



PEACE CONNECT

2025

Reflections from our global gathering

For years, civil society actors in the Majority World/Global South, including peacebuilders, human rights defenders, community development leaders and social movement activists have been navigating multiple layers of crisis. Exhaustion, funding cuts, shrinking civic space and a profound loss of trust in institutions meant to protect them, have loomed large over their daily work, while the level of violent conflict globally continues to rise. Peace Connect, a global gathering of peacebuilders, activists and their allies, held in Nairobi from 13–17th October 2025, emerged in response to these realities. A space to think collectively, reflect, rest and explore what peacebuilding looks like in this moment of uncertainty. The gathering grew out of conversations among local civil society actors who have repeatedly encountered convenings claiming to be locally led, yet designed around the priorities of Global North actors.

The 2024 guidance note [How to Organise International Events and Convenings](#), written by local actors and endorsed by almost two thousand Majority World/Global South signatories, informed the approach of Peace Connect. The note identified structural barriers that exclude local actors from shaping international spaces, including costs, visas, language, assumptions of expertise and hierarchies. It laid out five principles for conveners and funders committed to operationalising locally-led development:

1

Ensure local actors are at the table

Move beyond a few token representatives from the Majority World/Global South to have equal representation of local – and community-based organisations in decision making.

2

Ensure we have access to the table

Hold convenings in countries where Majority World/Global South actors can more easily obtain visas.

3

Respect our participation

Provide sufficient notice and full sponsorship, including visa, accommodation, meal/per diem and entry fee costs, upfront so that local organisations can participate.

4

Speak in a language that we understand

Have simultaneous translation, use accessible materials, and have physical access for people with disabilities so people from different contexts can participate.

5

Set the agenda with us

Co-create the agenda and co-host with local and community-based organisations and their networks.

Peace Connect was guided by these principles from the outset. It informed the choice of country and venue for the gathering, the way the agenda was developed, the 80% target for Majority World/Global south representation, the interpretation offered during the event and the costs that we covered for certain groups of participants.

The agenda was co-created with the Peace Connect Global Advisory Group, made up of local peacebuilders and activists who represented civil society networks and alliances such as CIVICUS, Network for Empowered Aid Response (NEAR) Network, Shift the Power, Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict (GPPAC), Movement for Community Led Development, International Civil Society Network (ICAN), United Network of Young Peacebuilders (UNOY) and the Global Network of Indigenous Peacebuilders, Mediators and Negotiators. The International Centre for Peace, Human Rights and Development (IPHRD) –Africa, a local Kenyan peacebuilding organisation, co-hosted with Peace Direct, mobilising local participants and grounding the week in regional context. Other supporting partners, including Humanity United, Robert Bosch Stiftung and the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs contributed to the design and delivery of the gathering.

The gathering took place at the Safari Park Hotel in Nairobi, Kenya. Participants included peacebuilders, community organisers, youth leaders, human rights defenders, educators, mediators, researchers and development practitioners, and humanitarian actors. The gathering was designed to intentionally break down silos that often fragment these fields.

The initial objectives that were set out for Peace Connect were:

- Forge powerful alliances**: Represented by a purple brushstroke background with an icon of two hands clasped together.
- Build community and solidarity**: Represented by a yellow brushstroke background with an icon of a hand holding a grid of blocks.
- Elevate the peacebuilding sector**: Represented by a blue brushstroke background with an icon of a plant growing from two hands.
- Facilitate collaborative action and analysis**: Represented by a red circular brushstroke background with an icon of three shapes (square, circle, triangle) in a cycle.
- Make space to learn and reflect**: Represented by a green brushstroke background with an icon of two triangles pointing towards each other.
- Focus on mental health and self-care**: Represented by a yellow brushstroke background with an icon of a person with a heart inside their head.

“[Peace Connect]: a chance to cry, reconnect with my own strength and feel inspired”

Closing plenary remarks by participant from Jordan

Peace Connect was an opportunity for peers to meet each other without the expectations of donors, reporting systems or institutional agendas, and a space to reconnect and learn, acknowledging challenges and possibilities ahead. This recap document aims to capture what happened at Peace Connect and offer insights from the various sessions held during the week.

“It can be isolating to believe in peace... Peace must be made local, localised, and speak to those who are closest to conflict”

Participant from Jordan, Peace Starts Here campaign

AGENDA - THEMATIC

Day 1 (Mon)	Day 2 (Tues)	Day 3 (Weds)	Day 4 (Thurs)	Day 5 (Fri)
<p>Primary Themes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shifting power & decolonising systems • Funding peace differently • Strengthening local leadership 	<p>Primary Themes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mental health & wellbeing • Human rights & protection • Under-represented and neglected conflicts 	<p>Rest and wellbeing day:</p> <p><i>no scheduled programming</i></p>	<p>Primary Themes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creative approaches to peacebuilding • Community-led protection & practice • Solidarity across struggles 	<p>Primary Themes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Commitments to action • Sustainability • Reimagining futures • Locally-led peacebuilding
<p>Evening Activities:</p> <p>Group dinner and entertainment</p>	<p>Evening Activities:</p> <p>Party and dancing</p>		<p>Evening Activities:</p> <p>Open Evening</p>	<p>Evening Activities:</p> <p>Closing ceremony ends 5.30pm</p>

Peace Connect was not intended to be a conventional conference. Rather than being structured around keynote speeches or plenaries, the programme centred local peacebuilders and interactive spaces designed and led by participants. These included solidarity spaces, workshops, skill-building sessions, open space dialogues, lightning talks and creative sessions. ¹



Movement and connection were woven throughout the week: morning tai chi and running, basket weaving and craft sessions, painting, drumming circles, dance and shared meals. These elements ensured that participants came not only to listen, but to contribute, connect and co-create.

Wellbeing was a vital and integral part of the programme. Counselling sessions were offered throughout the week, in multiple languages. A dedicated wellbeing room hosted sessions on different cultural approaches to wellbeing run by groups from around the world. Peace Direct's mental health provider also delivered resilience check ins and wellbeing sessions across the week. A quiet room, kitted out with cushions and bean bags allowed participants to switch off, unplug and sleep. And a dedicated wellbeing team was at hand throughout the week to attend to the needs of participants.

¹ Figures represented by final registration numbers.
56% self identified as women; 43% self identified male.

Across the 60 sessions throughout the week convened and hosted by participants, there were a wealth of insights captured through session notes, conversations, individual and group reflections and surveys. In this recap document, we have grouped the insights into five thematic ‘baskets’. These are:

- 1. The peacebuilding landscape and structural conditions**
- 2. Connection, solidarity and collective power**
- 3. Transforming power and systems**
- 4. Emerging and evolving peacebuilding approaches**
- 5. Looking ahead: Values, learning and commitments**



All participants gathered in the Jambo plenary room

“We need to challenge broken aid systems”

*Participant of **The State of Peace & Security in the World***

We reflected on the global context we’re working in; rising authoritarianism, militarisation, and shrinking civic space. Solidarity cannot be rhetorical and must be grounded in a willingness to act together when institutions fail. How can we build peace better together? In sessions such as *State of Peace and Security* speakers shared examples from Sudan, Myanmar, Palestine, Afghanistan and Ukraine. Participants of the session emphasised that solidarity is not just symbolic, it is grounded in dignity and shared struggle.

The impact of the current funding and sustainability landscape were widely shared and discussed throughout the week, in sessions such as *Alternative Resourcing and Sustainability*, and *Lessons in Advocacy and Donor Relations*. Participants spoke about the exhaustion of navigating abrupt funding freezes, particularly from major donors such as the US government, and the emotional toll of operating in survival mode rather than building long-term peace. Many spoke of shifting from reliance on traditional grants towards community-driven approaches such as social enterprises and mutual aid networks as available lifelines. Discussions stressed that advocacy toward funders cannot simply be about grants, but on shifting the logic of the system. Community-led approaches showed that security can be relational, grounded in proximity, trust and collective presence.

“Our survival is also our resistance and resilience.”

*Participant in **Rethinking peacebuilding: Solidarity resistance and collective action in a shifting world***

2. Connection, Solidarity and Collective Power

“Networking, collaboration and solidarity in civic space are becoming essential for survival”

Participant from Kenya, survey response

Peace Connect created space not only to exchange ideas and tools, but to witness each other’s realities and support one another. Solidarity across borders sustains hope and resilience, especially in repressive and conflict affected contexts. This was clear across conversations, emotional connections formed across regions, cultures, and languages. Despite representing many different contexts, participants acknowledged their shared struggle.



Participants enjoying DanceKlan’s moves

Throughout the week, *Solidarity Spaces* were held for participants to hear directly from peacebuilders with experience, past and present, of surviving and living in genocide; living under military rule; navigating restricted civic space; seeking justice and accountability; and building peace in neglected contexts. These gatherings were intentionally different from other sessions, designed as safe

spaces for witnessing and connection, sharing experience, holding pain, and honouring resilience. Trained counsellors were on hand during these spaces to offer support as needed, and no photography or recording was allowed.

“Peace Connect has not only brought together peacemakers: it has united hearts and visions for a common future based on trust, cooperation and shared humanity.”

Participant from Mali, survey response

Much of Peace Connect happened in conversations over food or tea breaks, during and between sessions, or during craft-making. Not all conversations were easy or unanimous, as connection and solidarity don’t always mean collective agreement; there were uncomfortable conversations that emerged during sessions and plenaries. We recognise this as a necessary aspect of collective peacebuilding. Spaces for dialogue are important, to listen, hear and respect that there are multiple truths. In one plenary where tensions were running high, a participant asked the room to hold a minute of silence to remind each other of our shared humanity, creating a powerful moment of shared reflection.



Tuesday – Day 2 graphic: second day of sessions at Peace Connect

“Multiple things can be true at the same time...The opposite of one big truth is not necessarily a falsehood.”

*Participant in **The Great Debate: Engaging with US Government and its Funding: Should civil society engage?***

The session *Alliance Building as a Tactic* highlighted how networks have kept movements alive during periods of repression. Sessions focusing on *Women, Peace and Security*, and *Youth, Peace, and Security* reminded us of the importance of intersectional organising to strengthen peacebuilding and open pathways for collective and collaborative action.

“Acting together...connectivity is a key tool to fight injustice”

Participant from the Democratic Republic of Congo, survey response

Feminist and gender approaches were emphasised throughout the week. In *Healing as Resistance: Feminist responses to violence*, facilitators spoke about collective care as necessary infrastructure for survival, and not an optional practice. Across sessions such as *Feminist Peacebuilding in Practice*, *Women Defending land*, and *Transforming Power through Feminist Leadership*, participants explored the role of women and LGBTQ+ peacebuilders as first responders in crises, yet excluded from decision making spaces. These peacebuilders have also long practiced peace work grounded in relationships and care; approaches vital for relational, inclusive, care-centred forms of leadership models that strengthen collective organising.

On peace as a collective responsibility:

“One finger cannot pick a stone”

*Participant from Northern Ghana in session **Indigenous humanitarian peacebuilding as a pathway to healing people, for peace and planet***

3. Transforming Power and Systems

“Localised efforts have a global impact. Our collective voice counts in shifting the world’s attention to real priorities.”

Participant from Kenya, survey response

Across the week, discussions repeatedly returned to questions of power: who defines peacebuilding, who benefits from current systems, and who is excluded or harmed by them. One of the main breakout rooms was convened by the ShiftThePower movement, with sessions including *Alternative Resourcing: What does it mean and what does it look like?*, *Prototypes in practice: testing ideas and co-creating the future of development*, and *Building a movement to decolonise international cooperation*.

Discussions emphasised that transforming power is not a technical process but a political one, rooted in the histories, identities and geographies of those who participate in it.



Participants at the Shift the Power session

“Systems can be decolonised and systems can change”

Participant from Uganda, survey response

In sessions such as *Funding Futures: Beyond Aid Dependency* and *Seeing through the Open Eyes: local knowledge and wisdom and community-led evaluation*, peacebuilders shared how current funding reporting systems shape priorities, limit autonomy, and reinforce long-standing colonial hierarchies. Many reflected on how existing frameworks are not only administratively burdensome, but reshape narratives and identities. As one participant noted in the decolonising evaluation and learning session, *Seeing through the Open eyes*:

“We monitor our work in our own terms, and then we try to respond to other interests. It doesn’t fit. It never truly has.”

Calls for transformation were framed as a fundamental shift towards models rooted in trust, shared risk and long-term vision and sustainability. This was echoed in the *Funders Sensemaking Session* led by the Peace and Security Funders Group.



Members of the Global Network of Indigenous Peacebuilders

Throughout sessions such as *Are INGOs Still Fit for Purpose*, participants questioned assumptions about expertise and authority. Peacebuilders called for strengthened networks, ecosystems and long-term movements capable of sustaining peace for longer than just a grant cycle. Discussions also highlighted how knowledge is produced and recognised within the peacebuilding field. In *Indigenous Knowledge and Peace Practices*, participants shared examples of ecological stewardship, ancestral justice mechanisms and community-led accountability systems that continue to be marginalised in global frameworks, despite generations of evidence.

Across the gathering, the message was consistent: sustainable peace requires shifting power, resources and decision-making to local actors, not as a technical adjustment but as a fundamental reorientation of the peacebuilding system itself.

“Local actors must be at the centre of dialogue and conversations”

Local peacebuilder from Kenya



Participants in session Building a Movement to decolonise international cooperation

4. Emerging and Evolving Peacebuilding Approaches



Thursday – Day 4 graphic: third day of sessions at Peace Connect

CENTERING WELLBEING



Wellbeing was a central theme to the week and intentionally integrated throughout the event. The dedicated quiet room, onsite one to one psychosocial support sessions

Participants enjoying community drumming

with Thrive Worldwide counsellors and protected time for rest were consistently used: 86% of survey responders rated the prioritisation of wellbeing at Peace Connect either 4/5 or 5/5 on a scale of satisfaction. There was a dedicated safeguarding and wellbeing team on hand each day to support participants.

The mid-week rest day, 'Wellbeing Wednesday', offered space for participants to choose what they needed – a walk in Karura forest, a visit to the national park, time with friends and colleagues, swimming, quiet reflection. Respondents to the Content & Programme survey sent after Peace Connect reflected that this pause was key to engagement throughout the week and integration of learning.

“I rested because my body needed it most. I was exhausted after series of engagements prior to the event. The rest day helped me to rest.”

Female peacebuilder from Uganda.

Another participant said,

“The one free day in the middle of the week was a game changer.”

Sessions such as *Emotional Regulation Techniques*, *From the ground up: Integrating mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) and peacebuilding* and *Resilience and Renewal: Mental Health and Self Care for Peacebuilders* opened space to talk openly about collective care, exhaustion, trauma and emotional labour. The morning run and tai chi activities were integrated to support wellbeing, as well as the dedicated sessions for arts and crafts, such as the basket weaving.

“What struck me was how willing people were to immediately talk about what they’re experiencing and very personal stories. I think this is a testimony to the tone that this gathering created from the start... This underscores the importance of this topic and why it was worth investing in the additional well-being/mental health support and spaces throughout the week”

Participant from South Africa in session:

Resilience and renewal: Mental health and self-care for peacebuilders

CREATIVITY & ARTISTIC EXPRESSION



Participants in the basket weaving session

“Afghan women speak to the world through art, otherwise our voices are not heard”

Participant in session
Stitching peace: women’s craftmaking as resistance and resilience

Creativity and artistic expression were also core to how participants processed experience, resistance and identity. Sessions including *Tell your Story*, *Activism as Resistance*, *Woman Kind Art Circle* and *Creative Resistance and Narratives of Survival* offered practices for transforming grief, fear and memory into collective making.

The communal mural facilitated by the artist group ArtLords became a collective expression of the gathering. Okapu’s basket weaving, DanceKlan’s dance sessions and Munge’s Drum circles brought rhythm, ritual and group solidarity. These practices demonstrated creativity as a methodology, embodying connection without words. Éliane Feza’s slam poetry offered a powerful reminder of how voice and performance can hold both grief and hope, while Gaza Birds Singing shared with us a moving testimony through song of Palestinian resistance and resilience.



The communal mural designed by ArtLords

**“Art is resistance.
Art is memory.
Art is survival.”**

*Participant from Burundi,
survey response*

PEACE & CLIMATE JUSTICE

**“Peace is rooted in land, lineage
and shared responsibility”**

*Closing remark from the Global
Alliance of Indigenous Peacebuilders*

Emerging methods were also grounded in the material realities of climate justice, security and survival. In *Peace and Climate Change*, participants from the Sahel shared how environmental stress, livelihoods and conflict intersect, sharing how peace efforts increasingly include food systems, pastoral management and climate resilience. In *Alternative Resourcing and Sustainability*, discussions explored community savings models, local cooperatives and diversified income strategies to reduce reliance on short term aid. The impacts of the climate crisis are shaping conflict dynamics which must shape peacebuilding responses.

PROTECTING CIVIC SPACE

Discussions on shrinking civic space highlighted shared patterns of repression documented across many contexts. In *Rethinking Peacebuilding: Solidarity, Resistance and Collective Action in a Shifting World*, peacebuilders from Afghanistan, Myanmar, DRC and Palestine reflected on navigating surveillance, criminalisation and pressure to demonstrate surveillance without revealing fear. The landscape we are working in is shifting, and peacebuilders are learning together these shared conditions that require collective strategies and solidarity. Impacts of the climate crisis are shaping conflict dynamics which must shape peacebuilding responses.

“If I continue to do the work I do, I might die. But if I don’t do this work and I see what happens to my people and my country, I will die every day.”

Participant in session Rethinking peacebuilding: Solidarity, resistance and collective action in a shifting world

YOUTH LEADERSHIP

Youth-led spaces such as New Frontiers in Peacebuilding and Youth, Peace and Security: What has been achieved and what next? challenged tokenism and affirmed youth leadership as essential rather than symbolic. Participants emphasised the need for practices that weave intergenerational wisdom and

innovation. This creates movements capable of adapting without losing their foundations. On key themes, lessons, tools or ideas taking away from Peace Connect:

“The theme for me was the need for meaningful participation, where young people coming together and working on issues that affected them and their communities... One important lesson was the value of creating safe spaces where people especially women and youth facing exclusion can share openly and feel supported.”

Participant from Afghanistan, survey response

DIGITAL PEACE

Digital peace practitioners challenged assumptions about conflict spaces, demonstrating how harm, protection and organising occur online. Sessions such as *Digital Peacebuilding Ethics* and *Digital Ceasefires: Imagining and negotiating temporary ceasefires in online spaces*, explored online governance, community protection and new forms of collective care and resistance. Across these spaces, a shared insight emerged: peacebuilding is evolving, shaped by creativity, digital organising, climate realities, intergenerational collaboration and wellbeing practices that prioritise and acknowledge wellbeing alongside action.

“We must keep widening the spaces where our voices can be heard”

Participant from Uganda, survey response

“Storytelling is a way of elevating people’s voices from local to global platforms.”

Participant from South Africa, survey response

The week closed with a collective ceremony that was reflective, grounded and began with addresses from the Global Alliance of Indigenous Peacebuilders, each speaking in their own languages, reminding us that peace is rooted in land, lineage and shared responsibility. A song composed during the week by two musicians from Sudan and Manipur was performed, weaving together the sense of the week in solidarity across borders, and shared sense of resistance and hope. Participants also exchanged handwritten gratitude cards to acknowledge relationships formed and strengthened, new learnings, and stories and experiences shared. Several attendees offered closing reflections of the week, and personal intentions shaped by their contexts and the week's conversations.

Peace Connect was described in closing reflections as

“a space to reconnect with my own strength and feel inspired”

(*participant from Colombia*), while reflecting

“this is the first time I've been part of a truly human-centred design process”

(*participant from Afghanistan*). It was also voiced that

“I wish more funders had been in the room with us”

(*participant from Germany*). For a participant from Syria, it was shared that Peace Connect was

“so inspiring...I know I leave with a global community I can reach out to”

These reflections echoed trends emerging in post-event survey responses, where participants described personal commitments towards:

- Strengthening cross-border solidarity networks
- Practising more intentional care and wellbeing in their organisations
- Using creative approaches to tell stories safely and powerfully
- Continuing to challenge tokenism, particularly of women and youth
- Exploring alternative or community-based resourcing models

Hope emerged as a deliberate strategy, and participants emphasised the importance of deep listening, shared reflection and continuous learning as essential ways of working. Accountability was described as relational and mutual, rather than top-down or imposed.

“I still stand not because I am strong, but because I have not lost hope.”

Participant in Unveiling Peace: Creative Resistance by Young Women

Peace Connect 2025 marked a beginning and a foundation to move forwards. The values that grounded the week – dignity, solidarity, care, humility and justice, will continue to guide our work ahead.

“Storms don’t last forever. When we stand together, we strengthen each other”

Anonymous survey response

As reflections continue to emerge this recap captures only a snapshot. Over the coming months, the work to gather learning from participants and share additional insights will continue. We invite participants, and those connected to this work, to continue sharing reflections with one another and remain connected.

We move forward with the reminder from one of our participants that:

“the path of sustaining peace will be easier in partnership – so what are you waiting for?”

Participant in session Healing and Resistance



Group photo at Safari Park Hotel

Acknowledgments:

Peace Connect was possible because of the shared commitment of hundreds of people and organisations who believed in the need for a different kind of gathering. We want to thank every participant who travelled to Nairobi, often at personal cost, to listen, to challenge, and to share knowledge.

We thank the **Peace Connect Global Advisory Group**, whose guidance, lived experience and insistence on dignity shaped the principles of the gathering. Their leadership ensured that priorities and design remained rooted in the realities of those most impacted by conflict.

We are grateful to our co-host, the **International Centre for Peace, Human Rights and Development in Africa (IPHRD-Africa)**, for grounding the convening in local context, mobilising participants, and holding logistical and pastoral responsibilities in Nairobi. Their staff and volunteers carried much of the unseen labour that made the week possible.

We thank our Kenyan partners: **Waridi, Pneuma** (audio-visual), **IPHRD volunteers**, local photographers, and **ILS security**, whose professionalism enabled participants to engage with care and ease. The practical arrangements, from transport to translation to accessibility, were critical to creating an environment where people could be present.

We acknowledge the collaboration and trust of networks who supported the programme and brought representatives from across their communities: **CIVICUS, NEAR Network, Shift the Power, GPPAC, Movement for Community-Led Development, ICAN, UNOY** and the **Global Network of Indigenous Peacebuilders, Mediators and Negotiators**. Peace Connect was strengthened by their participation and the connections they facilitated among members. We also thank **Thrive Worldwide** for their onsite counselling service and psychosocial support, as well as contributing to wellbeing sessions across the week.

Our thanks extend to the organisational allies and funders who backed this experiment, in particular **Robert Bosch Stiftung, Humanity United, and the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs**. Each played a role not only as donors but as partners, contributing time, advocacy and thought, and accepting discomfort when challenged.

We acknowledge the artists and creative practitioners whose work held the emotional landscape of the gathering. The mural by **ArtLords**, the dance spaces led by **DanceKlan**, the basket-weaving sessions by **Okapu**, and the community drumming by **Munge's Drum** gave form to grief, hope, and solidarity that cannot be expressed through policy language.

We extend appreciation to the staff and security team at **Safari Park Hotel**, whose hospitality and care supported the practical and emotional needs of participants throughout the gathering.

Finally, we thank every facilitator, session convenor, organiser and volunteer whose contributions built the collective learning we shared. Peace Connect did not belong to any single organisation; it was carried by the people in the room.

Images: Peace Direct/Brian Ongoro

Illustrations: Kathryn Gachini



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