The Missing Piece in Peace:
Stories of Community Resilience

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THE MISSING PIECE IN PEACE

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Editor's letter

When we talk about peace, we often think of treaties signed in distant capitals, of diplomats around negotiating tables for long hours, or of large-scale interventions by multilateral organisations. Yet, this publication tells a different story—one of peace built from the ground up, by communities themselves.

This story is crucial for policymakers and other stakeholders as the Global Gateway projects are implemented worldwide. For the Global Gateway to be a true values-based infrastructure partnership, it must recognise that if conflict sensitivity and peacebuilding are not integrated from the design phase, infrastructure can become a flashpoint rather than a foundation for development.

"The Missing Piece in Peace" brings together compelling case studies from South Sudan, Cambodia, Ethiopia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Somalia. What connects these diverse contexts is a powerful insight: sustainable peace will not come from external impositions but from empowering local communities with the tools, knowledge, and agency to resolve their own conflicts.

Across these pages, you'll meet women in South Sudan who transformed from survivors of gender-based violence into economic leaders; farmers in Somalia learning climate-smart agriculture that reduces resource conflicts; peace promoters in Bor mediating disputes before they escalate to violence; and religious leaders in multiple countries challenging harmful norms and building bridges across divided communities.

These stories challenge us to rethink how we approach peacebuilding. They demonstrate that when we invest in community-led approaches—whether through Peace Committees, Community-Based Sociotherapy, conflict-sensitive programming, or faith-based dialogue—we create foundations for peace that endure.

The "Missing Piece" *in Peace*, it turns out, isn't missing at all. It's been there all along, in communities themselves.

I hope these stories move you as they have moved me and strengthen your commitment to community-centred approaches.

Dr. Tabeth Masengu

South Sudan: Peace Committees and Promoters

By ZOA Dorcas South Sudan

Bor South County in Jonglei State, South Sudan, is characterised by a history of violent conflicts and displacement due to violence and flooding. Since the start of the civil war in 2013, many people have left their villages and found refuge near Bor town, where security has been more stable. The population has become diverse with people from different payams, clans and ethnic backgrounds inhabiting Bor town and its surroundings. Families, especially youth, are adapting to a new life in town away from their villages, as they cannot return due to the ongoing fear of new attacks by neighbouring Murle. This complex situation is a breeding ground for family and community conflicts, and coupled with the widespread presence of small arms, these often escalate into violence.

Hence, the need for Peace Communities. Peace Committees are active in 3 payams (Anyidi, Makuach, Kolnyang). A payam is an administrative unit in South Sudan that sits below a County, while a boma is the local unit under a Payam. Peace Promoters work in the various bomas within these payams. Local leaders propose Peace Committee members and Peace Promoters, who come from different categories (chiefs, church leaders, women and youth leaders, elders, and people with disabilities), representing the different bomas and clans. To take part, members should be respected by the community, live in the community, remain neutral, and avoid violent conflict. The Peace Committees have 17 – 20 members, depending on the number of bomas in the payam. The total number of Peace Promoters in the three payams is 200.

Photo Credits: ZOA

The Peace Committees are active in conflict resolution, conflict prevention and peacebuilding at the payam level, where Peace Promoters do similar work at the boma level for minor cases. They existed before the project started, and all work voluntarily. ZOA Dorcas has revitalised them and provided training and coaching.
Peace Committees and Peace Promoters cannot rely on a government mandate or armed forces to mediate conflict. However, they use their existing skills in conflict mediation, which have been strengthened through various training sessions. The presence of local chiefs in the Peace Committees increases their authority. Communities believe that their decisions should be followed or respected.

The Peace Committees (PC) and Peace Promoters (PP) have been addressing several types of conflicts.

- Family conflicts: conflicts between the spouses and between family members.
- Conflicts around boreholes, including disputes between children and women related to water scarcity, broken-down boreholes, and the increase in water users with the influx of IDPs.
- Land conflicts: disputes about grazing land and farmland, demarcation issues and contested ownership.
- Disputes about access to the fishing grounds.
- Family retaliation and dowry issues resulting from an illegal marriage without the consent of the parents and without dowry payment.
- Youth-related violence: conflicts at dancing grounds, when playing games, sometimes associated with alcohol and drug abuse.

Photo Credits: ZOA

Impact of Peace Committees and Promoters

Widespread violence averted through quick action: The Peace Committees and Peace Promoters, who are present in the community, act quickly to prevent conflicts from escalating. They intervene when they hear about a conflict, while the local chiefs wait till the conflict is reported to them. The chiefs testify that this reduces the time they spend resolving conflicts.

Increased Community trust and legitimacy: They are trusted by both the chiefs and the community and are seen as neutral and capable. Chiefs are not always seen as neutral, as they represent their specific clan, while the members of the Peace Committee and Peace Promoters come from different payams and bomas and therefore from different clans.

"ZOA Dorcas trained us not to distance ourselves, but to stay close to people when they face conflict. The local authorities now ask us to mediate."

- Peace Promoter

Considered a Positive alternative to police and chiefs: The Peace Committees and Peace Promoters can handle minor conflicts which do not require involving the local (formal or informal) authorities. This saves people time and money and prevents the payment of fines imposed by chiefs or formal justice providers, or court fees.

Enhanced Reconciliation: The focus of the Peace Committees and Peace Promoters is on restorative justice, which promotes dialogue, forgiveness, and relationship restoration.They also engage in discussions with families after the chiefs or police have imposed fines, or after a court has delivered its verdict. These actions can create feelings of bitterness among those involved and their families. Therefore, dialogue and reconciliation are essential for families to continue living together peacefully.

Effective Counselling services: The Peace Committees counsel conflict parties, advise people not to seek revenge but rather to sit down and talk, and to refrain from violence**.** More so for Peace Promoters who have a wide presence in the bomas, counselling families when there are (potential) conflicts between spouses, parents and children, or family members with in-laws.

Conflict Sensitivity for Peaceful Resource Management: Cord's SPIRIT Programme in Cambodia

By Cord

Photo Credits: Cord

Cambodia's fragile governance and widespread land disputes have made natural resource management a hotspot for conflict and violence. Cord's Strengthening and Protecting Indigenous Rights to Traditional Land (SPIRIT) program introduced conflict-sensitivity tools, such as Do No Harm (DNH) and Non-Violent Communication (NVC), and conflict-sensitivity programming to empower indigenous communities and NGOs to resolve disputes peacefully.

Through training, coaching, and participatory dialogue, communities have successfully negotiated land returns, reduced violence, and improved gender equity. It has also provided safe spaces where human rights defenders and stakeholders can resolve conflicts peacefully through demonstrated evidence-based advocacy. As a result, this approach simultaneously reduced the impact of environmental harm on indigenous communities and reduces the potential for costly future land related conflict with the government and private businesses. This case illustrates that targeted investments in peacebuilding reduce the likelihood of future crises, strengthen social cohesion, and avoid the high costs of conflict.

Cambodia's transition from civil war to stability has been marred by systemic land conflicts, affecting an estimated 700,000 people in 2013. Economic Land Concessions (ELCs), illegal logging, and weak governance have fuelled disputes between communities, companies, and authorities. These conflicts undermine food security, social cohesion, and democracy, aligning with the EU's priorities in Quality of Life, Defence and Security, and Future Preparedness.

Cord, an international peacebuilding organisation, launched the SPIRIT programme to strengthen indigenous rights and promote conflict-sensitive approaches. The initiative addressed critical risks of violence and displacement, fostering resilience and inclusive governance in a context where civic space is shrinking, and systemic reforms remain slow.

Cord applied a participatory approach combining workshops, site visits, and coaching for NGOs and community environmental defenders. Training focused on conflict analysis, DNH, conflict sensitivity and NVC, enabling actors to identify dividers and connectors, design non-violent advocacy strategies, and institutionalise conflict sensitivity in organisational plans. Communities of practice facilitated peer learning, while the integration of digital security and advocacy complemented the approach. This methodology was chosen for its ability to build local capacity and embed sustainable peace practices at both household and community levels. Crucially, in a context where land contestation and civic engagement with the government is often adversarial, the adoption of peacebuilding tools to engage with the government on sensitive issues is vital to reduce the likelihood of conflict.

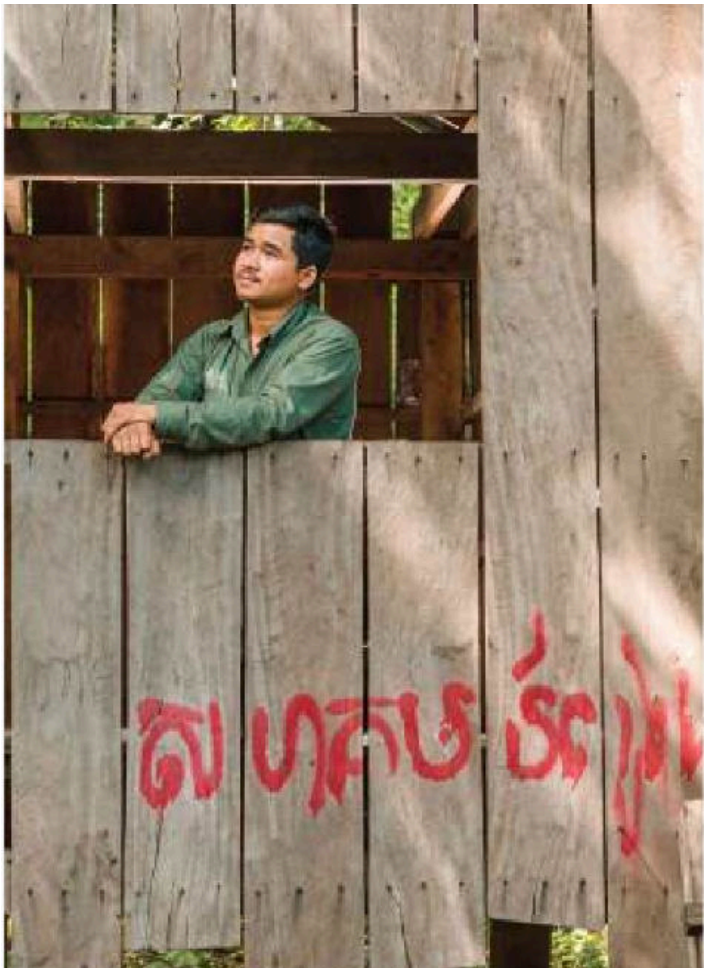

Photo Credits: Cord

Photo Credits: Cord

Peaceful Solutions for Safer Communities

The initiative is already shaping daily life in meaningful ways. Communities have resolved land disputes without violence, while relationships with local authorities have shifted toward constructive dialogue. Women are taking on visible leadership roles in mediation and forest patrols, opening space for greater gender equity. Households report calmer communication, and communities feel safer with fewer clashes over natural resources. Several organisations have begun building conflict sensitive practice into their strategies, contributing to stronger resilience and reducing the risk of future crises.

Recommendations

Integrate Peacebuilding into EU Global Gateway Investments

Support Systemic Reforms in Land Law Enforcement

Provide Sustained Funding

Scale Up Conflict Sensitivity Training

Women and Young People Show the Way to Peace in Ethiopia

By PMU

In central Ethiopia, a long-term armed conflict has marked the lives of Medina and her community. Despite several attempts by authorities and organisations to mediate peace, it was only when PMU's partner YBCEDO involved women and young people in the peace process that a real change took shape.

Photo Credits: PMU

Women and Young People Show the Way to Peace in Ethiopia

By PMU

Medina participated in a programme where women, from different ethnic and religious groups in conflict, received education, met across borders, built relationships and developed joint action plans for peace. Previous peace attempts have only focused on men as peace actors, but now, when women and even young people were involved, it paid off. The women were involved in influencing the men and used their networks to curb the violence and spread the message of peace. As a result, a conflict between two major villages, which had lasted for seven years and claimed over 200 lives and injured thousands, could finally be ended.

When the women were given a platform, they realised that together they could make a real difference. Medina and the other women immediately started working on. They took the initiative and mobilised collections of clothes, blankets, water cans, kitchen utensils, food and money for families who had lost relatives and had their homes burned down. They also engaged young people in the reconstruction – so far, over 67 houses have been built.

New Law on Forced Marriages

The women also wanted to do something about the problem of forced marriage. During the conflict, kidnappings of young girls had increased. Despite being prohibited by national law, traditional practices continue to enable kidnappings and forced marriages. But thanks to the women's advocacy work, a regional law has now been introduced that fines everyone involved – from kidnappers to families and religious leaders.

This means that it is not only the criminal act that can be punished, but also if you have the intention to commit a criminal act. It is an important victory for girls who dream of a different life, who have the right to decide for themselves and also have the opportunity to stay in school.

The knowledge gained from the peace programme has made a strong impression. Medina previously held a leadership position in a women's association, but it was traditional and limited. After her training from YBCEDO, she – like many other women – has realised how their platforms can be used to change society. Now women know that they are a force to be reckoned with. Within the same program, men have also begun to recognise the importance of women and given them space to act for change. Another important step in peacebuilding has been women's work with school children. Through a program of after-school activities, where girl groups were previously taught sewing and practical skills, the women have now begun to educate both girls and boys in peace issues. "We asked the students to pass on the knowledge to their parents – and they really did," says Medina.

The message of peace has spread like wildfire through the villages. People are starting to work together, and new initiatives to support vulnerable families are emerging like ripples on the water

"If you now bring a wedding gift to a family in order to marry the girl, you will be fined. The family will also be fined if they accept the gift,"

-Medina

Photo Credit: Coalition for Humanity (CH), 2025

The Transformation of Pederi Women Association in South Sudan

By Tearfund Germany

This case study highlights how survivors of gender-based violence (GBV) in Pochalla County transformed from crisis-affected women into a cohesive, self-reliant economic association. This was done through the Coalition for Humanity (CH) and Tearfund Germany's BMZ-funded Structural Transitional Aid Project "Reconstruction assistance, sustainable income generation, and peacebuilding for strengthened resilience of conflict-affected populations and returning refugees in Pochalla County, South Sudan".

Before 2022, women and girls in Pochalla County faced severe GBV and lived in fear of abduction as they foraged for a living in the wilderness surrounding Pochalla. They had no access to protection services, safe reporting pathways, or psychosocial support options. Survivors suffered in silence, and local authorities lacked the capacity to manage sensitive GBV cases, often depending on customary law provisions, with no reference to statutory law. This absence of services weakened community cohesion, undermined safety, and hindered women and girls' ability to participate socially or lead economically viable lives, creating conditions that perpetuated cycles of violence and instability.

Photo Credit: Coalition for Humanity Pochalla Team

Initially established within the Women and Girls Friendly Space (WGFS), the Pederi Women Association (PWA) was founded by participants in the WGFS, a group of survivors of gender-based violence seeking healing, dignity, and stability. CH applied a holistic, survivor-centred methodology integrating protection, psychosocial support, and livelihoods.

First, women received trauma-informed care, case management, and legal referrals. This then evolved from a psychosocial support group into a formal livelihood group. As healing progressed, CH facilitated skills training, primarily tailoring and catering and provided equipment and mentoring to form a structured livelihood group. The group started producing school uniforms, reusable sanitary pads, and other tailored goods.

Their journey illustrates how holistic, survivor-centred interventions combining protection, capacity-building, and livelihood support can foster long-term peace, resilience, and economic stability by reducing drivers of conflict and strengthening community trust as a foundation for sustainable peacebuilding.

The Pederi Women Association initiative aligns strongly with EU priorities, particularly:

- Social Cohesion, through strengthening protection ecosystems.
- Democracy and Values, by enhancing access to justice and rights awareness.
- Quality of Life: Food Security and Livelihoods, via income-generating skills.
- Global Partnerships, through locally driven development and resilience.

Photo Credit: Tearfund Germany

The Impact

Members now produce market oriented goods including school uniforms clothing bedsheets reusable sanitary pads and beadwork strengthening incomes as well as confidence. Agreements with two primary schools in Gilo and Terilul will supply 550 school uniforms with more than 100 already completed and clear demand across the county's schools. Alongside this the women have established a shared savings and income pool to support financial independence and future planning. Looking ahead they are developing a community led vision for long term sustainability including plans to open Pochalla's first standard restaurant.

The approach was selected because it supports long-term recovery, builds confidence, and enhances social cohesion which are critical pillars of sustainable peace in fragile contexts. Implementation emphasised safety, empowerment, and market-driven livelihoods to ensure sustainability beyond the project's funding cycle thereby reducing economic drivers of conflict and strengthening local resilience against future shocks.

Recommendation for EU Policy

Prioritise Resilience in Fragile Countries

Integrate Peacebuilding with Livelihoods

Long-Term Investment in Survivor-Led Economic Groups

Promote Community-Based Safe Spaces

Photo Credit: Fida

Peace and Unity in Congolese Schools

By Fida

In the Democratic Republic of Congo, torn by decades of conflict, thousands upon thousands have faced loss and pain for generations. Ethnic conflicts, war, natural disasters, poverty and social problems. All this threatens the development and human rights of the country as a whole. Building the future requires reconnecting people and communities. Schools play a key role in this. It is where the leaders of tomorrow grow.

Peace education is an integral part of Fida's work in the Democratic Republic of Congo. In partnership with the Congolese CEPAC Church, Fida has opened 80 peace clubs in various schools.

The work of peace building is essential in our communities. The clubs teach children the meaning of peace and help them to connect with each other," says Jonatan Asumani Dunia, a project worker. The peace clubs that meet in schools are also relevant to people outside the school community.

"In the groups, children learn tolerance and how to deal with disputes. They also become ambassadors for peace in the rest of the community."

- Jonatan Asumani Dunia, Church worker.

Teachers have also been trained in peace work. In March, a teachers' seminar went through a guide for peace clubs. It covers topics such as identity, emotions and communication. Teachers challenge children and young people to contribute according to their own capacities, so that step by step they move towards peace. Not just in society, but in their own hearts and minds, at home and at school. Teacher Christoph Rubaduka heard about the clubs a few years ago, and soon his school had a club of 12 children meeting three times a week.

"Gradually we were able to resolve everyday conflicts. The children took responsibility and brought messages to the teachers about different situations. When problems arose, we invited the children and a few teachers to analyse them together,"

- Teacher Christoph Rubaduka.

When children are given the right amount of responsibility and skills, school peace improves. Christoph explains how it also helped a child with disability who had been bullied at school to have the courage to go back to school.

We found that our work also had an impact on the village community, as other children who were not from our school brought problems for us to solve. Jonatan Asumani Duni, a CEPAC church worker, says the same effect has been seen in other schools that have received training in peacebuilding. The children are able to resolve disputes and understand the richness of diversity.

"In my everyday work, I think a lot about how to build peace and hope in the hearts of children who have seen their parents killed. It is unreasonable to ask them to forgive, move on and forget the past."

-Teacher in Training

The Peace Club also goes on the local radio station to talk about peace every week. In the future, village leaders will also be invited to join in. Christoph hopes that communities will see the importance of working with schools. Although the work is challenging, building peace has started with small steps in everyday life.

"Development cooperation has also brought encouraging changes to the daily lives of entire villages. Seeing positive change and having communication skills gives a stronger foundation now and in the future."

-Jonatan

Creating a safer community for future generations is a vital aspect of peace clubs. Church worker Christoph emphasises that schools serve as neutral spaces that bring together the entire village community. As Christoph puts it, "When you care about someone, you cannot hurt them." This principle embodies the essence of peace clubs as a means of building peace in the DRC.

Community Based Sociotherapy in South Sudan

By ZOA Dorcas South Sudan

In South Sudan, Zoa Dorcas is using the Community-Based Sociotherapy (CBS) approach to help people rebuild trust, relationships, and mental well-being. This is a community-led and community-driven approach. For 15 weeks, participants form small groups of 15 men and women. In these groups, participants discuss daily concerns under the guidance of two well-trained community facilitators. They follow the six-phase model and the seven principles to structure the conversations. This approach aims to enable participants to learn and experience new constructive behaviour. This learning process will ultimately have a positive influence on their personal life and on their environment.

CBS, which is a new methodology in South Sudan, has been implemented since 2021 in two Payams, Anyidi and Kolnyang, in Bor South County. In total, 48 CBS facilitators have been trained who have facilitated 123 CBS groups (in 7 cycles of 15 weeks each) with 1,790 participants (77% women). The International Institute for Community-Based Sociotherapy (IICBS) provided the first training sessions and online coaching.

Photo Credits: Corita Corbijn Yolanda van den Broek Peter Caton

Photo Credits: ZOA

The Impact

- CBS has a strong positive effect on individual well-being, family life and the neighbourhood as also confirmed by relatives and neighbours of CBS participants .
- Changes around economic activities strongly contributed to improved mental wellbeing and family life.
- A strong gender effect was also observed and CBS members addressed conflicts at the family and neighbourhood level.
- The CBS approach was adapted to and accepted in the context. The facilitators came from the communities and did not use complicated textbooks. They followed the CBS methodology which was contextualised duringt their training to make it relevant for the Bor context.

Why is CBS successful?

CBS is often translated into the Dinka language as Akut de room de wel (“sharing with each other”). Participants value strongly the practice of sharing experiences and struggles with each other. They feel that they are not alone in their struggles and the shared stories help them to reflect on their own feelings and behaviour.

Each CBS group talks about safety, trust, care, respect, new life orientation and memories. New life orientation was the topic that was seen as the most powerful topic. It helped participants to reflect on how to leave the past behind and to take initiatives for improving the current situation.

The CBS group includes women and men, young and old, and people from different clans. The principle of equality of all participants is practiced for example through the sitting arrangement in a circle and the opportunity for all to talk. The group meets for 15 weeks, 1 session per week, so it is not a one- off activity.

Photo Credits: ZOA

Living Peacefully

The CBS facilitators, 48 women and men, were selected from the communities and were trained extensively in the CBS methodology by certified CBS experts. Eight facilitators have graduated to CBS trainers, and they have trained new CBS facilitators.

CBS has played a significant role in reducing conflicts within communities, including at common points like the borehole, between families, and among clans. CBS participants intervene to mediate and de-escalate tensions, helping prevent conflicts from escalating into violence.
CBS groups bring together indiiduals from different gender, age groups and clans. This fostered a sense of unity and cooperation.

CBS has contributed to a shift in social morals, where violence is no longer seen as the solution to problems. The emphasis on safety and care in CBS meetings has led individuals to value peace and reconciliation over revenge and hostility, even in the aftermath of violent events like killings.

"The discussions about care and respect helped me to live in Bor with other people who are not from Anyidi. We are all neighbours, and we all have experienced displacement."

-Female CBS participant

Gender Equality

The CBS methodology has contributed to more equal gender relations, according to the participants. CBS promotes equality by encouraging men and women to sit together in circles, giving everyone an equal opportunity to speak. This approach challenges traditional gender roles, where men often dominate decision-making, and allows women to share their experiences and contribute equally to discussions, both within CBS groups and in their communities.

Women have gained confidence by practising in the CBS groups. These mixed groups create a safe space for women to communicate openly with men and offer their insights. This experience has empowered women to speak in public and engage in discussions that men have traditionally dominated.

"Before women could not sit with men, but they do so in the CBS group which is mixed. Facilitators are both male and female. They all talk. Now ladies in the community can talk."

-Male CBS participant

Empowering Farmers with Climate-Smart Agriculture in Somalia

By LM International

This case study highlights the Mission for Emergency Aid & Lifesaving's (MEAL) Climate-Smart Agriculture (CSA) initiative in Middle Shabelle, a region repeatedly affected by droughts, erratic rainfall, and tensions over scarce natural resources. These factors have made farming increasingly difficult, threatening household incomes and community stability. This initiative addresses these issues by introducing drought-tolerant crops, sustainable land-use practices, and climate-adaptive farming techniques to vulnerable households. Through targeted training, demonstration plots, and inclusive community participation, farmers were equipped to adopt practices that improved productivity while conserving resources.

As a result, participating households experienced significant increases in agricultural yields and more stable incomes. The project also helped reduce disputes related to land and water scarcity, demonstrating the link between improved resource management and community cohesion. Overall, this intervention illustrates how climate adaptation can strengthen both livelihoods and peace. By improving food security and promoting equitable access to resources, the CSA initiative enhanced resilience in a fragile environment and contributed to long-term social stability.

Photo Credits: MEAL Team

Photo Credits: MEAL Team

Middle Shabelle is one of Somalia's most agriculturally dependent regions, where the majority of households rely on river-fed and rain-fed farming for survival. Over the past decade, the area has faced severe climatic shocks. During poor seasons, crop losses of up to 70% have been reported, pushing many families into food insecurity. These environmental pressures have heightened competition over fertile land and water, contributing to inter-farmer disputes, tensions between pastoralists and farmers, and marginalisation of youth. The absence of modern farming knowledge and climate adaptation strategies has left communities vulnerable to both conflict and economic decline. In response, MEAL launched its Climate-Smart Agriculture (CSA) program targeting vulnerable farming households. The initiative aims to strengthen resilience, improve agricultural productivity, and reduce climate-induced conflict triggers. Through the introduction of drought-tolerant crops, sustainable land-use practices, and climate-adaptive farming techniques, combined with training, demonstration plots, and community engagement, the program supports both livelihoods and social cohesion.

The CSA initiative aligns with several EU priority areas:

- Quality of Life – Food Security & Nature:
- Social Cohesion
- Future Preparedness:

MEAL started with a vulnerability assessment to identify communities where climate pressures were driving tension and conflict. Farmers were trained in climate-smart techniques, drought-resistant seeds, crop diversification, mulching, soil rehabilitation, and water-efficient practices to strengthen both livelihoods and resilience. Demonstration plots served as interactive learning hubs, enabling farmers to adopt and replicate sustainable practices on their own land. Inclusive engagement of youth groups and women's farming associations ensured broad participation and equitable access to knowledge, fostering community cohesion. Through ongoing monitoring and feedback the project refined its approaches, supporting adoption and promoting long term peaceful coexistence in climate stressed areas

The Impact

- 780 farmers trained, with more than 60% adopting climate-smart practices. Crop yields increased by 30–45%.
- Farmers reported reduced land-use conflict, due to improved productivity and reduced competition over fertile areas.
- Women's cooperatives produced and sold surplus vegetables for the first time in four seasons.
- Household nutrition improved.
- Increased youth engagement in productive farming reduced migration and tensions among unemployed youth.
- Communities created a shared seasonal climate adaptation plan for future shocks.

Photo Credits: MEAL Team

Recommendations

Invest in Long Term Integrated Resilience Programs

Prioritise Inclusive Participation

Scale Sustainable Agricultural Innovations

Support Capacity Building and Knowledge Transfer

Integrate Lessons into Broader EU Strategies

Key findings show that boosting agricultural productivity, reducing competition over land and water, and engaging vulnerable groups not only improved food security but also mitigated local conflict triggers. Households were able to shift from short-term crisis responses to long-term planning, while inclusive community participation fostered trust and collaboration. The experience highlights that low-cost, sustainable agricultural interventions can produce tangible peacebuilding outcomes. Overall, the initiative reinforces the broader lesson that resilience and conflict prevention are deeply interconnected, and that practical, community-driven approaches can support sustainable stability.

Securing Freedom of Religion or Belief through Peacebuilding

By Tearfund Netherlands

The Joint Initiative for Strategic Religious Action (JISRA) is an international, interreligious partnership operating in Ethiopia, Indonesia, Iraq, Kenya, Mali, Nigeria, and Uganda, aimed at promoting peaceful societies where all individuals enjoy Freedom of Religion and Belief (FoRB).

JISRA is grounded in the belief that engaging religious actors and including women and youth in peacebuilding is essential to building lasting peace and FoRB for all. Tearfund was one of 4 international consortium partners partnering with the Dutch Ministry of Foreign affairs in the year programme (2021-2025).

In situations of conflict, religion is often politicised and used as an instrument of division. The misinterpretation of religious text can fuel conflict and extremism and is used to justify harmful norms and behaviours. JISRA engaged religious actors, recognising their potential as agents of change. Together with faith-based organisations, women's and youth groups and networks JISRA worked to rebuild trust and counter hate speech, exclusion and violent extremism. Despite bearing the heaviest burdens of conflict, patriarchal structures frequently sideline women and youth, excluding them from decision making spaces. A central focus of JISRA has been to challenge harmful norms and stereotypes, particularly those that excluded women and youth opening doors for their full participation in decision making.

JISRA worked towards peaceful and just societies were all enjoy FoRB through four interconnected pathways.

- Intra-religious - working within religious communities to promote gender equity, youth inclusion and transform harmful norms.
- Interreligious – working across religious communities to build trust and encourage faith sensitive initiatives.
- Extra - using lobby and advocacy to ensure context-sensitive FoRB policies
- Crosscutting - promoting the meaningful participation of women and youth in decision making structures, ensuring their voices are heard.

JISRA emphasised local leadership and contexts, collaborating with religious and traditional leaders. Local partners facilitated dialogues, workshops, and campaigns to promote social cohesion and challenge harmful norms. Through Participatory Grant Making (PGM), communities, especially women- and youth-led groups, gained decision-making power for interreligious initiatives. Advocacy at various levels amplified local voices, expanded civic space, and advanced Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB). Religion served as a crucial entry point for building just and peaceful societies.

Photo Credits: Levi Ezekiel/Tearfund

Religious leaders are often trusted community figures who possess unique moral authority and are deeply rooted in the community. Throughout JISRA they proved instrumental in challenging harmful norms and practices, building interreligious understanding and advocating for inclusive peace and acting as protectors of FoRB. Through inclusive and contextual engagement religion proved to be a vital source for building peaceful and just societies in the seven JISRA countries. When FoRB and peacebuilding initiatives are localised and communities themselves shape, implement and monitor them they are far more effective, resilient and sustainable. JISRA demonstrated that meaningful change begins at the local level and FoRB advances when grounded in lived realities.

The Impact

- JISRA challenged harmful norms and stereotypes through faith literacy and the inclusive interpretation of sacred texts.
- Locally grounded collaborations and initiatives have created a durable foundation that continues to thrive beyond the programmes direct involvement.
- The programme strengthened the capacity of religious actors for advocacy and provided them with platforms and opportunities to engage with policymakers.
- Participatory Grant Making was a transformative mechanism in shifting power to the locals.

Recommendations for EU Policy

Design Peacebuilding Initiatives That Prioritise Community Ownership

Include Women Religious Leaders and Actors in Decision Making Processes

Invest in FoRB Sensitive Peacebuilding and Conflict Prevention Initiatives

Invest in Capacity Building of Religious Leaders and Actors

Ensure the Participation of Youth in Peacebuilding

Promote Inclusive Inter-Faith Dialogue

Provide Sustainable Funding and Capacity Building

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