

Annual Report | AISBL

Search for Common Ground's

# *Impact* *in 2023*



Search for  
Common Ground

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The future for Yemen, Sudan, Gaza, Niger, and numerous other conflict-torn regions remains uncertain. Navigating the challenging global landscape, sustaining hope for peace can be a daunting task in today's world. Nevertheless, at Search for Common Ground AISBL we draw inspiration from the bold acts of colleagues and partners worldwide, striving for peace in their countries. We are proud to support groups of peacebuilders who persist in fostering dialogue across the globe's most volatile contexts. Notwithstanding the difficulties, they actively champion peaceful initiatives within their societies. Our commitment to mitigating violent conflict extends beyond physical spaces to digital realms. Our extensive experience has taught us that online hatred, dehumanization, and polarization eventually spills over into the real world, escalating the risk of further violence. The conflicts and violence we are observing across the world underscore the urgency of this issue.

This work is hard, but our commitment remains steadfast. Whether in Brussels or across the globe, our colleagues and partners tailor their approach to each conflict situation where we work. Because there is no "one size fits all approach" when it comes to (re)building trust or dialogue. Conflict analysis, capacity-building on mediation, media or social media work, policy and advocacy efforts, the tactics our teams and partners use differ from one context to the other. But always, they are driven by one same goal: to equip the institutions, communities and individuals to address the root causes of the conflicts and manage conflict in a non-violent way.

This report was made possible by the 750+ frontline peacebuilders who work to build peace every day across the 35 countries where we work, alongside the hundreds of partners, stakeholders, and communities we engage on a daily basis. Their lived experiences and expert observations were crucial to measure the impact of our peacebuilding work. We find encouragement and gratitude in the continued support and generosity of our donors and partners who have worked alongside us, enabling us to sustain our vital work. On behalf of the entire Search for Common Ground AISBL we invite you to explore this report and discover some illustrations of the impact we had in 2023. Together, we look forward to continuing our journey.



**Charline Burton**  
Executive Director of Search for Common Ground AISBL (Brussels)



**Sandra Melone**  
Chairwoman of Search for Common Ground AISBL (Brussels)

# Our Superpowers

## Multi-partiality

Rooted in empathy and collaboration, multi-partiality underpins how we work, centering human dignity above all else. Because our diverse teams are from the divided communities where we work, they understand the complexity of conflict dynamics first-hand and are trusted by the parties in conflict. Multi-partiality creates the space for trust and collaboration to flourish despite our individual beliefs.

## The Common Ground Approach

Common ground is not a compromise. The Common Ground Approach (CGA) invites actors from every dividing line in conflict to gather, identify one goal everyone wants to achieve, and collaborate to reach that goal. Successful collaboration builds trust, which furthers more collaboration.



### The Common Ground Approach

*Pelagie lives in Burundi, a place where cultural norms dictate that it's not easy for women to participate in income generating activities. We invited community leaders to participate in our "Let's Talk" peacebuilding initiative, addressing gender norms and female economic empowerment. Community leaders found common ground by recognizing the need for economic development for everyone. Pelagie, like so many women, now exercises her voice in household decision-making, owns and operates her own business, and runs for public office with the support of her husband.*

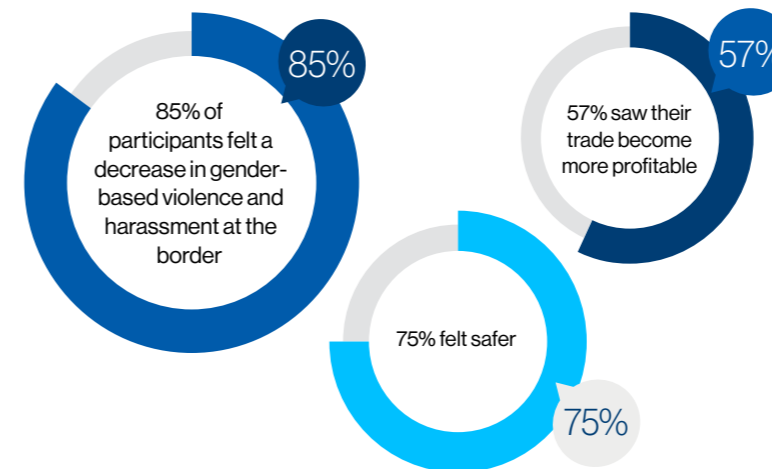


## The Peace Impact Framework: A Tool to Ground Quantitative Measurement

Improving the vital signs of a healthy society is possible even in areas where conflict continues. But how do we know our peacebuilding initiatives work? How do we know they don't create negative side effects?

Gathering input from peace practitioners, community organizers, government officials, and academics at 180 organizations in 45 countries, we created the Peace Impact Framework, a tool to measure the impact of our peacebuilding initiatives from three perspectives.

1. We account for the lived experiences of people living in conflict. We want to know what matters to the communities where we work and what kinds of change people want to see because peace looks different in different places.
2. We gather metrics about the five vital signs of a healthy society: physical violence, personal agency, institutional legitimacy, polarization, and government resource investment by asking people living in conflict questions such as "Do you feel safe walking around your neighborhood?" (physical violence), or "Would you call the police if someone attacked you?" (institutional legitimacy).
3. We gather and analyze practitioner observations, coding their reflections to monitor expected and unexpected results to make sure our projects do not create unintended consequences.



After implementing our programming with female traders in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Rwanda, and border checkpoint guards, **85% of participants felt a decrease in gender-based violence and harassment at the border, and 75% felt safer. 57% saw their trade become more profitable.**

# Our Engagement

## People Engaged

Direct Participants	243,402	
Indirect Participants	11.7 M	
Digital Media Reach	11.8M	
Local Partners	598	
Economic Empowerment	7,060	
Humanitarian & Relief	16,773	

## PEOPLE ENGAGED through specific type of ACTIVITIES

... Through Activities	277,797
... Through Subgrants	128,808
... Through Media	13.5 M
... Through Digital Media	20.2M

## PEOPLE ENGAGED through specific type of PROGRAMMING

Economic Empowerment	7,991
Humanitarian & Relief	15,287
# Of Local Partners	661

*N.B. These figures covered all of our programs, besides Yemen. They represent the impact of the overall Search for Common Ground family in 2023, of which Search for Common Ground AISBL is a member.*

# Our Impact:

## Measure Societal Vital Signs Where We Work

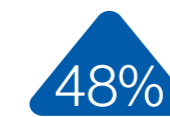
The amount of physical violence, personal agency, institutional legitimacy, polarization, and government resource investment people experience every day are signs of societal health. When the vital signs are strong, peace flourishes. That's why our peacebuilding initiatives target these vital signs to improve societal health and make people's lives better.



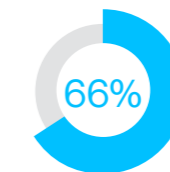
### Physical Violence

What if you didn't feel safe walking down the street at night in your own community? Violence refers to people's personal and direct experience with violence.

In 2023, our peacebuilding initiatives addressing physical violence achieved the following results:



The percentage of people who feel safe walking around the area where they live in **South Sudan** increased by 48%.



66% of respondents in **Kenya**, where electoral violence is common, reported having experienced election-related issues/conflicts and report them being addressed peacefully.



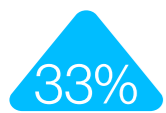
Vulnerable communities living at the border of the **Democratic Republic of the Congo** and the **Central African Republic** felt an increased sense of security, which rose by 12%.



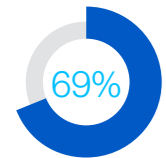
### Personal Agency

Agency is about the connection people have to their societies and whether they believe they have the power to positively change them.

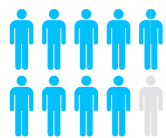
In 2023, our programming addressing personal agency achieved the following results:



The proportion of the population demonstrating better knowledge of their rights and how to obtain redress increased by 33 percentage points in **Niger**.



Search for Common Ground's work significantly boosted journalists' agency, with 69% of participants fully confident in their ability to impact their community in **Pakistan**.



89% of community members in areas targeted by our election violence prevention program said that an ordinary person in their community could make a positive difference to make their community better in **Kenya**.

### Mark Ifeanyi Ugwu (32), Nigeria



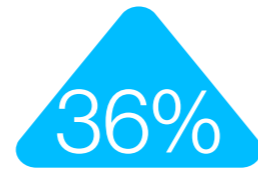
From an early age, it was evident that my passion lay in the art of empathetic listening, engaging in thought exchanges, and fostering mutual understanding. Peacebuilding was, therefore, a logical step. Peacebuilding, for me, is the willingness to understand each other. And this never ends. I do it in my role as a president of the Catholic Youth Organization in Nigeria, but also when I'm

talking to my family or friends. Not long ago, we discussed a case of violence following a farmer-herder dispute. Very quickly, the conflict was framed as a religious conflict. I explained that violence is not a part of religion. In this case, it was a simple issue of criminality. We must not fall into the trap of dismissing all political tensions as religious conflicts.

### Institutional Legitimacy

Institutional Legitimacy is about how institutions, such as the media and government, maintain trust from the people they are meant to serve.

In 2023, our peacebuilding initiatives addressing trust in public institutions achieved the following results:



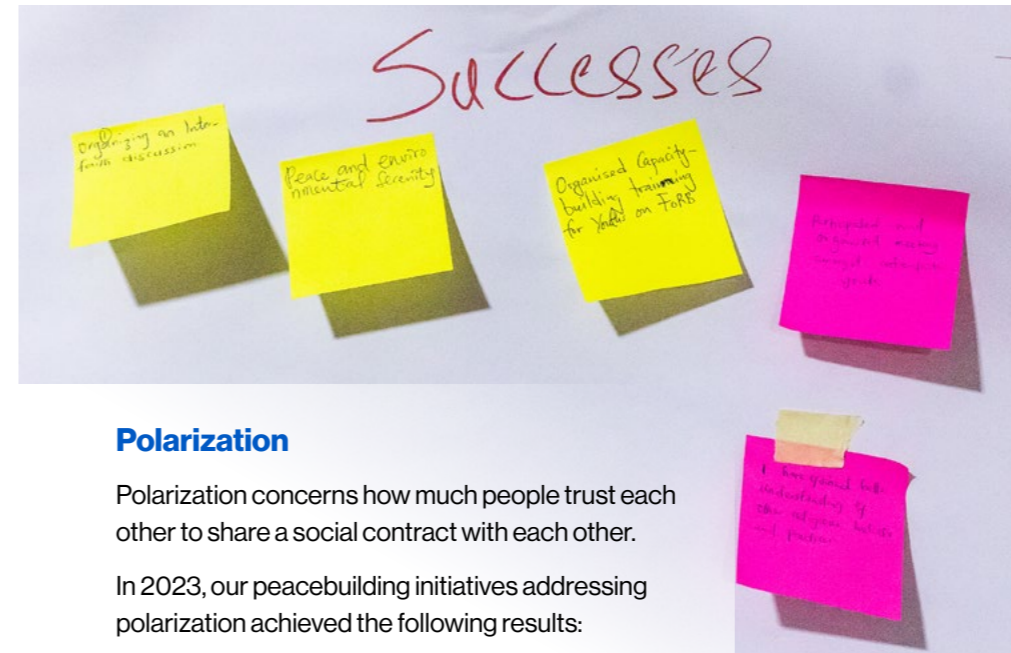
The number of media program listeners who reported feeling better equipped to recognize instances of misinformation/hate speech encouraging electoral violence increased by 36% in **Kenya**.



Program participants who were satisfied with the way legal problems were solved increased by 37 percentage points in **Niger**. We are proud of this accomplishment as providing access to justice for all was identified as a priority need among the targeted communities.



Our program bringing together police and community members through dialogue and town hall meetings contributed to increasing the legitimacy of the police in Mtwara, **Tanzania**, which was perceived as a credible partner in safeguarding community security, including by marginalized groups such as women. There was a 24% increase in people's perception that they have access to a safe platform for discussing sensitive violent extremism-related issues.



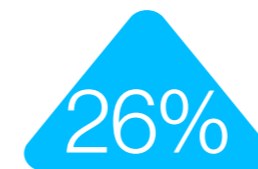
### Polarization

Polarization concerns how much people trust each other to share a social contract with each other.

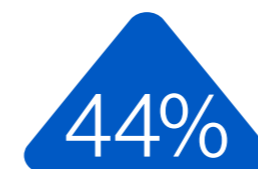
In 2023, our peacebuilding initiatives addressing polarization achieved the following results:



Our programs addressing health and protection services increased positive relationships among both displaced and host communities by 23 percentage points in the **Democratic Republic of the Congo**, a context where displacement and strained resources increased tensions among groups.



Our atrocity prevention program facilitated the development of trust and enhanced interactions between host and IDP (Internally displaced Person) communities in settings like markets and community events. There was a 23% increase in host/displaced community members reporting positive interactions with the other group) and a 26% increase in collaboration as a direct result of Search for Common Ground's atrocity prevention program in **South Sudan**.



The percentage of community members who believe that young women and men can make a positive difference in bringing communities together to address conflict around land and environmental issues increased by 44 percentage points in the **Central African Republic**.



In Mali, we leverage a shared economic interest across dividing lines to reduce polarization. Local peace clubs and authorities played a crucial role in reopening a vital livestock market that had been closed for years due to conflict. They organized dialogues where both sides could discuss their issues, leading to a mutual understanding and resolution.

"I became a member of a peace club in Bamako in Mali and received training in conflict prevention and transformation," Sylvie says. "What helped me the most were the experiences of conflict resolution, successful or not, that everyone shared. With everyone bringing their share of experience and knowledge, resolution is now done as a team. No one is left out, no matter how severe the conflict."

### Resource Investment

Investments tell us whether a society has the resources to support peace or conflict.

In 2023, our peacebuilding initiatives addressing resource investment achieved the following results:

- Our projects increased the agency of women leaders in **Sri Lanka**. As a result, 75 elected women were appointed to decision-making roles within local governing bodies. This outcome is significant as it marks a shift from women being passive participants to becoming key actors in governance, capable of shaping and influencing policy and decision-making.

# Meeting the Moment

From social media moderation in Sri Lanka to reality television show production in Burundi to United Nations policy process influence, we innovate in any context. We introduce new models, and when those models are adopted by others, we push forward new modalities of engagement in pursuit of peace.

## Digital Peacebuilding

Technology is key to enabling the trust and collaboration needed to meld “Us versus Them” into “We.” Working with technologists, academics, policy makers, investors, and peacebuilders, we harness the power of tech to reduce polarization and distrust in public institutions so online harm doesn't become real world violence.

## ConnexUs

The platform [ConnexUs](#), created by Search for Common Ground for social impact practitioners in conflict contexts, connected over 102,000 visitors from 146 countries in 2023. ConnexUs' community of practitioners, policymakers, donors, and academics grew to over 4,400 registered members, who contributed 3,293 resources, 254 events, and 300 jobs across the 25 Thematic Action Areas. By providing a crowdsourced and accessible space for connections across borders and sectors, ConnexUs creates positive social change by empowering organizations and individuals to increase their reach, effectiveness, and impact.

## Policy Work

We work hand in hand with key institutions to help them see the value of our approach and to become champions of peacebuilding. We do that by bringing the lived experiences and learnings from our country programmes to the places where key policy decisions are made in Addis Ababa, Amman, Abuja, or Brussels. Our European headquarters are a key center of our policy efforts, where we engage policymakers, the private sector, and development actors to support sustainable business practices and conflict-sensitive approaches through evidence-based policy advocacy. Here are a few examples of our 2023 activities.

### Program innovation

Meet BridgeBot, a chatbot that helps social media users bridge differences and build trust and understanding online. It acts as a companion to help social media users think differently about how to deal with differences. Between June and December 2023, more than 750 persons were using BridgeBot, including in Kenya, Nigeria, and Sri Lanka.

### Digital peacebuilding at the heart of our European Union policy work

The ‘Leveraging International Lessons in the Implementation of the Digital Services Act (DSA)’ conference organised by Search for Common Ground in Brussels in November 2023 brought together key European Unions stakeholders, policymakers, international experts on digitalization, representatives from academia, civil society, and the tech industry to share insights on successful strategies for protecting human rights in digital platforms and advancing social cohesion. This event shed light on the learnings from our digital peacebuilding initiatives in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Mali, Kenya, and Sri Lanka, and explored their implications for the implementation of the DSA. This was also an opportunity to introduce our policy report: [Boosting the EU Digital Services Act](#).



In Mali, our digital peacebuilding programme led to the creation of the Bamako Forum on Tech and Social Cohesion, which took place in September 2023. By bringing together policymakers, civil society, regulators, tech companies, and influencers from the Sahel, it aimed to foster more inclusive and responsive decision-making when it comes to addressing online polarization in Mali.

### Freedom of Religion and Belief

The Ministerial Conference of the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance took place in Prague in 2023. It served as a gathering for Ministers, Heads of Delegations, and other high-level diplomats, as well as religious leaders and actors, who came together to discuss the promotion of Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) worldwide. This year's Ministerial actively sought to engage young people. Search for Common Ground organized advocacy trainings for participants from more than ten different countries in the Youth Track. It was a unique opportunity for young FoRB champions from different parts of the world and with different religious backgrounds to share their personal experiences while working on practical projects to advance FoRB for all.

### Sustainable Business practices in the Democratic Republic of the Congo

To ensure a just and green energy transition, respecting human rights is crucial. Mining should take place without new conflicts arising, particularly in mineral-rich countries already faced with conflicts such as the DRC. Since its creation in 2000, Search for Common Ground has been one of the founding members and an active participant of the Voluntary Principles Initiative on Security

and Human Rights (VPI). This unique multi-stakeholder initiative brings together companies, governments, and NGOs to promote a set of principles that guides companies on how to conduct their security operations while respecting human rights. We are proud that in 2023, a significant step forward took place with the new membership of the Democratic Republic of the Congo as one of the governments joining this initiative. The addition of the DRC to the list of members of the VPI is the result of years of collaboration between Search for Common Ground and the authorities of the DRC around the issue of human rights and security in the mining sector.

### COP28

There can not be a sustainable green transition without conflict sensitivity, and [climate change](#) will inevitably influence conflict dynamics. In 2023, for the first time ever, a dedicated thematic day for Relief, Recovery, and Peace was on the programme of the 28th United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP28) which took place in Dubai. Search for Common Ground joined this crucial gathering as a member of the Belgian delegation. We hosted a side event together with our partners from International Alert on the impact of climate change and environmental degradation on peace and security. We were also a member of the CSO network ‘Peace at COP28,’ a network comprising a broad range of organizations interested in advancing peacebuilding and firmly integrating the links between climate and peace onto the COP agenda.



### Supporting development stakeholders to mainstream conflict sensitivity

In Belgium, our efforts extend beyond putting peacebuilding and conflict sensitivity on the political agenda and influencing policymakers. We actively participate in awareness-raising activities and collaborative initiatives with various Brussels-based development stakeholders, such as other NGOs, CSOs, the Belgian development agency Enabel, and civil servants from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Belgium. In 2023, we conducted four conflict sensitivity training sessions for 55 Brussels-based development professionals. The objective of these sessions for development actors is to ensure that they are equipped to design, implement, and monitor development aid initiatives in a “conflict-sensitive” way - this is: in a way that does not exacerbate potential or existing conflicts and that reflects on the takes conflict dynamics unfolding in their areas of action. Considering the choice made by the Belgian government to focus a large part of its efforts on conflict-torn countries, these sessions were positively welcomed by all participants.

# The Challenges Ahead

In 2023 Search for Common Ground opened new offices in Benin and Mozambique. These are important milestones, opening new opportunities for Search for Common Ground's work in West and East Africa. In **Mozambique** we work together with the International Organization for Migration (IOM), to prevent and respond to violent extremism in the border areas of Southern Tanzania and Northern Mozambique. The project seeks to build trust and collaboration between security forces and communities so that they can jointly prevent violent extremism and respond to security challenges. Our work in **Benin** centers on fostering dialogue and collaboration for a more harmonious and conflict-resilient society.

## Niger

In 2023, Niger faced upheaval following a military takeover on July 26, followed by a political transition and a rapid change in the national and regional context. As with every crisis across the globe, Search for Common Ground team's remained committed to supporting forces for peace despite the evolving situation. Throughout the second part of the year, our colleagues in Niger continued to focus on vulnerable communities, particularly those outside urban centers, grappling with socio-economic and security challenges.

Operating in a country where the median age is under 15, we pay special attention to youth, women, religious minorities, and alternative voices. Leveraging Niger's rich tradition of community-level dialogue, we collaborate with civil society, local media, mediators, and community organizations to amplify traditionally silenced voices. Our efforts to build trust and collaboration have yielded positive outcomes, with a 68.5% increase in trust and collaboration, as per the final evaluation of the Mu Gina Gobé project. As peacebuilders, we see how positive change is possible when we work together. International partners can and should still play a supporting role in Niger.

## Sudan

Following the outbreak of the war in April 2023, Search for Common Ground's team and partners in Sudan have been working hard to resume programming. In the volatile landscape of South Kordofan, local peacebuilders trained by Search for Common Ground have played a crucial role in averting a crisis in Dilling. Leveraging their deep understanding of local dynamics and training in conflict resolution techniques, these community leaders from varied ethnic and age groups effectively mediated between the RSF and SAF, preventing the invasion of Dilling.

Though challenges remain large, nevertheless we continue working on these pillars: conflict monitoring, Common Ground Approach training, livelihoods support to internally displaced and host communities, social media campaign, and policy engagement. We keep pushing for prioritized funding to support peacebuilding and social cohesion in Sudan. Humanitarian assistance and peacebuilding need to work in tandem to effectively address the needs of people in Sudan.

## Climate Change Exacerbates the Devastation of Conflict

Climate change, environmental degradation, and overexploitation intensify the scarcity of natural resources such as fertile land or water, minerals, and oil. In already fragile contexts, this often leads to violent conflict.

### Sahel

In the Sahel region, climate change is making life difficult for livestock herders. Pastoral communities from Nigeria to Mali are having to adjust their traditional routes due to changing weather patterns. The once-grassy savannahs they relied on are now strained by prolonged droughts. This forces herders to constantly search for water and animal food elsewhere, leading to land disputes.



### The Democratic Republic of the Congo

The DRC has many of the natural resources central to the world's green transition. Yet the development and the mining of the country's natural wealth are driving violence, corruption, and human rights abuses. Breaking the cycle of predation is important to the Congolese people and state. This is where organizations dedicated to promoting peace and transparency, such as Search for Common Ground, can play a crucial role. We assist in developing effective resource governance and advocate for greater transparency and accountability from both companies and governments.



# Integrity

Integrity and respect are our core values, shaping an organizational culture of accountability. This foundation makes us credible, trustworthy partners worldwide. We maintain a zero-tolerance policy for abuse and harassment, ensuring a safe environment for all. We promptly investigate Code of Conduct breaches and condemn any attacks on integrity within our organization, among partners, or in funded

interventions. Code of Conduct and Safeguarding Training are required elements of each Search for Common Ground's onboarding.

We signed the Integrity Charter of the Belgian Development Cooperation Sector, committing to fundamental principles for maintaining integrity. This involves adopting an ethical code, organizing integrity courses, implementing an anonymous reporting system, and designating contact persons for reporting violations.

# We Thank Our Donors Around the World

The Government of Belgium  
 The Government of Germany  
 The Government of the Netherlands  
 The Government of Norway  
 The Government of Sweden  
 The Government of Switzerland  
 The Government of the United Kingdom  
 The European Union  
 The British Council  
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