free legal aid and counseling to women

whose lives had been torn apart by the conflict. We also launched a microcredit initiative, providing women with the skills training and financial resources they needed to rebuild their lives. But it wasn't just about economic empowerment—it was about healing and restoring dignity. Through our programs, we sought to foster collaboration across communities that had once been bitterly divided.

When we began the microcredit program, we first focused on direct contributions from our community and did not approach any donors at that stage. Our first head collection was used to help a young woman who had lost her leg to a landmine. We provided her with a lease for a tractor to plough her field and others' paddy fields. Later, we organized women at the village level into savings circles and matched their savings by doubling their contributions. These savings were then given as revolving loan funds to one or two women in need to start livelihoods, mostly in areas like cultivation, home gardening, small animal farming, or poultry.

We addressed war related displacement and sexual violence committed by state military against Tamil women heavily. It made us to go underground for some time due to surveillance placed on some of us.

This method of financing continued until 2002 when we officially registered MWDF. After that, we were able to raise funds from donors—including the Canadian

International Development Agency—and set up a model unit to address domestic violence. When Sri Lanka passed its Domestic Violence Act in 2005, MWDF was the first to offer a comprehensive, one-stop solution. We established counseling and legal units, a referral system with hospitals and police, a shelter to host victims and their children, and a livelihood development program for survivors of domestic and sexual violence. Later, with the help of the police, MWDF helped build two separate women- and children-friendly police units in Mannar Island to address cases of abuse involving women and children.

At first, there was deep mistrust between the Tamil women and the Muslim returnees, but we took a different approach. We didn't just provide services or run programs; we worked to mediate conflicts on a personal level, addressing grievances before they could be co-opted into larger communal or political disputes. Slowly, women from both communities began to engage with one another and share their war-related experiences. That's when we realized the power of grassroots reconciliation. In 2005, I was given a two-year fellowship from Echoing Green to build a model resettlement village for displaced communities in the north. It was through projects like this that I began to see how essential it was to build common ground between communities, particularly between Tamil and Muslim youth,

who had been growing further apart because of the war.

After the war ended, a Muslim woman returned to her village, Vidathaltheevu. Her husband had passed away, and she approached MWDF seeking the land that had once belonged to him. To her surprise, she found that it was occupied by a Tamil woman, a widow who had lost all her children to the war, except for her youngest son. This Tamil woman's family had received the land and house as a donation from the LTTE, in recognition of their sacrifice. The land was backed by the yellow deed they issued her, while the Muslim woman held the government-issued LDO permit that her late husband had given her.

The land, spanning about 30 perch lands, had become a source of tension. However, through careful and respectful negotiation, the two women came to an agreement. The Tamil woman kept the land with the house, while the Muslim woman received the remaining empty land. Despite efforts from politicians of different parties who tried to use the situation to fuel the existing mistrust between the communities, the women's agreement stood as a testament to their mutual understanding and resolve. It was a quiet victory, born from dialogue rather than conflict, in a time when such cooperation was rare.

The Work Continues

Over the next two decades, the work I had started in Mannar expanded. I became involved in initiatives that spanned the entire country and at the international level, especially in transitional justice and accountability. In 2009, after the war ended, I co-founded the Women's Action Network (WAN), a coalition of 11 women's rights organizations. After the end of the war, many women's groups were restricted or its members—especially leadership—were killed. WAN focused on promoting justice and accountability for war crimes, especially crimes against women. We worked with survivors, helping them prepare to testify about disappearances, sexual violence, and abuses committed during the war.

It wasn't just about seeking justice for sexual violence or war crimes—it was about rethinking what justice meant in post-war Sri Lanka. Women had to step up as heads of households, often in communities that still viewed widowhood as a curse. Many of the women we worked with were struggling to navigate this new reality, but we fought for their rights to education, livelihoods, and resources. We also pushed against the top-down, politicized development agenda of the government, advocating for a women-centered perspective on rebuilding. Despite the rebuilding of roads and bridges, the needs of women—especially those in the

north—were often ignored. It became clear to me that true peace and development would only come if women were fully included in the process.

It was a dangerous time for human rights defenders in Sri Lanka. We faced threats and intimidation, but we persevered because we knew how important it was to center the voices of the victims in the fight for justice. As such, WAN has never registered as an official entity or conducted fundraising. Today, it remains a voluntary collective that facilitates group-level activism and individual efforts, helping to amplify their voices at national and international levels.

It has been over two decades since I first returned to Mannar, and my work continues. But when I look back, I can see how far we've come. We are no longer just survivors of a brutal war; we are active agents of change. I believe that the work we've done at the local level—empowering women, bridging divides, and demanding justice—holds the key to the country's future. If Sri Lanka is to transition from decades of conflict to lasting peace, it will have to center the voices of its most marginalized—especially women.

Lessons for the International Community

by Dr. Véronique Dudouet

Given the unprecedented intensity of protracted and violent conflicts worldwide, policymakers must recognize the critical importance of "people power" in preparing, building, and consolidating peace. This final section distills key takeaways for international actors as allies of grassroots social movements in their frontline activism. The vast landscape of global allies includes inter-governmental, state and non-state actors alike, at the nexus between diplomacy, development aid, philanthropy, democracy support, peace mediation, and peacebuilding at large.

Voices From the Ground: Contributions to Conflict Transformation by Grassroots Activists

The compelling narratives of personal and collective engagement for peace and justice shared in Section 2 of this report exemplify the rich diversity of movements

that emerge amid structural or armed violence. The motivations driving nonviolent activists are rooted in addressing deep-seated issues (including marginalization, oppression, and human rights violations), as well as the direct consequences of armed conflict (such as destruction, displacement, famine, militarization, gender-based violence, massacres, and war crimes). In response, the slogans promoted by the featured activists and peacebuilders embody a vision of peace that is truly positive and empowering – making it clear that there can be no real peace without justice, freedom, democracy, good governance, and human rights for all.

Grassroots movements contribute to positive peace in several impactful ways:

- **Bottom-up change**: A first observation from all testimonies is that social change achieved through nonviolent struggles, driven by communities most affected by conflict, is more sustainable and empowering than top-down, elite-led transitions. As powerfully depicted in the story from Sri Lanka, people power transforms victims and "survivors of a brutal war" into "active agents of change," often with women and youth at the forefront of mobilization. As echoed by activists from LUCHA in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC),

"the people are the foundation of change." They demonstrate that it is possible to promote and enact change through nonviolent struggle, even amid warfare and while facing the combined violence of state and non-state armed groups.

- **Human rights advocacy**: One of the main strengths of people power is its focus on raising awareness—among both dominant groups and aggrieved communities—on accountability and justice needs. The activists and peacebuilders featured in this report have used various means to document past atrocities and advocate against ongoing violations of basic rights by governments and various armed actors, as illustrated by the work of children rights defenders in DRC. When advocacy is not enough, activists also take justice needs into their own hands, seeking ways to protect civilians at risk, providing legal counseling to marginalized minorities and violence survivors, and empowering them to take legal action against impunity, as exemplified by the work of Women's Action Network in Sri Lanka.
- **Constructive resistance**: Civil resistance movements that mobilize amid oppression and war provide a vision for a better future, thanks to their embodiment of peaceful practices, direct democracy, decentralized decision-making,

equitable relationships, demilitarized societies, and community solidarity. One prominent example is the neighborhood committees in Sudan. These played a key role during the 2019 revolution and the resistance against the 2021 coup, by combining mass protests with the promotion of alternative governance models through cultural resistance and vibrant "street politics," including the co-creation of a revolutionary charter that aims to give power back to the people.

- **Relief and resilience**: Due to their informal, decentralized structures, social movement initiatives can flexibly adapt to changing conflict dynamics and reinvent themselves to respond to people's most pressing needs and priorities in the face of hardship. The ongoing humanitarian work conducted by Sudan's resistance committees through emergency response rooms helps to keep hope alive, proactively seeking out ways to respond to the fundamental needs of civilians caught in the middle of warfare. In Ethiopia, grassroots peacebuilders from Beza for Women are also at the forefront of relief work through food distribution as well as psychosocial and spiritual support for survivors of conflict and gender-based violence.

- **Economic empowerment**: As stressed by promoters of the humanitarian–development–peace (HDP) nexus, short-term relief to address the basic needs of aggrieved citizens needs to be complemented by long-term approaches to sustainable socio-economic empowerment. Nonviolent movements and grassroots initiatives are well suited for fostering self-sustaining development from below, for instance by leading microcredit programs and women-centered reconstruction efforts in Sri Lanka and Ethiopia.
- **Bridge-building:** Nonviolent activists also act as trusted connectors and mediators within and between communities. Their continued presence and persistence even during the most difficult times allows them to build and maintain networks, and to address personal or inter-group conflicts to prevent violent escalation. This is also shown in the example of Sri Lanka, where Mannar Women's Development Federation has effectively mediated inter-ethnic grievances to avoid their co-optation into larger communal or political disputes.
- **Healing and reconciliation**: Bridging divides and co-mobilizing across old conflict lines; promoting alternative narratives about a shared history; digging into a painful history to restore

accountability and dignity: these homegrown strategies for dealing with the past and forging a joint future can also be powerful forces of change, as a complement to civil resistance against violence and injustice. The stories featured in this publication showcase the importance for nonviolent social movements in deeply divided society: by debunking simplistic and polarizing narratives and promoting constructive coexistence between majority and minority groups destined to live together in Sri Lanka, or by working jointly with religious leaders of all faiths in Ethiopia. Together, these approaches help to prevent violent conflict escalation and violence relapse after war through peaceful mobilization from below.

Key Takeaways for International Allies

As summarized above, the stories featured in this publication showcase incredible testimonies of courage, creativity, perseverance, and peaceful change. However, they also underscore the vulnerabilities and risks under which activists, organizers, and peacebuilders operate, especially in the midst of active conflicts. To effectively acknowledge, promote, support, and amplify people power contributions to conflict transformation, international allies should consider the following support strategies:

1. **Be attentive**:
   - Educate oneself on the diverse contributions of grassroots movements in all phases of conflict transformation, by preventing violence while advancing peaceful social change, protecting vulnerable groups caught up in warfare, de-escalating polarizing dynamics, building bridges across conflict lines, constructing new narratives and power relations, and keeping the momentum for sustainable post-war transformation.
   - Rely on grassroots movements when conducting conflict analysis, as they have direct and deep knowledge about the needs and perspectives of the most marginalized segments of society. While national or international NGOs come and go, or are largely based in capital cities, grassroots movements and community-based initiatives remain active even at the height of armed conflict. They thus represent a unique entry point to homegrown experiences and bottom-up solutions.
   - Practice the principle of Do No Harm by monitoring and anticipating the potential risks and harm which external support could bear on grassroots movements and remaining watchful of evolving dynamics and needs on

the ground. While some of the community-based initiatives featured here rely on external funding for survival, others thrive best as informal, unregistered, self-funded collectives, and, hence, support options should be constantly adapted and adjusted based on these diverse realities.

2. **Be assertive**:
   - Amplify the voices of activists, organizers, and peacebuilders at national and international levels, allowing them to speak for marginalized minorities or disempowered majorities. In situations of latent or violent conflict, the power of nonviolent action should be recognized as an effective and constructive alternative to armed resistance on the one hand, and institutional politics on the other. The repressive targeting of LUCHA activists in DRC—who advance citizens' aspirations through nonviolence and dignity—is a tribute to their effectiveness in showing that there is another way to fight against injustice and inequality. Such voices can be promoted in many ways, be it through public awards, legislative resolutions, invitations to speak at panels and conferences, and advocacy testimonies on their behalf.

3. **Be supportive**:
   - Address holistic security needs faced by nonviolent movements—including physical threats, legal risks and psychosocial fatigue—through various means, from protective accompaniment and legal support to digital security training or mental health and self-care accompaniment.
   - Offer technical and strategic support tailored to the needs of activists, the stages of mobilization, and the conflict phase, including through skills training, coaching, and guidance on topics as varied as organizing and coalition-building, strategic communication, campaigning, dialogue, negotiation and mediation, and so forth.
   - Facilitate connections: horizontally, there is real added value in creating spaces for movements to engage in peer learning, experience sharing, and solidarity, as well as fostering the building of positive coalitions aligned in their demands and visions for change; vertically, peace mediators and diplomats can advance inclusive and transformative peacemaking by promoting spaces to bridge the gap between grassroots activists and formal decision-making/negotiation processes.

- Be there for the long haul: Accompany social movements throughout the cycle of conflict transformation, including long-term processes of post-war (or post-struggle) institution-building, structural change, and reconciliation; allowing them to monitor the delivery of promised reforms and 'peace dividends, while staying mobilized against the risks of backlash and relapse into violence, autocratization, or apathy.

By adopting these approaches, international allies can significantly enhance their engagement with grassroots movements, fostering a more inclusive and effective pathway to sustainable peace.

Too often, social movements are sidelined when peace negotiations begin—even though they are often the ones who put justice and peace on the agenda in the first place. But what if peace wasn't dominated by Track II negotiations with diplomats and armed actors? Social movements have always had a central role in shaping a just and lasting peace. What if we start our processes there?

In preparation for the Copenhagen People Power Conference, the Global Social Movement Centre (MOVE) brought together activists, peacebuilders, and allies from conflict zones worldwide to explore these questions at a convening in Arusha, Tanzania. Through workshops, discussions, and collective writing, they began envisioning what a *People's Peace*—a peace rooted in grassroots action—could look like.

This book brings together cutting-edge research and first-person accounts from activists and peacebuilders on the frontlines in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Sudan, Ethiopia, and Sri Lanka, alongside insights for a global solidarity movement from activists in Palestine, Ukraine, and Lebanon. It offers a bold vision for how movements can shape peace and security, and practical lessons for policymakers and allies committed to supporting peace from below.

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